

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Brandy King, Class of 2001*

Interviewed by  
Rebecca York, Class of 2018

May 21, 2016

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Brandy King talks about transferring to Smith as a junior, the Women and Gender Studies Major, and Wilder House traditions. King also remembers her work as a Gold Key Guide for the college, and her work as a Resident Coordinator post-graduation.

## **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:** King, Brandy. Interview by Rebecca York. Video recording, May 21, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Brandy King, interview by Rebecca York, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** King, Brandy. Interview by Rebecca York. Transcript of video recording, May 21 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Brandy King, interview by Rebecca York, transcript of video recording, May 21, 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 21, 2016, with:

BRANDY KING  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: REBECCA YORK

YORK: Great. Yeah, cool. OK. So I am Rebecca York and I'm conducting an interview with Brandy King on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016 for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. Thank you for coming.

KING: You're welcome.

YORK: So what has life been post-graduation?

KING: Let's see. When I was at Smith my work study was at the library and I worked with Dr. Bruce Sajdak, who was an amazing librarian. And I thought it was so neat that he had a PhD in English literature, but he could find you information on anything. And so I thought he was kind of magical and I really wanted to work with him to kind of learn more about what he did. And then in talking to some of the other librarians I realized how happy they were with their work and how excited they were about what they got to do every day and I thought that was really neat. So I went to grad school to become a librarian and I've worked — for the past 15 years I've been working in nonprofits in the health field. So I worked at Children's Hospital for eight years, in Boston, and now I'm with a small foundation. And it's a really neat way to be a librarian and a neat time to be a librarian. I've never actually managed any collections with books in them, it's more doing internet research, and a lot of communications, maintaining things on a website, social media, that kind of thing. So I really like it. You really learn a lot every day and there's a lot you can do with a library science degree without needing to go back to get a different degree. So if I were to become a public librarian it would be completely different than what I'm doing now, but I wouldn't have to go back to get a new degree or a new certification, so I think that's something I really like about the field.

YORK: That's wonderful. When did you start working in the libraries at Smith?

KING: I transferred to Smith in my junior year and I think I started working in the libraries my second semester of junior year. So I did reference

mostly with Bruce Sajdak, and I did that for, like, a year and a half until I graduated. So it was neat.

YORK: Cool. So what do you think of the new library renovations? Have you—

KING: Very excited about it. I'm a member of the Friends of the Smith College Libraries' executive committee, so I've heard quite a bit about it. And my husband's an architect, so it's a neat intersection of things that we get to talk about. And I think what's most exciting is that they're designing the library not for the materials necessarily, but for the users, and I think that's a really different way to organize a library than has been done in the past. And I'm excited that the special collections will all be housed together and seen as one big collection. And I think that in a century where we're so digital having those special collections is going to be what makes Smith stand out and gives students really unique opportunities, so I'm very excited about that.

YORK: So what did you major in? Was it something that went with the library?

KING: Yeah, English and women's studies. I started off my college career at George Washington University and I was there for two years. And they only had a women's studies minor, and so I had taken almost all the classes there and felt like I still wanted more. So when all my friends were deciding where to go abroad, I decided that I would come to Smith and do this junior year in women's studies program. And when I got here, I think I was here maybe three days before I decided, Maybe I will just stay. (laughs) And so started, you know, I talked to the admissions office, and put in an application to transfer, and transferred here, so then I became an English and women's studies double major, which was a great — it was an easy combination. I took a lot of women's literature classes and it's really served me well. I mean, a lot of librarians are English majors, but I think just the liberal arts background really serves you well in life. If you know how to write and verbally communicate in a sophisticated way, then I think you can really get your point across, you can really influence people, and you can really explain things, and I think that that's really served me well in my career.

YORK: Yeah. And we've heard from other Smithies that a lot of those communication skills they also were learning in their houses over dinner.

KING: Yeah.

YORK: Would you say—

KING: Absolutely. Yeah. I lived in Wilder and having meals together so often — I mean, coming back for lunch from a class, trekking back to home to eat, and then going back out again, I mean, if you're eating with

people three times a day and it's the free time in which you get to speak about anything you want to, you just learn a remarkable amount about people and about different topics. And you do learn how to communicate with people, because you are going to live with these people so you have to be civil. And I remember a lot of Ruth Simmons's kind of instruction at that point was about civil discourse. And she, I think, made a really big impact on me in terms of being able to get your point across with logic, and with facts, and with evidence, and in a courteous way. And I think it was a perfect time to do that and I think she did it very well.

YORK: Were you involved in any organizations or clubs?

KING: I was in Gold Key, so I was a tour guide. When I was at George Washington it was a very — it's a huge university and I was on the shy side. I kind of always had been. And when I got to Smith something just kind of came out. I just really felt like I had the freedom to figure out who I wanted to be, and to become that person, and the confidence, just the pure confidence of being surrounded by people who want to hear what you have to say was really empowering. And so I would never have envisioned myself being a tour guide, but it was great to be able to show off Smith to people who were interested and to be able to tell them what it was really like there and give them the inside scoop. It was neat.

YORK: What did you — as a Gold Key and being so heavily involved in admissions, were you aware of the push to really — to use their word — diversify Smith at the time? Or were you seeing results?

KING: Not at the time. No, not at the time. I don't think I was really aware of that. But I have to say one of the best things about the alumni parade today was watching all of the classes before us and then turning around and going back through and seeing the class after us, the class of 2011, be so diverse, was so — I don't even know how to describe it. It was very — I just think there's so much value in it and I know that the college has been putting a lot of effort, and to see the results of having such a diverse class — and a diverse class that showed up and got the award for the most participation and — I just was really proud that Smith was able to achieve that goal. Yeah.

YORK: So going back to the conversations that you were having, do you remember what you were talking about?

KING: What were we talking about? Talking about the election. It was the Clinton-Gore election at that point. I remember talking a lot about that. And — or Bush-Gore, I'm sorry. I was just learning about transgendered ideas or transgender people, and kind of that was a new thing for me to learn about. So I remember wanting to learn about that

and having the lens to look at it through my women's studies major was really important, I think, at the time to look at it not only through the friends that I knew who were experiencing that, but also to have, like, a theoretical framework with which to look at it, and to examine gender in our society and what that really meant. So I remember that being something that we talked about a lot.

YORK: Do you remember how trans issues were being addressed in women's studies? Because I know at the time it was just women's studies.

KING: Yeah, it was just women's studies, right. I don't remember in particular, but I remember doing a lot of thinking of, Well, does it mean — is it that people want to slip into another gender, because they have more rights and more power in that gender? Or is it — and how does that play out once you have been in both genders? Or is it that we can just say that there are lots of different kinds of ways to be a woman, but without switching genders. So I remember just a lot of thinking about that. It was really interesting.

YORK: Was there programming on campus around—

KING: I think there — yeah, there was. Actually I know there was, because I remember there being an LGBTQ board. So learning about it at that point was really neat, and I think there were on— there were very few people in the trans community at that point, and I remember they had to go to all of the different LGBTQTs, because there were just so few of them. But I'm really glad that they did that, because it was very — I think it's an experience not many people had encountered before they got here, or at least I hadn't, and so it was important to hear from that community, but I think they bore the burden of educating everybody at that point.

YORK: Yeah. So how did you — it sounds like house was definitely your main community?

KING: Yeah.

YORK: Is that correct?

KING: Mm-hmm. Yup.

YORK: And mentors? Were there student mentors who you—

KING: I wouldn't — not really. Since I got here as a junior I was in this weird position where most of my class was actually gone; most of my class was abroad. So the few people that stayed, we became really close, but I also was very close with the first-year class, because we were all

coming in, so when I did orientation I was with them. So in terms of mentors, I don't really think so.

YORK: Did you become a mentor?

KING: But I did. Yeah, I went on to become a head of new students, a HONS. Do they still have that?

YORK: Yeah.

KING: Oh, thank goodness. And that was really the first kind of leadership position I ever really wanted, and it was so fun to welcome the new students, and to get them to be part of our traditions, and to kind of orient them to not only college life in general, but to Smith in particular and to this house in particular. I mean, there were so many levels on which you kind of adapt into an environment, and it was really neat to be able to help the first-years get into that. It was fun.

YORK: Do you think that experience is what motivated you to join Gold Key?

KING: Probably. Yeah. It was neat to be in that kind of leadership position, because I hadn't seen myself as a leader before and that was the first thing I ever really wanted, and ran for, and it was an election, and it was important to me to get that recognition from my very small peer group, to say that they thought that I was a good representative of the house and that I would be good to kind of welcome people into the culture was very validating. I think especially as a transfer, you know, that I was able to kind of pick it up, and then turn it over, and welcome new people was really cool.

YORK: What was Smith's support of transfer students? Was there much?

KING: Hmm. I don't remember that being a particular topic. No, yeah.

YORK: OK. Can you tell me a little bit — so going through old *Sophians*, we've been reading a whole lot about maybe not a resurgence but a spike in feminist activity on campus in, like, the '90s bleeding over into the 2000s. Were you aware of that?

KING: I don't think so, only because it was already — I already felt that I was moving from this — from GW, where there was a women's studies minor and I was a pretty — I was getting very aware of gender disparities at that point, and then coming here where it was so engrained in the culture of learning. You didn't have to be a women's studies major to learn about that kind of thing, and that's something I really appreciated, that it was kind of built into all of these classes, but I also think I kind of overdosed at one point. (laughs) You know, it was like, I just can't talk about gender anymore. But the culture overwhelmingly

was so into female empowerment that I guess I didn't separate it from — or I didn't think of it as a feminist movement, it was just the culture of being here.

YORK: And do you think that — was that culture primarily, I don't know, supported by students or were faculty and, like, was it in the English classes? And were you very much (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

KING: Definitely, yeah. Marilyn Schuster, Susan Van Dyne, Cornelia Pearsall, Kevin Quashie, I mean, I think they all really took the time to address gender and race disparities and structural inequality in the context of whatever they were teaching, whether it was literature, or specifically women's studies, it was — that topic was addressed constantly. So, yeah.

YORK: So what do you think — what was the transition like leaving Smith and going out into the world? You sounded like you had a pretty clear idea of what you wanted to do.

KING: Yeah. Well, I actually, you know, it's funny. I now — it's not that I forgot about this, but I was thinking about it — I didn't actually go straight to grad school. I took a year, and I stayed on campus, and I was a resident coordinator for Wilson House. I don't think they have that position anymore, but it was basically people who just graduated or were recent graduates, and they were like a head resident, but, like, one step above. So I lived in Wilson for a year. It was the biggest house on campus. I was also in charge of Gardiner and Morrow, but they had their own head residents, but I was kind of their supervisor. So that was a tough year. That was a really tough year. I felt like it was too big of a job for a 22-year-old to do. I felt like they were jumping from being, you know, just a student to then realizing all of the problems that students are struggling with was very eye opening. I mean, in the one year that I did that, we dealt with vandalism, rape threats, suicide threats, cutting, alcoholism. I mean, I really — like, racial slurs. It was very eye opening to me, because you're kind of — when you're in the bubble, you're even in your own bubble, not even just in Smith but you're in your own, individual, focused on yourself bubble that I don't think I realized that all that was going on. And then being the person who was responsible for being like a first point of contact for people to say they needed help, and then connect them with the resources that they needed, was so hard.

YORK: How did you learn how to do that?

KING: I had a lot of support. They had area coordinators, which I think they still have. So I had a lot of support and the resident coordinators as a group, we were a very tight-knit group. We went out every week just to kind of vent, and talk, and work through problems. And we had a lot of



support in terms of res life was very supportive of this — like, they had a lot of trainings, and it was a lot of, Here's where you can help students do this or that. But it was really hard. And whenever I am anxious in my life today I have — my anxiety dreams are about that year. So it, like, transports me right back there. It was a very stressful time. I think also I wasn't sure what I was doing next. I was pretty sure I was going to go to grad school, but, you know, it was just a time of uncertainty in general and kind of not knowing where you fit in, because I wasn't a student, but I wasn't in the real world. And I was still on campus, but I was now responsible for people. So it was kind of an in-between year of being in limbo.

YORK: It's very interesting. So as a graduate and being fairly recently out of Smith are there any words of advise (laughs) that you would pass on from all of these really—

KING: I would just say take advantage of this alumni network. I mean, when you get out in the world and you want to hire someone, put those job ads out to Smithies, you know, get them into positions where you think they can learn and grow. And then when you want a position, find out if there's a Smithy working there. I mean, I will always interview Smithies no matter what they're applying for. And when I need something there are lots of alums, not even just from my class, but if you find older alums, there's an automatic connection, and you can talk to those people about anything, and they want to help. They want to see Smith women make their way in the world and will do everything in their power to do that, and I've found that to be true no matter what class I'm talking to. Yeah.

YORK: Great.

GEIS: We're good.

YORK: Great.

KING: Awesome. Thank you. You're a good interviewer. I haven't thought about those things in a long time. (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Jessica Rubin, June 2016.*