

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Theresa Kitay, Class of 1984

Interviewed by
Julia Greider, Class of 2016

May 17, 2014

Abstract

In this interview, Terry Kitay discusses her interest in history and African American studies, as well as her passion for civil rights. She talks about her perception of lesbians on campus in the 1980s. She also tells about her career as a housing discrimination lawyer since graduation. Finally, she remembers both the good times with her friends in 150 Elm and the challenges with which Smith presented her.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Julia Greider.

Transcript

Transcribed by Charles Messing, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Kitay, Theresa. Interview by Julia Greider. Video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Theresa Kitay, interview by Julia Greider, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2014, with:

TERESA KITAY
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: JULIA GREIDER

GREIDER: All right. This is Julia Greider, and I'm conducting an interview with Terry Kitay, Class of 1984, on May 17th, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this.

KITAY: My pleasure.

GREIDER: So how did you end up coming to Smith?

KITAY: I was supposed to go to Wellesley. My mother is — went to Wellesley, class of '60. And I was all set to go to Wellesley. I applied to Wellesley. And when we did the little college tour we went up to look at Wellesley and then looked at — my mother said, "As long as we're in Boston," because we were from Atlanta, she said, "Why don't we go out and look at Smith and Mount Holyoke just in case? You won't like them, but just in case." Biggest mistake of her life. (laughter) And I fell in love with Smith the minute I saw the campus. That was it. And we — my mother and I have had a friendly rivalry ever since.

GREIDER: So did the fact that it was a women's college affect your decision to come here?

KITAY: Very much. I wanted that. I came from a big suburban high school. I think there were more people in my high school class than there were in my college class. And the valedictorian of our class was not the person who had the best grades. It was the captain of the football team. So I was ready to be in a place where being a girl wasn't a strike against you to begin with.

GREIDER: So what did you decide to study when you came here?

KITAY: Took me a few years. First I thought I would be a government major. Then I thought I would be a religion major. Then I was going to be a geology major. I never flirted with math. (laughter) That was never — I wound up as a history major but I did the — you had to concentrate in some period of history. I did post-World War II America, and so wound

up actually taking most of my classes in the African American Studies department. So it was a history major but it was almost an African American Studies major.

GREIDER: Do you remember an academic experience that had a big influence on you while you were here?

KITAY: Yes. My junior year. Took a seminar. It was the first African American Studies class I took, actually. It was called Blacks and American Law. And it was about the legal aspects of the Civil Rights Movement in the '60s — '50s, '60s, and would even go back to the '30s. The professor was incredibly dynamic. It was a small class. And I just got totally turned on by the history, and the stories, and just the excitement of it. And the passion toward civil rights and how important it was. So that was a big class for me. It was called Blacks and American Law. I remember that really well. Yeah.

GREIDER: So were you involved in any like political activism or anything on campus while you were here?

KITAY: Not terribly. I — it was the early '80s. And we were kind of struggling with Reaganism and Wall Street and greed is good and all that. And I was kind of trying to stay out of that and focus on more service sort of oriented things toward my life. But I did — I'm trying to think. I did get a call the first — I think the first week I was on campus as a first-year student because I was from Georgia. The Equal Rights Amendment was still being debated. It was still potentially going to be passed. And I remember that somebody, some other student, called me and said, "Since you're from an unratified state." It's like, I'm sorry, it's not my fault. (laughter) "We'd like to have your help on this." I think I did a little bit on that.

And I remember the election in 1980. So that would have been November 1980. I would have been here for a few months. And the student center, which at the time was at Davis, had a promotion where when your state, when your home state, declared for one of the candidates, that night they'd give you a free sundae or something like that. And so I went over there really early. And again being from Georgia, Jimmy Carter, they declared it at three o'clock in the afternoon basically. I said, "Well, they already declared. Can I still have my sundae?" And they said yes. So got the sundae. Unfortunately that may have been the extent of my political involvement. I mean, I was very aware of a lot of political things and I probably was very sympathetic to a lot of them. But not particularly an activist.

GREIDER: What other kinds of political issues do you remember being talked about on campus?

KITAY: I know divestment was big, South Africa was big. I think it really came to a head the year after I graduated, I think in '85. But it was a big deal. El Salvador. The revolution in El Salvador was a major event. The — and the class before us, class of '83, had a similar controversy over their commencement speaker that happened this year.

GREIDER: Yes.

KITAY: Yes. With Jeane Kirkpatrick. And I remember people objecting to her, and if I'm not mistaken, I think there was actually a connection to a Smith graduating student, that she had been the niece of one of the nuns that had been killed in El Salvador I think. Something like that. I think it was a much more personal connection. So I remember there was a lot of outcry over we don't really want to have Jeane Kirkpatrick.

And I certainly didn't have any sympathy for Jeane Kirkpatrick. So I was — that was fine. But I didn't realize that our class was going to pay the price for that. The next year we had the most bland, vanilla, horrible commencement speaker you could ever have.

GREIDER: Oh my goodness.

KITAY: I just call her stupid poet. But she was — I mean, she was awful, she was awful. Just not inspiring at all, not what you want to hear on your commencement. But so obviously, that was a very big deal. And ERA was a big deal early on. I think the King Day holiday was passed federally when I was in school. And I think there was a lot of discussion about whether we should have a national holiday for King Day. Yeah.

GREIDER: So if you were involved in African American Studies and stuff like that, how did you perceive race on campus?

KITAY: It was some — it was a touchy issue. It was a touchy issue. I think everyone was very aware of race. I certainly had come from an environment where — classic public school, middle-class, white suburb. I mean, I didn't really know anybody of another race. And I — but I had this very strong feeling about racism and about equal rights and civil rights. And I was very committed to it. It was the first time it sort of presented itself in person to me, by having people in my house. There were a couple of black students in my house. Got to know them.

And I think back on it, and I think we were really naive. I think amongst all of my friends, I don't think any of us really thought about race very much, and thought about diversity. Certainly nothing like it is now. And this is only 30 years ago. This isn't in the '60s or the '50s. It was still very much not a particularly homogeneous [*sic*] society here at Smith. I know that SOAR I think started, the society, something against — Students Organized Against Racism or something. That started when I was here. I was very committed to that. I think we had — may

have had an incident or two that just cut me to the core, and it was horrible. And I would have been upset about. But the diversity was nothing like it is now. Nothing at all. And I'm sorry about that. I think it's a very enriching experience for students now.

GREIDER: So how did you come to be so committed to civil rights issues?

KITAY: It's a good question. I don't know. I just — I always — I think it's just always been in me that I feel strongly about equality and respect and making sure people are treated appropriately. And nowadays I think about gay rights and I talk to people about it. I think it's a human rights issue. It's a human rights issue. It's a civil rights issue. It's no different from racism. It's — you are who you are. And you shouldn't be penalized for who you are. I think — I don't know. I just always felt that. I mean, even in high school I remember having people in my class say things that just horrified me. And I didn't speak out about it. I probably should have, but I didn't have the wherewithal to do that. And the history of it. I've always been a real student of history. I've always loved history. And the history of it was fascinating to me because it was so close, because some of it was even in my lifetime. It just interested me.

GREIDER: So in our research we saw there was a lot of controversy over like the lesbian population at Smith.

KITAY: Really?

GREIDER: Yeah. Well, it seemed like there was some stuff about like some articles.

KITAY: In the '80s? In the early '80s?

GREIDER: Yeah, some articles in like magazines and stuff about there being lots of lesbians here.

KITAY: My perception of that is that that didn't really come out until later. Till after I had already left. I will tell you again in my first week here we went to whatever the student fair was for all the organizations that you could sign up for groups and things, for extracurricular activities. And I remember walking in and seeing a table for something called the Lesbian Alliance. And I freaked. I just — I had never seen a lesbian that I knew of. I mean, I'm sure I had. But I didn't know. And I thought, What does a lesbian look like? (laughter) It's really fascinating. My parents had some gay friends. So I knew some gay men. But I'd never seen a gay woman. And there was a student sitting behind the table. And I just remember this clear as day, because she looked different. She had really unruly hair, and like a beret. And I just remember being terrified, which I thought was hysterical. I mean, now I

think it's hysterical. But — and I was like (gasps) (laughter) how quickly can I get away?

It's not that I had a problem with anyone being gay. It's just I had never seen it before. So — and I certainly — I mean I knew people who were lesbians when I was here. Some of my best friends now are lesbians. But I don't really recall that it was a big deal. I don't — your research would bear it out. But I do know that later on, maybe when I was five, ten years out, there was a lot of controversy about if you go to Smith you must be a lesbian. Like — well, I could deny that, and tell you it's not true. But I really don't care. So, I mean, it's not like it's something I want to distance myself from.

GREIDER: So tell me about your social life here and maybe like house community or other kinds of social life.

KITAY: Well, my best friends at Smith and my best friends now still are all people I met my first day.

GREIDER: Wow.

KITAY: My freshman year roommate is my best friend from Smith. And my other friends lived across the hall and upstairs. So the house was everything, and I lived in 150 Elm, which had seventeen students at the time. So we were a very small group. And I was worried about it to begin with before I got here. But I stayed there for three years. I loved the small house. It was wonderful. And I think my social life at Smith was very different from my friends who went to other colleges. (laughter) I mean, you know it is different. You have a social life but you make it. And it is going to be different. *Dallas* the TV show was the rage. And who shot J.R. was — the conclusion to who shot J.R. I think was the fall of either my freshman or sophomore year, I don't remember. So we would gather on Friday nights in — one of my friends had a television that she'd inherited. And we would gather in her room on Friday nights and watch *Dallas*. We had to watch *Dallas*. And that was at nine o'clock. And then we would go out afterwards.

House parties, a lot of house parties, that were always — they were fun. My first introduction to alcohol, even though the drinking age was twenty, I think, at the time, and so I was underage. But nobody cared at that time. I think they just let us do it and nobody — everybody looked the other way. But so there was a lot of house parties.

Some of my friends had boyfriends that — one had a boyfriend that she met. She was working off campus and met him. Another one had a high school sweetheart that she's been married to now for thirty years. So there were some men around. But the social life was — it was very rigid in the sense that it was Friday and Saturday night and that was it. Because you had to study, I mean, every night. I mean, I was in the library every night studying.

So I think that regimentation of it is very different from what other students at other institutions find. And I don't know if it's the same. I don't know if that's changed at all. Do you still have regimented house parties on Friday and Saturday night?

GREIDER: Sometimes. Yes.

KITAY: Yeah. And you had to be on the guest list to go to somebody else's house. And the Cutter-Ziskind courtyard party was the party that everybody wanted to go to.

GREIDER: Really. (laughter)

KITAY: Yes. Yes, that was a great party in the spring. So, and different houses had different reputations for parties. You didn't want to go to a Quad party. They were just — it's like a frat party. You don't want to go there. (laughs) So, and the Green Street houses were all nerds, they weren't fun at all.

GREIDER: Sounds kind of similar to the stereotypes today. (laughter)

KITAY: Is it?

GREIDER: So did you have any experiences with relationships or dating while you were here?

KITAY: Once. I met a guy, a UMass student, at a party, he was a forestry student, and we were very close when we met. And all I knew was his first name, and I will never forget a friend of mine calling the forestry department at UMass to find out the guy's last name.

GREIDER: Oh my gosh. (laughter)

KITAY: She did. She found him. And so we had a few dates. That was fun. He came to a couple parties and we hung out a little bit. But no serious relationship at all.

GREIDER: How would you describe a typical Smithie when you were here?

KITAY: I think my friends and I did not think of ourselves as typical Smithies. I think there was still some thought that a typical Smithie was very wealthy and a little snobby and had gone to a private school and joined the country club and that sort of thing. I think we still had that image in our minds of what a typical Smithie was. So my friends and I, most of my friends were public school high school graduates. Very middle-class backgrounds. And I think we all — I don't know. What did we have in common? I think we all had just a real interest in being

supportive of each other and having fun and also very studious. I mean, we all worked hard. We worked hard.

GREIDER: So how did it feel, or how do you feel about not fitting that typical Smithie image?

KITAY: I was kind of proud of it. (laughter) I think I had an idea in my head that the idea of the typical Smithie, the country club set, was changing. And that made me happy, I liked that, so I was proud of it. Was proud of the fact that I was only in Smith because I had financial aid and that I had gone to a public high school. That was — somehow that was a defining characteristic at the time. I don't know if it still is. But that — I liked it, frankly.

GREIDER: How would you describe the campus atmosphere when you were here?

KITAY: Campus atmosphere. It was generally very nurturing, very supportive, very cozy. Felt very much at home. It was easy to come here and to live here, it wasn't a horrible — it was — I mean, there were some culture shock issues being from Georgia. There were. I stayed up the first night it snowed to see a snowplow, because I'd never seen one. But it was OK. It was a really good environment for me. It really allowed me to be whoever I wanted to be, and I hadn't felt that in high school. And Smith, if I said, "You know what? I want to do a little survey of my friends for my religion course just for the heck of it," nobody thought that was weird. I mean, it was — intellectual curiosity was good. And nobody had a problem with it, and it was fun for me. So it was very — supportive and nurturing I think are the two words that I mostly think of.

GREIDER: So what do you feel was expected of you after graduation?

KITAY: Ha. Well, I am third generation female attorney in my family. My grandmother was a lawyer, my mother is a lawyer. So there wasn't much question about what I was going to do. I did arrive at that decision on my own to go to law school. But the thing that was expected of me was to get a graduate degree. There was really no question that I was going to get some sort of graduate degree. So that's in terms of familial expectations.

In terms of Smith expectations, again it was the mid '80s. It was everybody was working on Wall Street. Everybody interviewed on campus in their navy blue suits and their pumps, and interviewed for jobs on Wall Street senior year. But I knew I was going to graduate school, so I didn't have to do that. So really graduate school was what was expected.

GREIDER: So tell me a little bit about your life since graduation.

KITAY: I went to law school immediately, and surprise, there were three other people in my law school class that were in my class at Smith.

GREIDER: Wow.

KITAY: And I didn't know any of them. It was pretty funny. And I got my degree and started working and then went to work for the government and then went out on my own. And I've been — had my own practice now for almost twenty years. I made a big move in — ten years ago, in 2004, I left Atlanta. I went back home to Atlanta after school, after Smith. Went to law school in Atlanta. Stayed in Atlanta, worked in Atlanta. Ten years ago I moved to California, which was a huge move for me.

My life is — I'm not married and I don't have children, which makes me a little bit different from most of my friends at Smith. I'm very happy not to be married, very happy not to have children, oddly. But I have a lot of friends, a lot of good friends, all over the world, and a lot of just good company. And I live with my best friend as my roommate.

GREIDER: Oh, that's cool.

KITAY: Yeah. I know everybody assumes that we're a couple. But — and it's wonderful. And my life is really nice. And yet I don't think a day goes by that I don't think of Smith in some respect, somehow. There is no question in my mind that Smith made me what I am today. The person I am. The sort of commitment to justice and commitment to women, and especially commitment to women's education. And the dear friends that I have. I mean, there's just no question in my mind that Smith was a huge influence, and I'm forever grateful for that.

GREIDER: So are you still working as a lawyer now?

KITAY: Yes. Yes, I have my own practice. I've been a solo practitioner since 2006. And just this last January I hired the daughter of my former law partner, who is also an attorney, to be of counsel to my firm. So now — there's two of us now. But she's in Atlanta and I'm in California, so we work remotely. I have a very narrow specialty that allows me to basically work all over the country. I travel constantly, and I've really developed such a narrow field that I'm one of maybe three or four people in the country that do what I do on a regular basis. So —

GREIDER: What is your field?

KITAY: It's fair housing defense work. So interestingly enough, I knew I wanted to do civil rights law. But I'm doing defense work, not plaintiff. So it's civil rights discrimination issues in housing, defending those

cases. And a lot of it has been concentrating on disability rights actually, and disability access. And so it's been interesting for me to come on campus and see all the changes that have been made in the buildings for disability access. And unfortunately I'm never off duty. So I'm — that's not right. (laughter) But that's it.

GREIDER: Do you have any favorite memories from your time at Smith?

KITAY: Well, I mean, they pretty much all revolve around my friends and just our times just pretty much hanging out. There were certain parties that are memorable probably for reasons that should not be put on tape. Our senior year Mountain Day was just idyllic. I mean, it was exactly what Mountain Day was supposed to be. By senior year a couple of us had cars. So Mountain Day we all tumbled into the cars and drove up. Just drove north. We had no idea where we were going. And we wound up in Vermont and had a wonderful day. And that's one I think all my friends remember. I remember that really well. But I think yeah, really just sort of hanging out in the living rooms and having — we had sit-down dinners with the same people every night because you had to eat in your house. And I have some academic memories I like, I guess. (laughter) I mean, I told you about the one class. But that particular professor is no longer here. I took every class he taught, because he was so wonderful. And they were all terrific and he was very supportive of me and I appreciated it.

GREIDER: Do you have any favorite traditions? You were mentioning Mountain Day.

KITAY: Mountain Day of course. There's something about early morning, the bells ringing, and thinking, (gasps) I don't have to go to school today. It's like a snow day. We did Rally Day shows. I understand they don't do shows anymore. We did class shows. And ours were always terrible. But it was fun to do.

GREIDER: What kinds of shows were they?

KITAY: Like musical shows. Yeah. Yeah.

GREIDER: That's cool. Tell me about some challenges that you experienced while you were here.

KITAY: Well, like I said, it was a bit of a culture shock. I think there was an expectation on the part of some of my friends and acquaintances that because I was from Georgia I was going to be a certain type of person. I think some of them assumed that I would be very Southern, and even though I'd grown up in Georgia, I didn't have a Southern accent. And I think some people assumed that — *The Dukes of Hazzard* was a real popular show at the time. I don't know if you've seen it. But —

GREIDER: I've heard of it.

KITAY: Yeah, well, there's a couple of country boys running around in a Corvette sort of thing, with a big Confederate flag on the side. And I think several people that I came to know at Smith, even some good friends, kind of figured that was a true depiction of life in Georgia. And that was a challenge to get over. Finances were always a challenge. I mean, my parents did a good job of not really involving me too much in the tuition aspects, although I know that it was difficult. And I had loans, they had loans, and I had scholarships and all that. But just day-to-day living at Smith, you need some money. And that was always a challenge. I remember having to bum ten bucks off a freshman one year to get home, to take the bus to get to the airport to get home. So that was a challenge.

And then academically it was a challenge. I remember the first time I got a C on a paper. I cried. I mean, I didn't get Cs. That just didn't happen. And the professor had completely marked up the paper and completely edited it and said, "Learn how to write well." And I was like, I thought I did! But those were good challenges. And the academic challenges were very good. There was one professor that I took every course she took — she taught. And she was notoriously difficult, notoriously. And I did — I got like a B minus I think the first time I took her class. The second time I got a B. And the third time I got a B plus. And with that B plus she wrote on my exam, or I don't know, on my exam or report card or something, she wrote, "I've enjoyed watching you improve over the years." I was like, Oh, that's nice.

GREIDER: Cool, let's see. When you think about your time here at Smith, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

KITAY: My friends. My friends, and being on campus. Yesterday I just walked onto the Chapin Lawn and just went, "Oh. Chapin."

GREIDER: So tell me about why you came back for reunion, and have you been back before?

KITAY: Yes. I'm a pretty loyal reunion-goer. I've been to every one of my reunions.

GREIDER: Wow.

KITAY: And I'm always kind of surprised when people are surprised by that. It's like, Why wouldn't you go to reunion? Ivy Day. The parade is a euphoric experience. It's wonderful. I love seeing the alums and I love seeing the seniors. It's fabulous. And our class actually has not had Ivy Day with the seniors very often. It's only happened a few times. So it's very special. And my group of friends generally have come to every

reunion. This year is the first year that a couple have not made it. And I come because it's a wonderful opportunity to get back on campus. And to see some of my friends that I might not have seen in the last five years.

GREIDER: What is it like to be back on campus?

KITAY: It's horrible staying in the dorms. In the houses. I will say that. I remember last time, at our twenty-fifth reunion, we all said we were too old for this and we weren't going to stay in the houses anymore. Here we are. I can't figure out what the seniors in the house were yelling about all night.

GREIDER: Oh no.

KITAY: But good for them. It's always good to be back here. It's very nostalgic. It's very evocative for me of a time in my life that was transformative. So it's important to me to be here.

GREIDER: How do you think that Smith has prepared you for the rest of your life?

KITAY: Smith helped me to be self-reliant. I knew I was going far away from home, and wouldn't be going home except once a year, at mid— break. And I was going to have to do things for myself and grow up. And I did. There's no question that Smith, the Smith education, is a fabulous education, prepared me to do very well in law school, prepared me to be a lifelong learner and a critical thinker. And that's invaluable.

GREIDER: Do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

KITAY: Advice for current or future Smithies? Appreciate your time here. My mother told me that the whole time I was here. And I blew her off. So I know nobody's going to listen to me. But all of my friends and I, we all say the same thing. It's so wasted on the people who don't appreciate what they have. We all want to go back to be at Smith now, being the people we are now, and knowing what we are now, and having the confidence and the self-knowledge that we have now to go through that experience. But I think that's how you get to that point is going through the experience. So my best advice is to appreciate what you have, enjoy it, remember it's just a grade, it's not who you are. And be proud that you're at Smith and remember those who come behind you.

GREIDER: So in starting to wrap this up I guess too, is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you feel is a big part of your Smith experience that you wanted to talk about?

KITAY: No, I think you've done a really good job. (laughter) We talked about a lot. So no, no, I think I've gotten the message across. I'm a big Smith booster.

GREIDER: All right. Great. Well, thank you so much for agreeing to do this.

KITAY: Thank you. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Charles Messing, June 26, 2014.