

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Angela Margolis, Class of 1964

Interviewed by
Grace Ramsay, Class of 2016

May 17, 2014

Abstract

Angela Margolis reflects upon her college experience as the first Smithie from North Dakota. In this interview, she talks about negotiating her class and national identity as she moved back and forth between North Dakota and Massachusetts. She speaks to the dating culture and the rigid rules set by house mothers. She also recalls specific anecdotes about her and her friends breaking those rules. Margolis then remembers specific events during her Smith career, such as hearing Eudora Welty and Robert Frost speak. She ends the interview by talking about finding her passion for theater after graduating, as well as her path towards becoming a wife, a mother, and a spiritual person.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Alisa Kharakozova, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Margolis, Angela. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Angela Margolis, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Margolis, Angela. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Angela Margolis, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2014, with:

ANGELA MARGOLIS
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: GRACE RAMSAY

RAMSAY: This is Grace Ramsay, and I'm conducting an interview with Angela Margolis, Class of 1964, on May 17, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for coming and doing this with us.

MARGOLIS: Thank you.

RAMSAY: So why did you decide to come to Reunion this year? What does it feel like being back?

MARGOLIS: Well, it was a bit of a decision. It's great being back. I was surprised. I didn't expect it to be so much fun. Obviously, it's the people. And interestingly enough, it's not just my friends, who I've been in touch with, but other people, that I accidentally sit down next to and start talking to. And surprisingly we have so many things to talk about. There's no difficulty in finding something to talk about, which is interesting. In general, I talk pretty easily anyway. But there does seem something special. I didn't expect it to be as special as it seems. I was sort of surprised. I wasn't ever anti-Smith, but I wasn't a great lover of Smith, by any chance, by any way. Does that answer your question?

RAMSAY: Why weren't you a lover of Smith?

MARGOLIS: I was very excited to come here. I came from a tiny farming village in North Dakota. And the year before they only had 49 states, missing only North Dakota, so I felt quite special. I remember telling a professor they couldn't kick me out because they'd have to change their literature. He allowed us how they could definitely kick me out. It would be no problem. So certainly the first year, I was fascinated. Kids in my little hometown weren't even going to college. And I got on a train and took two days to get here with a thirteen-hour layover in Chicago. I guess my father didn't believe in airplanes. It was exciting to be with all these women who were really interested in subjects. And that was exciting.

I was in the maids' quarters of Martha Wilson, and I immediately made a very good friend, who was also in the maids' quarters, Susan Gushee. But she was in a broom closet because it was a

very big class. Sixty-four was overly large. In fact, you had her here. She probably talked about the broom closet. Anyway, I stayed in Martha Wilson for a year, but then she was moved out of Cutter, as you know. The next year I requested to go into her house, and we were roommates, then in Cutter. And that friendship has continued. And, in fact, I would spend Thanksgiving and Easter — because I only went home Christmas or summer.

It was a long way from the prairie. I had always wanted to get away, but yet it was also strange. There seems something — maybe that was sophomore year — started to seem a little phony about all this — I don't know, education. I'm not quite sure what went on but I definitely had sort of a sophomore slump. But I couldn't think of what I could do if I left. Those days you couldn't come back easily. You couldn't leave and come back easily. I probably should have gone abroad, but I wasn't in any of the areas where you go abroad. But then eventually I got into writing more with Mr. Dabney, I think that was his name. I think I started to explore more where I had come from. And now you see the diversity, and it's wonderful. But I was like a diverse person then, even though I was from this country and spoke English. But, nevertheless, being from a tiny farming village in the middle of Dakota made me a little odd in some ways. And maybe that had something to do with it.

I also had the wisdom to go to a counselor. My parents never believed in anything psychological. But I want to a counselor here, and she just listened to me. And I realized I had wanted to be a brilliant academic like my older sister had been, who had been the first one to go off to — she went off to Vassar. But she was real intellectual. And I was not. And I was trying to be. And, in fact, I majored in English Literature, and I liked it, but I should have been in theater. And I thought I was going to be a doctor. When I left Smith, I worked just in the labs at Harvard Medical School and went to the lectures and realized that no way did I want to be a doctor. I didn't want to go through medical school and learn all that stuff.

And I realized theater was my real love always. And I had wasted some of my time at Smith. I should have been in theater. I then went to graduate school in theater and I acted and I taught theater for many years. And that was great. That was my real calling. I wish I had known that when I was here because it was a good theater department. And I should have been in it, but I found out later. Also there were a lot of things I loved — I heard Robert Frost, I think it was my first year here, which was mind-boggling. Eudora Welty, I heard here. It seems so extraordinary. And in the writing, I could write about the experience of being from a tiny village in the middle of the prairie. And all my ancestors had been pioneers. Of course, once you educate them, they leave. And they don't come back, which happened to everybody there. Do you have another question? I probably wandered way off your question.

RAMSAY: It's really great. You had mentioned that you seemed diverse to Smith at the time. So what did a typical Smithie look like when you were here?

MARGOLIS: Did I mention it wasn't diverse? Oh, I was different. Well a typical Smithie did wear the pleated plaid skirt with the pin on the side and the circle pins and seemed to me went on ski vacations often to Europe. So there was sort of a class thing too, I felt, and that I was in a somewhat different class. I grew up in the town. My father was a banker. So I was the rich kids. But I came here and I was the poor kid. Also, I grew up in the town. I was part Norwegian and part Irish. But there you hid the Norwegian part and just pretended you were Irish because they were classy. They were the bankers and the storeowners in the tiny town. And the Norwegians were the farmers, the red-faced farmers. You come East and suddenly, Irish — forget it, and Norwegian was classy. That's Ibsen, that's great literature and a beautiful country. So that was extremely valuable to learn that all those ideas we have of superiority is a bunch of crap. So that was very valuable education.

I also took Latin, which I surprisingly loved. I had taken some by correspondence in North Dakota because that's a lot of what you do. You can't get classes like that in your high school. And I had a Mr. Gimmick, I think. And there was something — we memorized things. That was wonderful. I was never good at languages. But the memorizing the Latin — there was something beautiful in that. Eventually, later in life, I got drawn to Sanskrit. And again, even though I'm lousy at languages, the beauty of that language was very powerful to me. And I sort of remembered that from a Latin class here. I think I went way off your question. (laughs) That's all right.

RAMSAY: Yeah, it's your interview. So I guess I'm wondering — you've spoken a lot about how your academics were, at times, very helpful for you. Do you have any memories of your social life?

MARGOLIS: Sure. Through my friend, Susan, I certainly met a bit of another world, a more socializing. You know when I was growing up, it was mostly all farm boys. I did not date at all in high school because I was a banker's daughter, and it was pretty much farm boys. And besides, I knew I was leaving. I knew I'd get on the train and go. So the social life — it was a lot through Susan. And it was making friends, and that was a big thing. I had had some friends in North Dakota, who actually, because of my family and me, did eventually go to college. For a long time I was the only one from my high school class that graduated from college. But I did make a bunch of friends from different places. I did tend to prefer — it was a little bit of a class thing — and I preferred what would have been the lower classes. I was more comfortable.

And then there was dating and dating intelligent guys that weren't farmers. I now admire the farmers and realize how hard they worked and how wonderful it was. But at the time that was my class thing. And having a boyfriend was an exciting thing — an Amherst

boyfriend. That was another whole new world that I hadn't known. I mean, of course I knew it. I read books. But I didn't other than that because it wasn't something in my high school. I mean, we didn't even have proms because the Lutheran minister thought they weren't appropriate. So we weren't even allowed to have a prom in my high school at the time.

RAMSAY: So I've heard that in your class especially there were a lot of rules and regulations about when you could come home and curfews and such.

MARGOLIS: Oh, yeah, and there was somebody — I'm sure you probably already heard — there was somebody, not in this class, but in our house, in Cutter House, who we found sneaking the door open, unlocking one of the back doors so her boyfriend could come up. And that was wonderfully scandalous, delightfully breaking the rules. There were a lot of amusing — and none of them I found dreadful, partly because it was all such a new experience to me. I didn't find things stifling in that way, at all. I mostly just hadn't found myself very much, that's all.

RAMSAY: So it seems like you had to negotiate your class a lot, in moving back and forth. So I'm wondering what expectations you felt upon graduation. What did you feel like you had to do?

MARGOLIS: Well I had signed up for the Peace Corps. I was signed up to be sent, I think to Kenya. I can't remember where exactly — Ethiopia or Kenya. And I panicked. I thought, two years is such a long time. How could I possibly go somewhere for two years? So that was interesting to see me panic out of that. Did you say expectations? As I'd said, I thought I was going to be a doctor. So I did the smart thing of working at Harvard Medical School and realizing no way did I want to go through medical school and be a doctor. So I had the wisdom and some good counseling.

I also had the wisdom not to get married. I knew I should not get married soon, which a lot of people did. And I did have a serious boyfriend at the time. So there was an expectation to find myself. And I knew the first day of work. That week was the first time I didn't go to church because I was on my own — truly on my own. Nobody was paying for my education. I stayed home and read Erich Fromm or something, somebody spiritual. I realized I was going to find my own path, whatever it was. And I'm sure Smith in some way gave that to me — that I could find my own path. I didn't have to follow the path I grew up in. And that was exciting. And that has really worked for me. I've had to explore around a little bit, but I have found spiritual communities that really work for me and academic communities, book clubs that really work for me.

RAMSAY: Who have you become since Smith?

MARGOLIS: Since Smith, well I was a drama teacher, as I said, and then I did get involved in — in New York City it's called the Practical Philosophy Foundation. But it's sort of — it was at that time anyway — could that get me in trouble — Esoteric Hinduism. And that's where I found enormous appeal in Sanskrit and — not being a language buff at all — it was the power of chanting in Sanskrit, which I had never experienced before. So I became both a theater person — I never supported myself by acting, but I did act quite a lot in little companies. One that is now a big, famous company. But when I was there, it was just starting. It was a little company. And so those two things are who I have become.

But then I got married when I was 31, and that's obviously a whole other thing of who you become. A wife. And what exactly does that mean? And then eventually a mother. And that changes a lot of your thinking, too. Theater became difficult when you've got little kids. Staying out at night and rehearsals — I had to go to bed by ten o'clock. And you couldn't do that if you were acting. But the community, both of the kids' schools, cooperative nursery schools, that community — I was in Brookline, Massachusetts at that point. I had been in New York, then in Brookline, Massachusetts because of the public school systems, mainly. They were really good. And we wanted our kids in public schools.

So I became — not sure in what order — but obviously wife and mother and philosophy member — sort of spiritual seeker. I didn't work. I did a lot of volunteer work, but I realized I couldn't teach kids all day and come back to more kids at night. That would drive me over the edge. One of my kids had a lot of problems — it was fascinating — but I needed to deal with that. So I was for several years something I never thought I'd be, which is a stay-at-home mom. I think it was a good thing I was. It was tough.

RAMSAY: When you reflect back on your Smith years, what is the first thing that comes to mind?

MARGOLIS: Well, the fascination of being among all these women who are studying some pretty interesting things. I think that's really the main thing. There is also the physical presence. You know, there are trees. I grew up with very few trees and the flowering trees in the spring and this incredible fall with all these different colors. I loved wandering down through the pond, where you apparently weren't supposed to go, because that was a world — and it still is for me, and I'm amazed. There are times I miss the prairie, that wide-open space and that huge sky. But the vegetation at Smith was incredible and obviously some remarkable teachers and some lectures, going to meetings in Greene Hall and seeing really famous people speak. That was impressive.

RAMSAY: Do you have any favorite stories or memories?

MARGOLIS: Well I mentioned hearing Robert Frost. That was powerful. And I remember going to the Academy of Music, which I realize is still there, and seeing Eva La Gallienne. And it just blew my mind. That's when I should have known, too, that I belonged in theater, because that just blew my mind.

And then I remember with another friend, we made a little May basket of all kinds of wonderful things and took it to a professor's house and rang the doorbell and ran away like little kids. And I'm not even sure what professor it was, but obviously we were infatuated with him.

The other strange memory I have is with a friend throwing snowballs at cars, which is a horrible thing to do. And a car stopped, and this man started running after us. And I said to my friend, "We've got to separate and go different ways. He can't get us both." And we both actually escaped. I was able to hide. She was able to hide. But the stupidity of that — obviously, it was a dangerous thing to do. You shouldn't throw snowballs at cars that are moving along in a snowstorm. I don't know why that's a favorite memory because it was something I did that was rotten. But it was just a looking at oneself and realizing how dumb you can be.

Again with somebody when we were studying for a class, going into one of the academic buildings and just using the blackboards and putting all of the diagrams on — maybe it was chemistry — and working with that at night. Obviously there were classes I loved. There was a math professor, who was brilliant, a woman. Calculus. That was just such a shock to see this brilliant woman explaining calculus so well that I could understand it. I really knew what she was talking about. And some of these big meetings that would really blow my mind.

RAMSAY: Do you have any advice for the Smithies about to graduate?

MARGOLIS: Well I really think — and I may have learned it at Smith, I'm not aware — just to trust one's own instinct, to fall silent and see what's the right thing because the right thing will appear to you. What had happened to me when I left and I knew I didn't want to be a doctor, a guy said to me — somebody who wanted to be a boyfriend but I was not interested. He said, "You should be a high school drama teacher." And all of the sudden I realized it was the truth. It was something you feel inside you — and maybe it came from Smith, I don't know — something that's right or wrong. This is the wrong person to go out with. This is the right person to go out with. This is the wrong path to follow just because it seems classy or it's what my parents want or it would make me look more important. That's the main thing is I really believe — of course, I'm now a meditation teacher, so that's my big thing — but I really believe you can fall silent and know what's the right thing to do and trust that. That's it.

GEIS [videographer]: Thank you so much. I have one question just to ask about your career path. So you had your children, and you had this friend who gave you

the suggestion of becoming a school drama teacher. Can you talk just about what your path was after — because you're home with your kids, until now?

MARGOLIS: I did a lot of writing. I had a little column in a newspaper. I've written a lot of short stories. A few have been published, but more poetry. So it's a lot of that. But now I'm a meditation teacher. I teach a few other things. I do some drama. I spend quite a bit of time in Florida for my health. I have scleroderma. And I have to be in Florida, and I found a wonderful community down there. I hated the idea of going to Florida, but I found a great community, both spiritual and writing community. And I teach down there quite a lot. And we just moved to the Bronx, so I haven't set myself up there, too, but. It's mostly volunteer teaching, but that's what I love to do. And it's mostly to old people, but a lot of them really need to learn to meditate. I'm also a hospice volunteer now, which is fascinating to me. It's partly where I am in my stage of life, but I think dying in this country is much too tragic a fact and it doesn't have to be so much so. So that's one of my more current interests. Did I answer you at all?

GEIS: Yeah. Thank you.

RAMSAY: Thanks.

MARGOLIS: Okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Alisa Kharakozova, June 2014.