

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Leslie Mark, Class of 1983

Interviewed by
Ellice Amanna, AC, Class of 2014J

May 25, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, Leslie Mark, who serves on the Smith Board of Directors, discusses her strong connection to the college. She speaks of the continuing importance of the Smith network in her life and the local alumnae chapters she's been a part of.

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: Mark, Leslie. Interview by Ellice Amanna. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Leslie Mark, interview by Ellice Amanna, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

LESLIE MARK

by: Ellice Amanna

AMANNA: So, this is Ellice Amanna, and I'm conducting an interview with Leslie Mark, Class of '83. It's May 25th, 2013, and this is the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So, thank you for participating.

MARK: Thanks for having us.

AMANNA: So, you're here for reunion.

MARK: Reunion.

AMANNA: Is this your first or have you -- do you come back regularly?

MARK: I have been up until this past year on the Board of Directors, so I have in the last four years been coming regularly to Smith, which has been a great joy, spring and fall, even better, good times of year to come. But this is my first reunion since 15th, so it's been a long time for just coming without agenda except to see people and connect.

AMANNA: Right, so being on the Board, I mean, that indicates you have a strong connection to the school?

MARK: I have a strong connection to the school. It -- it's probably two things that are buried in my mind. One, was my aunt, who was the Class of '45, strong character, especially that era out of the war, going through the college is a very different experience than anything. We have been talking a lot this weekend wrestling with the different experience that the young women have today than what we had thirty years ago, but I think about the sea change that was from '45's to '83, it's just sort of mind boggling. So, she was a very strong character in my life, and that was part of it. And the other part was another friend of the family, but always known as aunt, had a farmhouse up in Ashfield, which is just up the way.

AMANNA: Yeah.

MARK: And my father was a diplomat, we -- I was born overseas and grew up in and out of the states, but always home based to Washington, but every summer we

would come to Ashfield, and Northampton was the big town. I mean, we got the New York Times every morning. Academy of Music was a place to come and, you know, see stuff. I remember when the four-plex opened in Springfield, and we were like, "Wow, movie choices." So, and it was really old fashioned kind of summer, but it was a safe place, a great place, and Smith was always, therefore, in the sight line, and on the path to whatever. And we -- and my Dad would walk us along the banks of the river, and, you know, I grew up in the summers then seeing Look Park and knowing a little bit of the history of the mills, and so that was front loaded in, and -- and so then, like most people probably you aspire to different things that your parents did, so for a long time I thought I would follow in his footsteps and go into the diplomatic corps, and had all kinds of jobs in -- in and out of government in Washington as a student interning, which is a pre-Smith story, but I ended up not getting into the college of my choice twice in Washington, and going instead to the college park campus of the University of Maryland, and working on Capitol Hill, and really to maintain that job and a relationship with a guy. That's another story.

And -- and my little sister, who is a year younger and always followed me or attempted to follow me, had already landed at Smith, and the job came to an end, the boyfriend was ditched, and -- and so it was really a question of where to go, and I looked around, and I had a fantastic interview at Wellesley. I mean, they got to know me, it was great, I drove -- it was a Thanksgiving, I was picking up my sister to drive her home to Washington. I had an appointment here. I got lost; it was raining; I got to Park House where she lived finally at about 8:30 p.m. The cook had saved dinner on a plate and kept it warm for me. I was like, "Wow, any place that would do that is really someplace I had to look at." So, the interview I don't really remember at Smith. You know, I remember Wellesley, they really knew me. Smith kept my food warm.

AMANNA: There you go.

MARK: So, anyway, my sister didn't mind, and I transferred in the second semester of my sophomore year, and she promptly went away on junior year abroad, so we quickly -- you know, that was not a problem, and -- after one semester, and then she came back and I was leaving, so -- yeah, yeah.

AMANNA: So, what was your major?

MARK: So, I started as a Government major to keep in this track, and actually there was a professor here, he was -- I don't know -- I don't think he was a tenure track at that time, but he had worked for my father in the State Department, and had come up here, and his specialty was Vietnam, and -- and so I studied -- I thought that would be what I would not -- not crying, it's just a tear -- and he -- and it was great. But when I got here my eye was opened to art world, which I

had always been exposed to. The Art and Embassy Program is something that the State Department has had with the National Gallery for years, and my Mom took me when we were posted to an overseas post. My Dad was made Ambassador, and, you know, she was rummaging through the gallery backrooms with Jasper Johns to go up on the wall, or things like that. So, I had a chance for the first time -- that exposed me, but I had a chance for the first time to kind of see art history as this thing people actually studied and did, and I had no clue that that happened. And I got more and more into it, and I ended up switching not to Art History, but to Art as a Studio Major.

AMANNA: Oh.

MARK: And there were a few firecrackers back home when that little pearl came out, but it ended up being an okay thing. So, I took government classes, and I was active, sort of, in government things here on campus, and then was an Art major.

AMANNA: Wow, and when you say you were active here on government things, what do you mean, do you mean political?

MARK: Well, student -- student thing, yeah, not -- not -- no, in terms of the town gown kinds of things, not at all politically, not active in that way, but a lot of justice things. So, I read to a, you know, older man, who was legally blind, and I would go and do that three times a week and walk to his apartment. I -- all through SOS in those days. I worked with -- in a battered women's shelter down in Springfield. So, there was engagement that way, but political things on campus would be house politics, like, you know, running a little -- small elections, not campus-wide. Steph Lider was a friend, she was our class president. I -- I served on what was then a faculty committee that was an honor code violation kind -- I forget what it was called, actually, but there were a couple of students who sat on it, as well. And it doesn't exist anymore as a -- as a way of dealing with it, but when those in leadership positions were accused or had some problem, or whatever, that would come to us. It was sort of outside of the honor code group, and so we actually did have a case that came before us in senior year, and that was really eye-opening for me, and I had often thought about maybe law or whatever, and decided I really did not want to go that route, after that experience. It was very, very tough. But, anyway, good -- it all resolved in the end, but just it was an eye-opener. It was good.

AMANNA: So, then that kind of culture of giving back, of community participation, social justice, that kind of thing, was that something that you went on to -- that you took away from Smith?

MARK: Yeah, I -- I -- well, it was inculcated by my mother's father, my grandfather, and -- and so it was part of me, but definitely it was strengthened at Smith, and -- and went with me from here, and has informed and gotten stronger in part

through Smith connections over the years in my -- in my town where I live now, so --

AMANNA: Oh -- oh, okay, where is that?

MARK: Kansas City.

AMANNA: Okay.

MARK: So, that was a time like now, 1983, a bit of a recession, tough to find a job, certainly not Art majors. My father kept reminding me, you know. I had a lot of friends who were doing the whole women's suit, big bow tie thing in New York with bank internships, and, you know, new MBA programs, or whatever, and I ended up interviewing with Hallmark Cards here. They came on campus, which I'm really not sure how that happened, but through the CDO it did, and it didn't happen right away. I -- they flew me out for interviews in Kansas City, which is where Hallmark is headquartered, but it took six months after graduation. But by December of '83 I was hired and left my parent's home, which I had gone back to, so, it happened even then, and -- and went out to Kansas City for two years, thirty years ago. But there was this land-locked, land-loving Kansan who snared me, so, yeah, but anyway, no, it was -- it was a two-year project. And the Smith community in Kansas City really was very welcoming and I had several new moms to look after me, and, you know, it was great.

AMANNA: So, is that something that continues to be a center of your life?

MARK: Very important, absolutely, yeah, yeah. I got very active in the club and it was a wonderful group of women who had forged over the years -- there was a cadre of city women leaders, and when you see key things that happened in the city, there was usually a Smithie behind them. I was talking to an alum from Minneapolis, and I've been active helping regionally because I -- I became a RCC. We don't use that anymore, but -- in the Alumnae Association, and had done the Midwest, which, you know, from Northampton is just this chunk in the middle of the country spanning thousands of miles and a few clubs. So, anyway, in Minneapolis they also had a large centralized volunteer project. They call theirs Smith Day. It's like a giant rummage sale, and they raise their -- their scholarship money that way. We had something where we were connected to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and it was called the Antiques Forum. It ran for almost forty years, and the -- both instances, and it's similar in Baltimore where they have the book sale every year, massive women -- numbers of women are mobilized to put on this giant event. And as the 80's progressed and the 90's progressed, by the end of the 90's the ability and woman power to make that happen with women working more and more was really taxing the club. And we were having a lot of women in their 60's, 70's, 80's rehashing positions they had already held, and it ended up just -- we voted,

and it was hard, and we all knew that if we let go of this great symposium thing -- I mean, it was fantastic. We would bring art historians in from all over the world. We'd have an all-day symposium. We'd have a luncheon. The Nelson was the only -- we were the only outside organization that did this, and we sent tens of thousands of dollars back to Smith, and got a lot of interest in the community about the college. But I learned a lot in that process, and that's something that I'm struggling today in volunteer capacities to understand how to bring young alums into community this way.

AMANNA: Yeah, it's hard.

MARK: And it's -- it's a key struggle.

AMANNA: Yeah.

MARK: And so my term on the board was at -- it came -- there are some people who serve on the board as members at large. Mine was a portfolio that I came with by dint of being an RCC chair.

AMANNA: Okay.

MARK: And the Regional Club Committee is what those -- that means, and those -- those individual coordinators have these regions. We're now eleven in the United States, and one is Europe -- twelve is Europe, and thirteen is now Asia, that's a new one in the last few years. So, but the dilemma is the same, whether it's a large city club, like New York, or small, it's finding things and ways of connecting, and social media helps, but it also doesn't help, and so we're hashing out all of that. And my experience in the Midwest and in Kansas City is what's informed that work, and now I'm part of a small pilot project to reach out to alums as in a mentor role. I'm doing it under the aegis of the fund, and we're trying to see if we can sort of switch things up by using old fashioned notions, like writing, calling people, getting together. You know, stuff like that, in fact one of the young women today on the stage who was honored, Leah Gross, who's in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and has done a lot of work, and she was recognized by the association for her reinvigoration of the Pittsburgh club is one of my mentees.

AMANNA: Oh --

MARK: So, I hadn't met her in person.

AMANNA: That must have felt great.

MARK: It was great; it was great. It was like, ah, so --

AMANNA: That's great. And so speaking of mentors, did you -- do you recall, just

reflecting back to the art department, were there -- were there big figures --

MARK: Oh, yeah, big figures.

AMANNA: Can you talk about some of those?

MARK: Elliot -- Elliot Offner was a big figure in my life. There was a semester I was struggling to put together my classes. I was late to my change, you know, both as a transfer student and then changing majors, and so I ended up not -- I really wanted to take this watercolor class, but it met at 8:00 a.m., and that was just insanely early. Who gets up at 8:00 a.m.? And I do now, but not then, so there was this calligraphy class offered slightly later, and I thought, "Interesting, give that a wing-wang." So, I took a calligraphy class on a whim and met Elliot Offner, and I fell in love with calligraphy. And it was through that class and then a subsequent class in book art and typography that I ended up being able to be in a position to -- that I would be of interest to Hallmark. So, when I went to work for Hallmark I went to work as a calligrapher and a lettering artist.

AMANNA: Oh.

MARK: And, anyway, so that was how that came about, you know, another smart decision. You know, you can't make an 8:00 a.m. class, dumb, but anyway it makes me more forgiving with my own kids. The -- the -- Lee Burns was another person in the art department who was a very critical key piece, taught design classes.

AMANNA: What do you remember about him?

MARK: Lee -- Lee was -- he was a sort of pied piper in design. He was unexpected. He would give you classical challenges, but at the time just seemed sort of, you know, inane, so your toothpicks, use as few as you can to make a safe container for an egg. By the way, we're going to drop it from the third floor. I mean, you know, kids do that in third grade, but, you know, we had to do it in design class. We'd -- he taught a little bit of sort of the mill town history of Northampton, and in running old mills we went up and we had knives, actual steel stalk knives and cheese knives actually, shaped, they came in standard form, and he gave us blocks of wood and we had to come up with appropriate handles. And, you know, talk about why we chose that. It could be historic, it could be contemporary, but you have to have rationale and reason, and, you know, all of that. So, Lee and I --

AMANNA: That's memorable.

MARK: Memorable, and Lee and I stayed in close touch over the years. Dwight Pough taught lithography and print making, and I stayed in touch with him and helped

try to get his wife some work through -- into -- her work into Hallmark for -- we had freelance artists that we used from time to time. So, a lot of -- John Davis was another person I worked with, more after Smith, but even before he was chair of the art department. There was an architecture professor. My fifty-year-old brain can't remember his name. Anyway, but so there were a lot of people there, and art historians, too. One professor who will remain nameless taught a Renaissance Art class, the only D I ever received in any class, college, anywhere. But I learned more in that class about myself and about what I didn't know, and art history and, you know, he was unforgiving, and I was immovable, and I got a D. It was -- It was memorable in that way, so.

AMANNA: Different kind of education.

MARK: Different kind of education all together, all together, all together.

AMANNA: Where did you live?

MARK: I lived in Clark House, which is no longer a house. I lived on the first floor in what -- I have no idea what it was. It was not a room for occupation. It had no -- it was behind the kitchen on the first floor, and it had no closet. So, I had this little no bigger than this desk armoire, metal, out in the kitchen, outside my door, where I stored my clothes. And that was January overflow housing. Who knows what it was. I don't know, but I lived there, and my second year -- so that was January to June. And then I had that same room again in Clark the following year. I had a really bad number on the -- on the lottery.

AMANNA: Yeah.

MARK: So, we didn't really know Clark was going to be changed over, and it was not too long after I left school, but I decided to go for Chase House senior year, so that's where I was senior year, and that was great because I finally met -- you know, Clark was small. We ate at Dewey. We were twenty, you know, it was small, so Chase was broad.

AMANNA: Right, and do you still have friends from Smith you keep in touch with?

MARK: Huge, yes, yes, yeah, so reunion is nice for that.

AMANNA: Yeah, it's great.

MARK: I do, my -- one of my dearest friends also was in my wedding, Shelby Nelson, she was the head resident at the time of Chase, and I met her senior year. And we became fast friends because we both had common history in Africa. We didn't know each other then, but that's what brought us together.

AMANNA: Is that where your father was ambassador?

MARK: He was ambassador in Burundi in Africa.

AMANNA: Oh, what was his name, or what is his name?

MARK: David Mark.

AMANNA: Okay.

MARK: He has passed away, David Mark. He was an east-west specialist, so his -- and a linguist, and he would -- Russian, primarily, and -- well, and that was the time of the Iron Curtain. So, and he and Henry Kissinger had grown up together, and knew each other, and -- and Henry got tired of my father's analysis, and so he said, "We'll put him in Central Africa." So, you know, but it was a promotion, right, because he was -- he was career ambassador by rank, but it was his first ambassador position. So, --

AMANNA: Okay.

MARK: -- anyway, that's another story. But he -- we were going with people I stayed in touch with, so Shelby's father had been overseas in -- also in her youth, and she had in her suite in Chase a Makonde sculpture, which is a Tanzanian primarily, some see it some parts of Kenya, sculpture, black ebony. Very simplistic, very beautiful lines, and if you knew what it was, you knew what it was, and I walked in her room and I said, "You have a Makonde sculpture." And she was like, "What?" So, anyway, that -- we bonded, and I got her to come back to reunion, and she brought her nine-year-old daughter, Vivian Rothberg, and we're hoping we've got a new Smithie we're minting this weekend.

AMANNA: That's great. That's great.

MARK: But there have been others, and actually the grace of being a Smithie comes not just here while you're here, but it comes after from all your friendships that you make.

AMANNA: Yeah.

MARK: So, I have a lot of friends who are not '83-ers, and I've gotten to know them from teasing out knarly problems that we're working on, or, you know, doing other fun things, and making connections, and -- and I sort of bemoaned social media a little bit a while ago, but I have to say it's been fantastic. So --

AMANNA: Yeah.

MARK: I had done an early alumnae engagement study piece that we had done, and we found out, I saw by the responses on the computers that I was getting feedback on, I could see there was a cluster of alums, and they all lived -- it turned out when I ferreted out the zip code, in a nursing home, continuous care facility, in -- outside of Washington, D. C., and I was like -- so I wrote letters to all nine of them, and I said, "You may not know this, but there are nine of you living in your complex."

AMANNA: That's great.

MARK: So -- so, that's a lot of what I do still, but that's the fun part.

AMANNA: Yeah, yeah, okay. Well, we're coming to the end of our time.

MARK: At the end, okay.

AMANNA: Is there anything you'd like to say for me?

MARK: No, I would just say that this campus is gorgeous, even in this yucky bad weather, and every time I come back I'm just taken away by -- blown away by how amazing it really is.

AMANNA: Yeah.

MARK: And then I did the calculation of my \$6,000 that I paid the last year I was here, and that was hard-earned money. I paid myself my senior year, and I did the inflation calculation, and so today's dollars that would be \$14,152.00, and I know that is not what it costs to come here today.

AMANNA: We wish.

MARK: So, yes, we do. I'm paying two college tuitions right now, so I know, and I -- it's just mind boggling. So, more than anything I am committed to get young women here, but more than anything I'm committed to chasing down these dollars we -- it's a national issue. Carol Christ and I have spoken about it. I -- it's absolutely unacceptable.

AMANNA: Yeah.

MARK: So, that's got to change. So, that's a new mission.

AMANNA: Thank you so much.

MARK: Thanks, thanks.

AMANNA: It was a pleasure to sit with you.

MARK: Thanks, yeah, it was a pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.