

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Marilyn Johnston Martin, Class of 1957

Interviewed by
Sarah Dunn, Class of 2011

May 21, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Marilyn Johnston Martin discusses living in Lawrence House, her social life, her relationship with Sylvia Plath, issues of class, her decision to leave after her sophomore year, and her life after Smith.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Linda Sariahmed 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: Martin, Marilyn Johnston. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Marilyn Johnston Martin, interview by Sarah Dunn, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Martin, Marilyn Johnston. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Marilyn Johnston Martin, interview by Sarah Dunn, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 21, 2011, with:

MARILYN JOHNSTON MARTIN

by: SARAH DUNN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

MARTIN: But two weeks ago, we drove from Wisconsin (laughs).

DUNN: Wow.

MARTIN: Out here.

DUNN: That's a long drive.

MARTIN: That's what makes it hard, you know, because—

DUNN: Yeah, that's a long drive.

MARTIN: —it takes about three days, and —

DUNN: Yeah. I did the five-day — I did Seattle to here in five days with my partner.

MARTIN: A challenge.

DUNN: (laughs) It was — it was intense (laughs).

GEIS: All righty.

DUNN: All right.

GEIS: Whenever you're ready.

DUNN: OK. This is Sarah Dunn, and I am conducting an interview today with Marilyn Martin Johnson, Class of 1957 —

MARTIN: Marilyn Johnston Martin.

DUNN: Marilyn Johnson (sic) Martin. Sorry.

MARTIN: (laughs)

DUNN: I wrote it down wrong. On May 21st, 2011, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this project.

MARTIN: You're welcome.

DUNN: We're going to start out talking about how you came to Smith College, so why did you choose Smith to go to school?

MARTIN: It was nothing that was foremost in my mind, because my family had recently moved from the east to the Midwest, and I was very excited about the thought of going to a Big Ten university. And I had a Latin teacher who was very kind, and giving, and encouraging, and she said, I just think you should look at a school out east. And she gave me a couple of names. And believe it or not, SATs and things were not a big deal in that day. I mean, they had just been initiated a couple of years. I had no idea. There was no Princeton Review or big preparation. And my mother thought that would be a nice idea, and she encouraged me, and then — so I took the SATs, and applied, and the Smith club in Milwaukee somehow got a hold of the information that I had applied, and they came — if my memory serves me, they came to visit, and met my mother and me, and told us all about Smith, and I had never — of course, you didn't travel to look at schools then or anything like that. So it was sight unseen. And — but I was accepted, and I was given a berth in Lawrence House, which was a scholarship house, and the Smith Club of Milwaukee covered my travel expenses, because it was quite a ways to travel, which was a very nice addition. So I guess I was kind of destined, in a way, to go, because I thought, Oh sure. Well, I did, and then I said, Well, I can always go for two years, and then I'll transfer, and go to a Big Ten university. So I came.

DUNN: And what was the college atmosphere like at the time, when you arrived, and during your time here?

MARTIN: Well, I loved the campus immediately. The brick buildings were very warm and inviting, and the trees. The college atmosphere was quite different from what it is today, and it was exciting. I always have been open to new ventures. I had met some people on the train, the New England states, people traveling from the Midwest. There were two other girls from my high school here, and another young woman I knew from the Milwaukee area. So I didn't feel totally lost, but it was quite different than anything I experienced, and what existed then was pretty much a divide between the have and have-nots, as it were. There were a lot of prep school girls that kind of came and were in a clique — here I am all caught in this — were sort cliques that continued, you know, kind of the

power structure. And — but that dissipated after freshman year, pretty much. And it didn't really ruin the experience, it was just a different experience. Lawrence House was a very special place to be. And I think I was really blessed with some very good people. We've remained friends over all these years, and intelligent conversation. It was just a really exciting, interesting place to be.

DUNN: Can you talk more a little bit about Lawrence House, and what it was like to live in Lawrence House, which was a scholarship house at the time?

MARTIN: Yeah. Well, it was. There was the bridge group, and they were the intensely quiet, intellectual group. The artsy group, and on one of the first days unpacking, I met another young woman on the stairs, and it turned out she was from the Midwest, also — Evanston, Illinois — and she and I had the same birthday, and we kind of had — we were scholarship students, but we weren't poor poor, and we were both kind of embarrassed because we had some cashmere sweaters, and we had gotten the idea and the sense that there are people here who don't approve of luxury, or, you know, indulgence, and we said, should we really unpack this stuff or not (laughs). Well, I just spent — had dinner with her a week ago last Friday. She lives in Orient, New York, now, and we've remained friends all these years, and my husband and I went over to see her last weekend. It was different, and being with all women was different.

DUNN: Was it?

MARTIN: And there were some of us that were very social, and Jane and I, because we were from the Midwest, and some of the boys in our class had also come east to school, and she had a brother at Dartmouth, we were getting all these male visitors (laughter) and I think that some of the people in the house didn't quite approve of our social activity, and probably thought we were a little frivolous and whatever. However, we managed. The exciting thing of second semester was Sylvia Plath. She lived in the house, and she returned that semester after her first suicide attempt. And so when I returned after Christmas, people said, "Sylvia's back, Sylvia's back, Sylvia's back," it's like the walls were whispering. And so that was very interesting, getting to know her, and actually I'm going to be interviewed tomorrow by a guy who's writing — Carl Rollyson, I think is how to pronounce his name. R-O-L-L-Y-S-O-N.

DUNN: He's writing a book about her, right?

MARTIN: Yeah, a new biography.

DUNN: He's been in the archives a lot—

MARTIN: Here.

DUNN: –yeah.

MARTIN: Yeah. So–

DUNN: So she was in the same house as you?

MARTIN: Well, she was in the same house freshman year, and then sophomore year, I lived right next door to her.

DUNN: Oh, wonderful. Yeah.

MARTIN: And she created an aura in the house.

DUNN: Yeah?

MARTIN: There was an intensity, you know. There were lots of interesting people, though, at the house. I mean, just of large proportion (laughs) mentally and artistically. But she was very much the girl in the plaid skirt and the Shetland sweater and the blonde that we see, and not a tragic figure. I mean, she was very helpful to me, and because I had — I talked with her, I had done some modeling in Boston and I had an interview at *Mademoiselle*, and she had just been there, and so she actually talked with me about that, and took an interest in me. And I know once we discussed a paper that I was writing, and she read it. She was very friendly. And big sisterly. And she was — I think it was sophomore year, that time sort of lapses, but at some point, I don't know whether she actually became engaged, but Gordon [Laymeier?] was in the Navy, I believe, and she was seeing him, and he came to dinner, and I was so honored she invited me to sit at the table. If you know in the way things were then, which was very gracious and wonderful, we had linen tablecloths and round tables, and you could have guests for dinner, and then you invited who you wanted to sit at your table, and I was, you know, a freshman, she was what, a junior, senior. I mean, I'm not sure what her status was, or maybe I was a sophomore, then she was a senior, that was probably it. But I was quite honored, and — but I felt very comfortable with her, and the thing is, what I learned about myself, is that I used to be intimidated by power or wealth or intelligence. I mean, I felt like I wasn't up to it. And I think that's the one thing that living in Lawrence House helped me to discover, was a confidence, or a strength, or an ability to say, OK, yeah, it's all right, I can sit at Sylvia's table, or you know, OK, I can do this, or–

DUNN: Yeah.

MARTIN: —I'm getting personal here, but I got an A in History 1-1, and most of the people in the house thought History 1-1 was a horror. And they would study for weeks, and run charts, and these — and I didn't know what the big deal was (laughs). But I began to find some confidence that I could do things, that I could operate at a level that — and maybe you've had this experience — that you never really thought you could operate at. And we just heard at luncheon from some young people, and certainly this young girl, Jules Rhode, who graduated. Spoke at the parade? And I think that's the best thing that Smith does, and I think it's the best reason to go to a women's college. Because it's not about being popular with the boys, or it's not about this, or it's not about that, and I think I really began to find who I was here. Yeah.

DUNN: Did you feel a lot of tension with class or race, sexuality, religion? Was there a lot of conflicts at all on campus, or did you feel like, for yourself, just, as a scholarship student, and you know, it was a very different world (unclear)—

MARTIN: Well, race wasn't an issue here.

DUNN: Yeah.

MARTIN: I think we had one African-American woman in our house. Certainly gender issues were — they were present, not discussed. I know there were two theater majors in our house at the time, and there were suggestions that that theater crowd, which I gravitated toward, you better watch out for, you know, type of thing.

DUNN: Oh, really?

MARTIN: Yeah. But nothing overt in any sense of the word, and the major issue was the money, because this friend, Jane, and I, remember I came to a Christmas party, and we wanted to have a dance and dinner at the house, and invite guys, of course, and so we had this house meeting to discuss well, how much could we charge people, you know, how much could we have for the dinner, or what could we do, and oh, you couldn't have cocktails on campus. And I think some faculty member, and I was asking someone today if they remember, but some faculty member invited us to use their home, and I think we went there — no one else remembers this right now — but that we went there, and I think we had like, a punch, you know, a rum punch or something like that, because you couldn't have alcohol at the house. Well, this was a big issue, because some people in the house didn't think we needed to do this at all, and that was a waste of money, and we had some people who were teetotalers and didn't want to drink, da da da da, and Jane and I tended to come up on the more social, sophisticated, you know, side of doing things and spending money, and I

think we suggested that we could each chip in like, \$10, well \$10 at that time was, you know, a lot of money — (gasps) people just were aghast that we would even think of this. So the most tension that I remember was over money, what you could spend, what you could do, and then the competition over grades. Because we were all scholarship students, and someone again just raised that today, you had to have a B average to keep your scholarship, and to stay in Lawrence House. And so that was a big deal. And those were the major issues. Social issues, dating, not a problem. Of course, guys weren't allowed in the house — I mean, you know, some of the kind of tensions or concerns that might exist today were just not there. Which, in a sense, was good. It was good for me, because I — you know, I had had a boyfriend, and dated, and I was very social, so it was a good thing for me to have this different environment. But on campus, I can't remember that there were any big issues at the time.

DUNN: Did you feel accepted on campus as a student?

MARTIN: Yeah. I think I did. I mean, my biggest concern was over my intellectual ability to compete, I think. And it seemed everybody was so brilliant (laughs). But I did all right. And, because that's what I mean, I discovered something about myself, and that was good. Yeah, I felt accepted, and I had these friends. Two of the friends from my high school lived — they were Jewish — and they lived in the quad. Now, for them, if you talked with them, the Jewish issue was an issue then. And I was not aware of it. I was not aware of it. Because it had not been an issue in our community or in our high school at all. If there were any issues at that time, it was between religions. You know, whether if you were dating, if you were Protestant, you shouldn't date a Catholic, or you shouldn't date a Jewish — you know. And I think that the Jewish students felt that I was not conscious, or it wasn't a prejudice that I had, because in my high school, we had had quite a good mix of students. But I have learned that they felt somewhat, you know, uncomfortable at that time.

DUNN: Yeah. Did you go abroad at all? Were you here for all four years?

MARTIN: No, no, no.

DUNN: Did you leave (unclear) —

MARTIN: I left after the second year.

DUNN: Why did you end up leaving?

MARTIN: Well, I had intended to transfer, in fact, I just came across my application to University of Wisconsin, and I live in Madison, Wisconsin, now. We

were from Wisconsin. I was from Wisconsin. And I had intended to do that. By the end of my sophomore year, I was very excited intellectually, and I really was thinking about staying on, but there were some personal issues and problems and other stuff that I won't go into, financial, and personal, with me, and I left. And if I had stayed, I would have gone on to honor in English history, and — or the history of the English language is what I was very excited about at the time. But I didn't. And that — my life took a different path, and — but I continued my education, and — throughout my life. The attitudes and the discoveries that I made here during those first two years really have informed the rest of my growth, and my daughter came here, she graduated in '82.

DUNN: Wonderful.

MARTIN: And it was at that point — I had never felt, because I'd only been here two years, and even though I had stayed in close touch with some of the friends that I made, I never felt really a legitimate part of the school. However, I was teaching in the Boston area — Belmont, Massachusetts — and my daughter came here, and I got involved in the Cambridge Smith Club, and they needed an admissions person. And I don't know which came first, but they needed a person in the schools, so again, Smith kind of found me in a different way (laughs), and I started interviewing as an admissions counselor and coordinator, and becoming a part of the club, and it was a wonderful club. A lot of the people from that club were here today in the class that I'm reuniting with, and I had a wonderful experience there, and kept coming back here to meetings, and I began to feel a legitimate part of the campus again, until I saw somebody, and I said — they said, well, something about graduation, I said, "I wasn't here for graduation," and she said, "Well you've always been here with us," (laughs). And I thought that was a very nice thing. Excuse me.

DUNN: No problem.

MARTIN: I must — I should have turned— (audio cut) (laughs).

DUNN: So what has happened? What have you become — since (unclear) —

MARTIN: Well, in the Smith Club there, then I ended up becoming president of the Smith Club of Cambridge. Was president the year that Julia Child celebrated her 80th birthday, so I got to entertain — pick her up and take her to a—

DUNN: Wow.

MARTIN: —we have this annual wine tasting. And met many wonderful people there, and then I became Region 1 Coordinator for clubs in the Northeast, and

now I'm a class officer. So in a sense, I feel, you know, that I am a Smithy. And my biggest desire, and I don't know who to talk to about it — in fact, I was going to come back here and finish a degree, because my husband was involved in admissions at Colgate University. But I ended up graduating from Colgate, finally, and I graduated, I'm happy to say, Phi Beta Kappa, and cum laude, so Smith did me well. And it gave me that confidence, you know, to pursue and do that stuff. So I — my big dream, and I thought about this weekend, I want to get my Smith degree (laughs). And I don't know how I can do that, if I could come back and spend a semester here, but I want to actually have it, so I should talk with somebody about that (laughs). See how I could do it. What did I do? I married Guy — his name is Guy — from — we had known each other since we were 14, we were not high school sweethearts, we — we were our commencement speakers, we were our high school, sort of, you know — competitors, good friends, and we married. He graduated from Colgate, and he has had a wonderful career in college administration at Harvard — Colgate and Harvard and Yale.

DUNN: Wow, wonderful.

MARTIN: I've had a very good life. Involved with education, and his involvement with education has allowed me to continue my education, so did an MAT at Colgate, and then I went to — I became interested in computers and education early on, and working with special needs kids who had trouble writing, and thinking that using a computer to write could help to facilitate their expression, and so I went to the ed school at Harvard, which had a program in special needs, and I told them what — and they said, Oh, we're not doing anything with computers. This was in 1979. And, we're not doing anything with that. But they had the special needs program, and I could do this, and I could do that. So I signed up for it, and I was going to be taking courses sort of part time while I was teaching, and then at — things found me in my life, I'm very blessed, because I was at Belmont High School one day, and I heard over the announcement that there was a voucher available for this course at Lesley College, which is in Cambridge, and I had just seen in the paper that past Sunday that they were offering courses in computers and education (laughter). And I went right to the office and asked what I had to do to get that voucher. Lesley College was near where we lived, and I stopped in on my way home, and I started taking courses, and I did that part-time while I was teaching, I had three kids, and I got what they — they weren't offering a PhD, but what was called a CAGS, it was all the coursework, but in computers in education. And I got the first Apple grant for our school for a writing lab. Twenty Apple computers. I got the first AOL account at our school. Used to talk to Steve Case on the — who was AOL — on the telephone, just he and one other guy. So that was an exciting creative part—

DUNN: Yeah. That's great.

MARTIN: —of my teaching experience. And I continued on, and became, in 1987, a Christa McAuliffe fellow, after Christa McAuliffe. Well, I had — my kids had wanted me to apply for the teacher in space, and I said, "Oh, that'll never happen." So I didn't believe it. Well, then, after the *Challenger* explosion had come out for this Christa McAuliffe fellows, and they said, "Mom, you've got to go for it." And my son actually — I got the word, and I got the application, and my son actually hand-delivered it to the State House in Boston (laughs), because he wanted to be sure that it got in. And I got the fellowship, which gave me a sabbatical. And I took that sabbatical, and studied at Harvard Ed School, multicultural education, and spent my time in Lowell, Massachusetts, developing a curriculum for the new immigrants. This is on file at Radcliffe and several other places, but I had — I worked with a Vietnamese, Laotian, and one other person, and because they had so many Southeast Asians in the early '80s that just poured into Lowell, and they didn't know what to do with them. And anyway, using the computer and writing skills and everything, I spent my sabbatical there and studying multicultural education at Harvard, and did research, and you know, then I was able to publish a couple of stuff, and you know, it just—

DUNN: Went from there.

MARTIN: —went on from there (laughs). And I left — then I — they opened the center — Christa McAuliffe Center for Education at Framingham State College in '94, and I went there as the interim director, and they — I don't know whether you've heard of the *Challenger* Centers, where they have simulated space flights for kids? Well, I also became, at age 60, a flight commander (laughs).

DUNN: Oh, wow, that's cool.

MARTIN: I went down to Washington and trained, and because the Christa McAuliffe Center combined with the *Challenger* Center, so we had these flight simulations. So at age 60, I became a space — I got to space (laughs).

DUNN: You did. That's wonderful.

MARTIN: Yeah, so it was fun.

DUNN: Awesome. Well thank you very much for everything.

MARTIN: Well, you're welcome, I've — you get me talking, and I—

DUNN: No!

MARTIN: –you can tell I’m excited about learning.

DUNN: Yeah, I love it!

MARTIN: (laughing)

DUNN: I’m glad that you finally had a space experience.

MARTIN: I did! I did.

DUNN: I bet your son was very happy (laughs).

MARTIN: Yeah.

GEIS: It’s a space experience on the ground.

MARTIN: (laughs) Space experience.

DUNN: But you know, after the *Challenger*, it might have been a little bit better.

MARTIN: (gasps)

DUNN: (laughs)

GEIS: Yeah.

DUNN: I bet that would have been–

MARTIN: Yeah.

DUNN: –scary to–

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Linda Sariahmed, July 2011.