

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives

Northampton, MA

*Leslie McKenzie, Class of 1968*

Interviewed by

Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 25, 2013

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Leslie McKenzie, a philosophy of religion major, recalls the professors and classes that made strong marks on her life and tells stories of unique teaching moments which she has never forgotten. She also recalls the difference that living in a small house made in her college experience.

## **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:** McKenzie, Leslie. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Leslie McKenzie, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** McKenzie, Leslie. Interview by Anne Ames. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Leslie McKenzie, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

LESLIE MCKENZIE

by: ANNIE AMES

REESE: My name is Annie Ames and I am conducting an interview with Leslie McKenzie, on May 25th, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. We'd like to thank you in advance for agreeing to participate. So thank you for being here and agreeing to participate. So why are you attending reunion this year? Why are you attending reunion this year?

MCKENZIE: Oh, you're welcome.

AMES: So why are you attending reunion this year?

MCKENZIE: Well, it's my first reunion, it's my 45th, and actually I had decided I was going to go to my 50th and then it occurred to me why not do a trial run. Because on my 50th my spouse Joyce Gold (phonetic) may come with me, and this way I can tell her what it's like and so I thought that's why I'm at my 45th.

AMES: Wonderful. How did you choose to attend Smith as an undergrad?

MCKENZIE: I walked on the campus, just the minute our car drove in, in front of – right through the Greccourt Gates. I had been to Wellesley, I had been to Holyoke, I had been to Connecticut College and maybe Vassar, you know, for the interview process strictly and the tour and none of them had clicked. And I just looked here and there was something about the diversity of the architecture, of the grounds, the mix of buildings, just the difference. Many of the campuses I felt very close in, there wasn't enough room and that was it. Before I met anybody, I knew no one that had been here. This is where I wanted to be.

AMES: Absolutely. Did the fact that it was a women's college factor into your decision?

MCKENZIE: Definitely. My first year of high school had been at a coed institution, huge, and my parents seemed to know that I was unhappy, I didn't quite know it. I knew I wasn't delighted with it, and they asked me if I would like to go to private school. And I said, "Yes," and I found a little school

that was – eighteen girls were in the sophomore class that I joined, and I'm still close with one gal. And that experience of being in an all girls environment was so wonderful. I was just happy, I couldn't say, you know, why because there were no guys there. But didn't – I don't think I applied to any non – you know, any coed colleges.

AMES: So let's shift gears a little bit to talk about your academic career at Smith. What was the process of deciding upon your major?

MCKENZIE: Well, my major was religion, philosophy of religion. And I think probably my dad was a big influence because as I was growing up he was always sort of in controversy with the Presbyterian Church, a lot of angst. What was he teaching in Sunday school, *Catcher in the Rye*? Well that may not be acceptable. And then he started reading Kierkegaard, and there was a philosopher type guy at the church. And so I was – as I was in high school and junior high I was hearing these conversations, Heidegger, these names became familiar, and it was very compelling stuff. So there was never any question, you know that this would be what I studied.

AMES: Fantastic. What were some of your favorite and most memorable courses that you remember taking?

MCKENZIE: Oh, History of Christian thought with Tom Derr (phonetic). He was so well organized so that you had a chance to really get the flow of it. Sten Stenson was my advisor and he taught philosophy of religion and gave a seminar, and I remember when he taught us an individual like Hegel he made it clear. He said, "I do not want you to come away from this course with a critique of Hegel." And then he'd start pacing in front of us and he would say, "What I want from you is that you put on Hegel's shoes and you walk through the world looking at the world through Hegel's eyes, and if you can do that," he said, "then I've succeeded in this class." And it was so – you know, it was just wonderful, wonderful way to teach philosophy. So you're not just getting a combatative, well let's compare this one to that one.

AMES: Absolutely. So aside from the professors that you just mentioned, are there any other mentors or professors that particularly inspired you help you along our journey at Smith?

MCKENZIE: Well, there was a history professor whose name does escape me, but he had a very distinctive goatee and hair swept back and was very dramatic, and he was American. But he had a very – you know, he really let history come alive. And there was another young professor, I'm sure he was gay. It was the first time I probably recognized a gay man, young, blond, and he taught medieval history. And he set my mind so free to think about it that I remember when I came in for the midterm I just sat down and

started writing because in my studies I got a new idea about medieval history. And he critiqued the thing; I mean it was just all red, wrong, wrong, wrong, but he gave me an A and he said, "Never do this again." But I remember how many – how many people can teach you medieval history and make you think, you know, what was that Pope, really doing, so wonderful teaching, wonderful teaching.

AMES: It sounds like it. You clearly have very vivid memories.

MCKENZIE: I do.

AMES: Did you go abroad during your junior year?

MCKENZIE: No. No interest. No, homebody.

AMES: Absolutely. Were you involved in any extracurriculars?

MCKENZIE: Oh, not much. I was President of the Freshman Class, but you were elected as I remember in the spring. You know, you're near the end of your first year and my job was to help with the orientation for the next freshman class, and I had no particular ideas for that. And I think that experience kind of showed me that I wasn't a leader type of a person. I was more interested in internal affairs so to speak, and I never did much at Smith. Or even now I'm the treasure of my co-op and that's the first time I've taken on any kind of a position in a long time.

AMES: Absolutely. So shifting gears again to talk a little bit about your house community.

MCKENZIE: Oh, yes.

AMES: What was your house community like during your four years here?

MCKENZIE: Well, I came to Smith my freshman year with a preselected roommate, she had approached me. She did not want to have any uncertainty about who she lived with and that sounded good to me. So we were placed in Park House, but not Park House itself; it was 150 Elm. So it was a regular house, very small, we backed on Mendenhall's house, and it was a small group of us. It was a wonderful way for someone who was relatively shy to get quick, you know, sense of camaraderie. And then after my – we stayed there for sophomore year. Junior year we came to the big house at Park, and I think I felt very much at home. I remember our housemother Rebecca, but, you know, she was an older woman, probably in her 70s, and she would have tea every afternoon. It was a very orderly life and I needed that, it was nice. My mother died when I was in my junior year

and Mrs. – God, I can't remember her name, I'm sure she's gone, but she was just so dear and I felt very supported.

AMES: Absolutely.

MCKENZIE: Sorry.

Video: That's why we have tissues.

AMES: There's tissues right there for you.

MCKENZIE: Oh, not the only one, huh.

AMES: Absolutely not.

MCKENZIE: Yeah. Okay.

AMES: The last interviewee her mother passed away senior year so.

MCKENZIE: Oh, yeah, it's –

AMES: It was clearly – the house community was clearly a very important part of your support system.

MCKENZIE: I loved that it was small. It wasn't one of the big houses; I wasn't up on the Quad or something. Yeah, this was –

AMES: So what were your experiences with the traditions at Smith?

MCKENZIE: Well, things – I don't think I – it's funny. I love medieval history and things like that. But I don't think I really tied into traditions so much. Rally Day, Mountain Day, stuff like that I didn't get very involved as I remember. I was kind of a study person. And I think I do remember that Mountain Day I never took off, I was in the library.

AMES: All right. All right, let's talk a little bit more about the social, your social life and social climate at Smith. What was the dating culture like at Smith for you?

MCKENZIE: Well, I was very much a part of it. It was men off campus; you travel to meet your man. I was put on a blind date my freshman year in the Easter weekend, and he and I hit it off and I dated him until I graduated in November of '68, and I felt at the time that I would have died if I didn't have a guy. The campus emptied out on the weekends and I just – you know it was terrible. It was a terrible feeling. I mean I wasn't part of that except the first part of my freshman year, but there's so much you're doing.

I was just very grateful that I met somebody and I was part of – you know, looked like I was going to get engaged and, you know, that sort of thing. So I – yeah, I felt bad about it at the time, but that's just the way I felt.

AMES: Were your relationships influenced by the house policies, the housemother, the presence of the curfew, anything like that?

MCKENZIE: Well, I wasn't a buck; I didn't buck against, you know, things. So if they set boundaries, I lived within them. And I remember one incident where I came across drugs in my four years, and that was someone – I think I was a senior and one of my senior classmates came up to me and whispered, "Do you have any Valium?" And, you know, I didn't and I thought I didn't know what it was. But I knew I didn't want to know anymore than I didn't know. So what – the question was?

AMES: Oh, it was your social life, was your dating life at all influenced by the house policies?

MCKENZIE: Yeah.

AMES: You know we looked at the archives and, you know, there are reports of people being ten minutes late home from – you know, from studying and they got, you know, penalized for coming home late, and none of the houses used to have keys so, you know, if once the house locked you were locked out if didn't get in in time.

MCKENZIE: Wow, I don't remember that, and if I – I must have adhered very carefully because I never encountered that kind of thing.

AMES: All right. Let's see, did Smith foster an environment where discussions regarding sexuality could be had?

MCKENZIE: During those years I had no inkling that I would be open to a relationship with a woman. I was generally uncomfortable with men. But I – so, you know, we tittered. So I never was part of any broader conversations about sex, I just – too restrictive perspective, you know, it didn't even occur to me.

AMES: So you showed me your announcement that was in –

MCKENZIE: Yes. Yes.

AMES: – and I'd love to hear the story behind that, because it's not everyday that an alum comes in and shows me something as wonderful as that.

MCKENZIE: Oh, how nice. In 1993 Joyce and I both lived in Manhattan, didn't know each other, but we had both signed up for the same bus trip to take us up to a place called Omega. It's a summer institute kind of a place, and she had noticed me when we were waiting for the bus. And when we got off the bus up there, there was a line waiting to get your room – your cabin assignments. It was a week retreat sort of a place. And I noticed her on line because she was standing next to a man that I could hear what he was saying and it so difficult, you know, very obnoxious, and she was being so kind to him that, you know, I noticed it. So I get up to the window to get my cabin assignment and this nice – and I must say I probably looked much as I've always looked, very traditional, very – so the woman behind the thing said, "Honey, there's a lot of weirdoes up here." She said, "You want to choose your roommate, you don't want to just wing it." So I thought, you know, let me find this woman and I did, and I said, "Would you like to share a room with me?" And she said, "Sure."

So we went up, it was kind of in the late afternoon, we had some supper we – it was a gorgeous night. So we were out looking at the stars, and by the way she talked I knew she was gay. That was okay, I didn't – but by the next morning just because of what we talked about and what she could field from me, I knew I really liked her. Well, this was terrifying. So I called my older brother with a – you know, we were talking I said, "Craig, I have met a lesbian and I like her, what am I going to do?" He said, "Christ, I don't know. I don't know." So I said, "Well, look, you're not help. I'm going to call Douglas." I have two brothers. So called Doug and I had the luck to get his wife who is a lovely woman, and I got Pat, and Pat said, "Well, I'll be doggone." She said, "Well, Leslie, just relax, enjoy. You like her company, let's face it we don't – nobody likes a lot of people's company, really likes it, so have a good time." And that was – you know, that really took a lot of weight off my shoulders.

So we palled around. It was not a sexual thing, palled around and we kissed maybe, you know, a little. But I was – you know, she knew. She knew. I was hmm. And in about three or four months she said, "Look, I just got to tell you that I love you, I really love you, and if that means the end of the relationship, then I just have to live with it because I can't not tell you." And it didn't upset me, you know, I just said – she reminded me that I said, "Well, I'll have to think about that." All I knew is I just loved being with her and I could be relaxed. I said to her, "You – it's as -- I like being with you the way I like being alone." And she under – you know, fortunately she understood that. And then I took January off, I sort of told her well, I really need – this had now been August, September, October, November, December, five months. I told her in January, "I really need some time off." She thought it was all over. But I called her back in the beginning of February and then it's been 20 years without a break.

Video: Can you explain the ad that you brought in; I mean the newspaper article you brought in?

AMES: Yeah. Yeah.

MCKENZIE: Well, –

AMES: Here actually I can give it back to you and you can look through it.

MCKENZIE: Oh, did you make a copy or –

AMES: I can make a copy.

Video: It's for the archives.

MCKENZIE: Oh, okay. Just for the archives. Sure.

Video: Just hold it under your face.

MCKENZIE: Okay. This is the New York Times, Sunday, January 4th, 2004, and at this time they were calling it no longer just weddings, they were calling it the weddings and celebration section, and we were married on December 30th, in Toronto, Canada. You had to go to Toronto to really get married. And I got a letter from the Chaplain then of Smith after this appeared and she said to me, "You know I'm not sure, but you might be the first Smithie who has come out in this way."

Video: Thank you.

AMES: I would love to sit down with you and talk about this for another, you know, three hours, but unfortunately we're capped at a half an hour. So I'm going to ask you one last question before we go.

MCKENZIE: Yes, sure.

AMES: And that is as an alumni coming back for reunion do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

MCKENZIE: Well, I think it's more likely that they would have advice for me. I am very impressed with the generation in general, kids that age; I have nieces and nephews that are a little older. But this is such a non-subject to them and it still is a bit of subject for me because, you know, it's 20 years that I've been in the life. And so they have far more facility with discussing and living their lives and in a much more welcoming world.

AMES: Wonderful. Thank you so much.

MCKENZIE:           Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.*