

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Molly McNulty, Class of 1984

Interviewed by
Nina Goldman, Class of 2015

May 17, 2014

Abstract

In this interview, Molly McNulty describes her time at Smith, beginning with her excitement about attending a women's college. McNulty speaks to the experience of arriving and feeling academically overwhelmed, dealing with depression after arrival, and the strong house community that helped her through a challenging time. She describes her social life and issues on campus that prompted student organizing around race and sexual orientation. McNulty speaks to the Smith party scene and the low drinking age, which had a profound effect on issues of sexual violence on campus. She discusses Smith as a feminist school during the 1980s and the desire for students to shape their own experience. She also speaks to the presence of lesbian organizations on campus, sexual experimentation, and a general environment of excitement.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Taylor Maurand, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: McNulty, Molly. Interview by Nina Goldman. Video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Molly McNulty, interview by Nina Goldman, 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:

MOLLY MCNULTY
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: NINA GOLDMAN

GOLDMAN: Great, so, this is Nina Goldman, and I am conducting an interview with Molly McNulty, class of 1984, on May 17th, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So, Molly, thank you for agreeing to participate.

MCNULTY: You're welcome.

GOLDMAN: And I was just thinking we could start off at the beginning—

MCNULTY: Go right ahead.

GOLDMAN: —and hear how you ended up at Smith.

MCNULTY: How did I end up at Smith? Because of alums. My dad grew up in rural Vermont, and went to a one-room schoolhouse, and got very close to the teacher there, who was responsible for basically plucking him out of poverty and sending him to MIT. And I met her, and she was an amazing woman. And she was a Smith alum. So, that got me rather interested in Smith. And then I spent a summer at Chautauqua Institution when I was studying piano. And I met an amazing woman there, and she was at Smith at the time. Her name was Margaret Edson. And she went on to become a playwright. I forget the name of the play she wrote. It was about a Smith faculty member who was terminally ill. And so, I applied to Smith and Goucher, which was also a women's college, and some other places as well. But that's why I applied, initially.

GOLDMAN: Great.

MCNULTY: So, yeah.

GOLDMAN: And when you got here, what sort of first struck you?

MCNULTY: Oh, gosh. Well, I decided to come here because it was the most academically challenging college that I got into, I believed. And I was completely unprepared for the level of academic rigor that was expected

here. I was always, in high school, the way everybody here was. But I got some bad advice my freshman year, my first semester, which was, Oh, the professors don't really expect you to do all the reading. (laughs) Very bad advice. And then later, I got advice, Oh, you don't have to go to every class. So, the first few months were just such a shell-shock — really very tough. I got pretty depressed.

GOLDMAN: Because of that?

MCNULTY: Well, because a big part of my identity had hinged upon academic success, and being president of the National Honor Society, all that kind of stuff. And when I came here, I was just one of hundreds of smart girls. And I felt invisible.

GOLDMAN: How did you wind up, I guess, dealing with that or (inaudible)?

MCNULTY: Getting out of it? A couple of things. I lived in a very small house, 150 Elm Street, that's not even a dorm anymore. There were only seventeen of us in there, and I formed really close friends. In fact, the woman I was talking to, when I first came in, I met my first day freshman year, and we're still very close friends. So that helped. The other thing that helped, in retrospect, is that the Dean — I had — I was failing. I got failing grades. So the Dean called my parents, and said, you know, "She needs to turn this around, or we can't have her stay anymore." And one of the things they suggested was getting some therapy, which I did get. It was bad therapy, (laughs) but I saw somebody who was down at the infirmary, I think, and — you know, anyway. Somehow I survived that bad therapy. And I got better advice about how to manage academically. I didn't get tutoring or anything, but I started to understand I did really have to spend six hours a day reading everything. Plato — everything.

Oh, the other thing is, I joined the crew team. That's what really saved me, I think. I was a coxswain. I wanted to try something new. I thought, I have a chance for a new identity. I'd never been on any sports teams in high school, so I joined crew. And that kept me really busy, too.

GOLDMAN: And socially, what — I guess, how did you handle the new environment?

MCNULTY: Socially. I was such a wallflower. That's such an old-fashioned word, but it really describes how I was, very shy. I did experiment with going to parties at Amherst and at UMass. And I went to one party at Amherst, and one party at UMass, and that was it for me. I'm like, this is so — childish. I just — so I just hung out with my friends here. We didn't do anything special, just the usual: had meals together, had a couple of parties that were very silly, dress-up parties. So, I managed.

GOLDMAN: Great.

MCNULTY: Yeah.

GOLDMAN: Great, and I guess I'm wondering if you could describe a typical Smithie, while you were here, would you be able to — what would that— ?

MCNULTY: Wow, a typical Smithie. Um — there were some commonalities. And at the time when I was here, the student body was much less diverse. So the typical Smithie was white and middle- or upper-class. And American. Very smart — goes without saying, but sort of an intellectual drive, and a sense of confidence and competence that most everybody who landed here had that. And I would say that was a universal — kind of a universal profile. And there were eclectic interests, like horseback riding, or engineering, or something like that. But overall, they were formidable young women, and they still are today, from what I've seen.

GOLDMAN: And I guess I'm wondering — all times are sort of their own, like, special political climate, but what was it like here during the '80s?

MCNULTY: It was distressingly placid on campus. I think — I don't remember who was the president, either Carter or Reagan, and there was a — I was — during the four years I was here, there was a growing awareness of Reagan's policies, especially foreign policies, and they were unpopular. And one year, Jeane Kilpatrick [*sic*], who I think was the Ambassador to the UN, Secretary of State — I forget. Anyway, there were protests on campus about her, and the administration's policies.

And the other stream of political action that was nascent when I was nascent when I was a freshman, but became quite prominent by the time I was a senior, was a growing awareness of racism on campus. There were a handful of African American women, and faculty, who really felt very strongly that the norm here was assumptions about being white in America. And they felt so pushed to edges, in terms of curricula, the family experience, that they started to organize. And it wasn't till my last year, but that was really, I think, the beginning of the diversity movement at Smith, when I was here.

GOLDMAN: Was that — what did — I'm wondering if you, like, remember what you were thinking of all that, at the time?

MCNULTY: I remember thinking I didn't understand it, and that there was something to learn that I needed to learn, and I didn't get it. I didn't have any black friends. We had had one woman as a freshman, who just disappeared one day. She dropped out, or had — something happened. But she just vanished. And that was my only experience with what black students felt like while they were here.

I was an American Studies major, so I'd taken a lot of political courses, and I — like, I knew there was racism, but I didn't know how

to spot it when I saw it. So mostly, I felt uncomfortable not knowing what to do, wanting to do the right thing.

GOLDMAN: Yeah.

MCNULTY: So, yeah.

GOLDMAN: Kind of — just another question. You mentioned Kirkpatrick, and I'm wondering if there were any other sort of controversies that you remember from your time here?

MCNULTY: Hm, let me think.

GOLDMAN: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

MCNULTY: Politically. There was some organizing around sexual violence. The party line of the college at the time was that there was no rape on campus or there was no sexual violence here, which, based on my own experience, and that of my friends, I knew was complete bullshit. So there was some — sorry — agitation about improving campus security. And they did make some changes, like put up — we had blue boxes. You know, every half-mile, there was a blue box, just in case when you got attacked, you were right next to a blue box. But I think that was about it. I can't remember anything else, at the time.

GOLDMAN: If you don't mind me asking, like, what — how — what was the student perspective, or — with you, between you and your friends, and, like, noticing that the administration was maybe denying the fact that there was (inaudible) —

MCNULTY: We didn't talk about it very much. There was a lot of what has since been labeled date rape going on. Just really ugly stuff. Now, maybe, because when I was in college here, the drinking age was eighteen. So you'd have college boys — young men — coming in for the house parties. And there was just no control over drinking, at all. Everybody was of age, but there were no drink limits, no drink tickets. It was just a beer bathtub; everyone just completely getting drunk. And so, there were a lot of unpleasant situations at best, and I think a lot of what we would call now rape situations.

And I know I came home one night from a party in the quad, and a group of very drunk men followed me. And I had made one of them angry at a dance, because I refused to dance with him. I said I'd rather dance with my girlfriends. And I was probably not very nice when I said it. And they followed me home, and they tried to follow me into the house and attack me. And it was only because one of them — I don't know who it was, but he reached out, and he pulled the door closed, so they were all outside, and I was locked inside. But that was not uncommon.

GOLDMAN: And the administration—

MCNULTY: I did call security, but not till the next morning. I was so scared, I spent part of the night — we used to have phone booths on the first floor of the houses, so I just huddled down in the phone booth. And I called my aunt and uncle, who lived in New Haven, and said, “Can I come see you right away?” So I left campus. And then I notified security, and of course, what are they going to do at that point? They were long gone. And they were very — security was nice; sympathetic. But they couldn’t do anything at that point. But I don’t think I told anybody that happened. I was ashamed of myself. Why? I don’t know.

GOLDMAN: Not an uncommon [feeling?].

MCNULTY: No, it’s not. I understand that.

GOLDMAN: Yeah. Yeah, so the administration hadn’t set up any—

MCNULTY: No.

GOLDMAN: —ways of dealing with that?

MCNULTY: Probably they would have offered me counseling or something, and informed other students. There was no reporting to other students when there was an incident on campus. Nobody was notified.

GOLDMAN: It sounds like now, the house parties are a lot more regulated.

MCNULTY: Are they?

GOLDMAN: Yeah, it sounds like the ’80s was—

MCNULTY: It was a free-for-all. (laughs) Yeah. I mean, as much as I think raising the drinking age to twenty-one is a little bit silly, I think in the college setting, it’s probably prudent to have some kind of regulation.

I was just going to — laughing how old-fashioned we were. Our first house meeting, one of the things we had to vote on is whether the house was going to have parietal visit policies. You know, could we have men upstairs? And were we going to have visiting hours, and things like that? Of course, we all voted no, but it was different, back then.

GOLDMAN: And then also, there was the sort of ’80s party—

MCNULTY: Oh, yeah. We had great parties. (laughs) So — but, yeah, and the administration was silent. That is the way it was.

GOLDMAN: Were students sort of pushing for more—?

MCNULTY: No, because our focus, at that time, was on being independent — free and independent, and adult. And the last thing I think we would have wanted was the kind of administration that's in place now, which I think is probably better and more realistic. But we just wanted to do it ourselves, thank you very much.

GOLDMAN: I see. That makes sense.

MCNULTY: Yeah. Well, we were coming on the — coming in in 1980. So we were at the tail of the '70s, and the feminist movement then was very much about choice, individual choice, and not so much about institutional response, but about individuals.

GOLDMAN: And how — you've mentioned, I guess a number of things, but are there any other ways that you remember sort of like a kind of feminism, or sort of feminist consciousness coming out?

MCNULTY: Yeah, I think — we didn't take things for granted. For example, I'm a lawyer. And going to law school was something a number did, in fact, do, but it was not the norm, at that time. One of my closest friends is an engineer, and that was really out there, in terms of something only a feminist would do, to really go into the sciences. She was also in the Air Force ROTC, as a captain. So she was ground-breaking. And at the time, we knew it was groundbreaking. We had to be very conscious about pushing against sexual stereotypes, professionally. And that's why Smith was so helpful, because we went out in the world, and we were battered pretty severely, still, for being women in non-traditional professions. But we had — because we came here, we had a sense of self. But feminism was about careers then. Yeah.

GOLDMAN: Did you also — was that also a message that you felt like the administration was giving to you?

MCNULTY: They were supportive. I mean, Jill — Jill Ker Conway was the president at the time, and she was — her message was — it was — she was adamant about being who we were, and not to apologize for anything we wanted to do. And she had full confidence we could do it. So, in that sense, she was the face of the administration, and we felt, I think, nothing but support on that front. Hm, I think there was some takeover of College Hall, at some point, but I wasn't involved in it, so I don't remember what it was about. But overall, the administration was feminist, and used the word feminism back then. Yeah.

GOLDMAN: Wow. So they were — but they were still ready to sort of push you into a career?

MCNULTY: Yes, yeah. Very much so. Yeah, and the alums from ten years before us — there's a huge historical divide. I mean, the women in the early '70s were the firsts. They were — they did all of it first. And we came along behind, but we were not the people that — to break all the boundaries. We had to push, but we weren't the firsts.

GOLDMAN: Was that something you were aware of, and thinking about?

MCNULTY: Yeah. Oh, yeah, very much so. Because it was recent history. And the faculty in particular, the younger women, were — it's hard to describe the atmosphere, it was still very fresh. Nothing was taken for granted, in my view.

GOLDMAN: What do you — I guess, what do you mean by that?

MCNULTY: That women who came here were career women — career women. Or at least, everybody assumed you would be. And that it was going to require more than competence, in our technical fields, but it would require some personal abilities to be strong, and to negotiate your place in the world.

GOLDMAN: OK. Cool, cool. It's interesting to hear about that perspective, looking back on the '70s, and how that—

MCNULTY: Yeah, the ghosts—

GOLDMAN: —continued.

MCNULTY: —the ghosts of those women were with us, for sure. You know, Gloria Steinem, all those women. We were very aware that they'd been here, they'd lived in our houses, they — you know, they were the vanguard. So, it kind of felt like we had something to live up to. Yeah.

GOLDMAN: And at the same time, you were doing your own work of pushing on—

MCNULTY: Right, right. Yeah.

GOLDMAN: Cool, cool. Let's see. I'm wondering — just looking over some of the yearbooks of the '80s, and some of the editions of the *Sophian* has been really interesting.

MCNULTY: Yeah.

GOLDMAN: And one thing that we noticed that there seemed to be a Lesbian Alliance sort of starting up?

MCNULTY: Yes. Yes, indeed.

GOLDMAN: I was wondering if you remembered that.

MCNULTY: Oh, absolutely. We lived next door to a house that was four lesbian women, who were — who had self-identified, and I think—

GOLDMAN: Was this Hover House?

MCNULTY: Yeah. I'm just trying to think. It was a very interesting time to be on campus, in terms of sexual politics and identity, because there was this — what we called the radical fringe, who were comfortable with their sexual identity; made no apologies for it. They wore Birkenstocks, they did not shave their legs, they were vegetarians. You know, everything they did was fringy in our little, middle-class — whatever — hetero view. So it wasn't exactly mainstreamed, but there was a lot of pressure to move sexual identity from the fringe into the center. And they pushed really hard to do that, to their credit.

I was on the crew team. A lot of the women on crew were gay. So I personally was — I felt pretty comfortable with it. But I felt the way I did with the racial politics as well, that these women had an identity I didn't understand completely. I started to understand it was about more than sexual practice; that there was identity involved. But I didn't fully get it.

One of my best friends from Smith is gay. And she came out of the closet while she was here, I think. Partially out. (laughs) Out to her friends, not to her family. And then I lived with her and a couple of other women after graduation. So gradually, I got a personal education. The lesbian movement on campus was still seen as fringy. I can't think of a better word than that. They were unapologetic, but they didn't do very much education — maybe that's not the right word. But I wish they had done more, in terms of mainstreaming what sexual identity means, in terms of curriculum, social events, assumptions about family, and work, and relationships. They probably tried and it just — *wssht!* (laughs) I missed it. But—

GOLDMAN: Well, it seemed like the first time that Smith sort of saw — it really politicized—

MCNULTY: Yes.

GOLDMAN: —like, lesbian—

MCNULTY: That's absolutely true. Absolutely true. And North— and the other thing about it is that North— we're in Northampton. And separate from the college, that was a growing center for lesbian activism. And so, I think the two dynamics fed each other. But yeah, it was definitely a time where the women stepped out of the closet and started making demands. It was good.

GOLDMAN: And you got to sort of witness and hear.

MCNULTY: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I — as I said, I lived in a small house. Three or four of the women were gay, in different flavors. (laughs) One of them was very dyke, and another one is totally frilly. (laughs) It was like the spectrum. But yeah, it was an interesting time. Yeah. Lots of sexual experimentation going on, too. A lot of women who would call themselves straight now were kind of testing out — see, oh, maybe I'm gay, maybe I'm bi, that kind of thing.

GOLDMAN: You know, it seems like, in general, the campus, at that time, just had a lot of—

MCNULTY: Sex. (laughs)

GOLDMAN: (laughs) I think they were breaking out into the open.

MCNULTY: Yes, they were. Yeah. It was a new — lot of things were new. Yeah.

GOLDMAN: And it must have been interesting to happen all sort of in this space that looks very old and (inaudible)—

MCNULTY: Yes. I found it very ironic.

GOLDMAN: So, stuff you were thinking about—

MCNULTY: A little bit. You know, we were in this — I always felt Smith is sort of a faux Ivy League, in the sense — not in an academic sense, but that the environs were built to look like Old English, you know, Oxford. But the population, both faculty and students were radical. Just by being here, you were radical. You were saying, “I am a woman. I'm smarter than the rest of you, and I'm going to do more than the rest of you.” And that's — that's a pretty powerful statement. And it was radical in the '80s, even though we probably didn't feel like radicals. And we're surrounded by ivy, and white outfits, and sashes, and roses, and all this stuff.

GOLDMAN: And I am just wondering, were there also — there must have been some sort of, pretty conservative students?

MCNULTY: Oh, yes.

GOLDMAN: OK.

MCNULTY: Oh, definitely. When you asked me what a typical Smithie was, of the time, that popped into my head. There was definitely — this is a stereotype, but I'll just give it to you — a contingent of women who came from highly wealthy families. They lived in the quad. They wore

preppy clothes. They were Reaganite Republicans, and had no time for anyone else who wasn't from their — I don't know what — milieu. But I think their conservatism was primarily class-based. They came from a world that — the assumptions were, there was no economic want, that your family was fairly stable. It was just a class thing. And they — there might have been a campus Republican group, but it was probably about three very quiet women. (laughs) Because — yeah. Someone I used to live with in Park House, who's here this weekend for reunion, lives in Wyoming. And she's an extreme right-wing, like just — I find her scary. But they're out there. They were out there, even then, on campus.

GOLDMAN: And while you were here, were you sort of — did you kind of keep your distance, sort of? How did you—

MCNULTY: I sat at another table. Let's put it that way. (laughs) Even then, I was pretty much of a lefty, and did not feel comfortable hanging around (whispers) people like that. (laughs)

GOLDMAN: Yeah. (laughs)

MCNULTY: Yeah.

GOLDMAN: So we're sort of getting close to the end, and I was—

MCNULTY: OK.

GOLDMAN: —wondering if you wanted to just give us a little snapshot of who you've become—

MCNULTY: Who I've become?

GOLDMAN: —since — since Smith.

MCNULTY: Let's see. Two minutes — one minute, forty seconds. I'm a lawyer. After college, I lived for a year in Boston as a paralegal, and then I went to NYU Law School. And then I worked in D.C. as a federal lobbyist for the Children's Defense Fund. So I worked on social issues, like national health insurance. I got married, moved back to my hometown, which is Rochester. Had two children. Got divorced. I was highly successful, professionally, in Washington. But I got a bad case of postpartum depression, and that, ultimately, broke down my marriage, and — I was pretty prominent in my field, which was maternal and child health policy. And I was on the faculty at the University of Rochester for a number of years. And simultaneously, I was in an abusive relationship, had a massive breakdown, didn't get tenure, it was like an apocalyptic year, and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

And since then, my life has not been at all what I thought it would be when I was at Smith. It's — I have a nine-to-five job as an

editor. It's extremely boring. It pays half what I used to earn. My children grew up, and they're launched. They have struggles around having been raised by a mom who was — had a mental illness. A lot of times, I was not functioning very well. But my daughter's out of college, and she's OK. And my son is in college, and he will be OK. (laughs) I never remarried. So I live a very small life now, compared to what I thought it would be, when I was here. It's OK. It's OK, though. And I — Smith will always be the strongest piece of my identity.

GOLDMAN: Great, great.

MCNULTY: Mm-hmm. OK.

GOLDMAN: Thank you so much.

MCNULTY: You're welcome.

GOLDMAN: We have some tissues.

MCNULTY: Oh, I'm all right. Every half hour, I break into tears here. (laughs) Oops, I think I mangled your mic thing.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Taylor Maurand, June 2014.