

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Christine Merrill, Class of 2005

Interviewed by
Maggie Kraus, Class of 2013

May 14, 2010

Abstract

In this oral history, Christine Merrill discusses her experiences on the crew team and the swim team, her time abroad in Geneva, Switzerland and travels in Europe, and her work as an art history major.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Holly Redmond 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: Merrill, Christine. Interview by Rachel Dean. Video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Christine Merrill, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Merrill, Christine. Interview by Rachel Dean. Transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Christine Merrill, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2010, with:

CHRISTINE MERRILL

by: RACHEL DEAN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

- MERRILL: — unfamiliar with this whole process. Great. When you're ready.
- DEAN: OK. This is Rachel Dean, and I'm conducting an interview with Christine Merrill on May 15, 2010, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this.
- MERRILL: Thanks for letting me be a part of it. (laughter)
- DEAN: What were the benefits in choosing Smith over other schools?
- MERRILL: Benefits in choosing Smith? Obviously, there are many. One of the major benefits for me coming here was the fact that it was in Massachusetts. I grew up in Seattle, and so, coming from some place far away where I was not close to my family at any point during the year, except for Christmas and summer, really allowed me to grow and become involved in this community here, which was something that I really, personally appreciated. Other benefits — obviously, this is a wonderful community. I made a lot of really, really great friends here, and have maintained a lot of those relationships, which has been very fulfilling. And it was — it is a fantastic place to study. I was challenged intellectually every day, not just in class, but around the dinner table, just talking with other students. And there were a lot of fantastic — everywhere I looked — there were fantastic female role models to look up to, and they were always bringing in outside speakers, and just a lot of opportunity to benefit from other people's experiences, and also to be enriched by them.
- DEAN: What reactions did you get from families or friends for attending Smith?
- MERRILL: People were very excited. One of the reasons I actually — One of the first times I heard about Smith was a good family friend, her mom came to Smith and graduated in 1951, and she told me all these really great stories. She lived in the Quad and told me all about pillow fights, and just — and she studied her junior abroad in Paris, so she told me a lot about that. And, so, based on the fact that I had had a really good family friend come here, I think everybody was really excited, and my

mom has always said to me, "Live somewhere cool so I can come visit you," so I think everybody was pretty excited, and yeah.

DEAN: Were the older woman — women in your family college graduates, and did that influence you at all?

MERRILL: My mom — Let's see, my grandmother did not go to college, and my mom only has her AA degree. Likewise, my dad, he only has — he actually dropped out a semester before he graduated. But it wasn't — I'd say it wasn't a factor in my decision to come here. I really — I really wanted to be intellectually challenged, and I really liked the opportunities that I was able to have here. So, and I think they were very excited. My mom wants to come back and be an Ada. (laughter) So, yeah.

DEAN: That's exciting.

MERRILL: Yeah. Yeah.

DEAN: How did Smith live up to your expectations, and your hopes or fears?

MERRILL: Smith exceeded my expectations in many, many ways. I knew I'd have a great education coming here, but I also met just so many wonderful people, and I was able to do my junior abroad in Geneva, Switzerland, with the Smith JYA program. And that was a fantastic experience that I wouldn't trade for anything, and the fact that Smith allowed me to do that has been one of the greatest gifts in coming to school here.

DEAN: What clubs and organizations and/or teams (laughter) are you involved in, and how did they influence you?

MERRILL: My first year, I did crew, and crew was a very — it was physically challenging because we were waking up at 4:30 in the morning and running two miles down to the boat house, and then spending a few hours on the water, and then — and then going to class and studying, you know, five, six hours a day after that. But all those early morning hours were very good for forming really close friendships, (laughter) and there were quite a few of us who were first — who were novice crew team members, and that was a really — I really enjoyed that time. And then my sophomore year, I decided to do swim team, and it was also a fantastic experience. I loved being in the water, being in the same lane with the same group of people every day, and having that constancy in my academic life was a huge help to kind of all aspects of my Smith experience here. And I did that my senior year as well, I swam. My junior year, as I said, I was in Geneva, Switzerland, on the JYA program, and there were twelve of us, so again, we were all very close. And I was a fully matriculated student at the University of Geneva, so all of my class work was in French, and (laughter) I got to travel a lot, eat different food from many, many different cultures, and

that was — has definitely been one of the best years of my life so far. And in addition to crew, swimming, and JYA, I also did — I worked as a student archivist here, which was great because I got to learn a lot of things that I would not have had an opportunity to learn, had I not been looking at historical documents every other day, so.

DEAN: What house did you live in, and how did your house community shape your overall college experience?

MERRILL: I started out my first year living in Lawrence House, and I moved my sophomore year to Park House, and then junior year I was JYA, and senior year I was in Park House again. I think for a lot of Smithies, the housing experience is — it's fantastic. It's very, very unique, but I think, generally speaking, a lot of people tend to identify themselves with their houses, and I never really — I never really did that because I was doing sports and I wasn't actually at home that much. But in terms of the houses themselves, it was really nice, coming from far away, to have a place that looked like a house and felt like a house. That was very comforting, and also, I love the, like, creaky old stairs and arched windows, and all the kind of idiosyncrasies of all the old campus houses. I think that's really special. And so, in terms of shaping my experience here, I think the Smith houses are a huge part of this campus — obviously, they're on-campus, but I don't think the Smith community would be the same without them because they are so unique and they contribute so much to kind of the spirit of Smith.

DEAN: So, for your JYA program in Geneva, how did that influence your life in general and life after Smith? Like, what impact did that have on you?

MERRILL: That's a good question. (laughter) Well, I started learning French as a first-year student here, and so, I — my French was (laughter) probably not as sharp as it could have been, going to Geneva after just two years of college-level French. However, our first month of JYA, we lived in Paris with a host family, and that was complete immersion into French language and culture. And also, with the other 12 women on the program — sorry, excuse me, 11 women on the program — and also the director of the program and his family, we took a lot of trips. We saw Giverny, we went to Normandy Beach, and I had never been to Europe at that point in my life. And so, just being able to look at these amazing — be able to be a part of and walk in these amazing places that I'd seen photos of or heard about was really inspiring, and it was also (laughter) kind of surreal, at times. And the fact that we were living in a city, I think living in a city is extremely different from visiting a place, and that experience in itself was really special. I was living with another student, and, you know, we would walk out the door and straight into Swiss culture, and I think that's something that can never be replaced, for me. And in terms of shaping my life since then, I have a more profound appreciation for traveling and for feeling more

comfortable — I'm very shy, (laughter) and so, meeting other people was — going abroad that year kind of helped me overcome part of that shyness barrier, for me, in meeting new people and experiencing new places and new things. And the friendships that I've made that year, I've maintained, and I probably talk about my JYA experience once a week, (laughter) so it's a big part of my life.

DEAN: How was the coming back to Smith after being in Geneva for a year?

MERRILL: Well, I was excited to come back to Smith. Smith always feels like a big hug to me, coming back to campus, even as an alum. It's — Going abroad and studying abroad and having that kind of experience, you definitely should look into it, as a student. It's hard to explain when people ask you a question about, you know, how was your JYA? And you say, "It was great!" And they say, "Great!" And then they continue on in the conversation. It's hard to kind of capture that experience in a few words, and a lot of people, I think, just from saying, Yes, it was great, a lot of people don't necessarily appreciate how great it is because they weren't there with you experiencing that. And had they been, they would have felt the exact same way. So, I was very fortunate in the fact that seven of the women that I was on the JYA program with in Geneva were actually Smithies, and so, it was really nice to be able to talk to them about those experiences and reminisce. And I have had a chance to go back to Europe since then, and, yeah. I — It was a great experience, and I never felt bad about coming back to Smith. I felt bad about leaving Geneva, (laughter) but I was ready to come back to school, so.

DEAN: What was your major, and who were your most influential professors, advisors, and/or mentors?

MERRILL: I was an art history major. I would say John Davis, who was the Art Department Chair at the time, he was one of my favorite professors. I loved going to his classes, and he was very approachable and easy to talk to. And so, I think he kind of helped instill a passion for learning about art history in me, and it's still — when I think about his classes and going to a museum, the classes that he taught, for me, tend to be the period of art that I still enjoy the most and enjoy looking at the most. And also, my advisor when I was in Geneva, Cristophe Golé, he's actually the head of the Math Department. He's been really great — he's a great friend, extremely approachable, and I felt really lucky to have him there in Geneva. He was, you know, not only kind of a cultural intermediary, but he was also somebody that I felt like I could always approach, and he would, you know, help us with any problems that we had. And, I mean, he's a good friend, so yeah.

DEAN: How would you describe the campus atmosphere while you were here?

MERRILL: During reunion?

DEAN: Or — No, during, well, as a student.

MERRILL: Oh, when I was a student?

DEAN: Yeah.

MERRILL: As a student, OK. Challenging. Challenging because there was always an enormous amount of work to be done for class. Challenging because of the other students, and — I grew up kind of in a — I grew up in a suburban area, primarily middle class, white, and so I never had so many different viewpoints to kind of talk about and discuss. And so, for me, that was very challenging in a really wonderful way. It opened me up to a lot of different viewpoints and cultures and different ways of thinking, and helped me learn a lot. Smith was also a very empowering place for me; being able to be in a classroom full of women who were interested in what they were learning and excited about what they were learning, and who had done all of their homework, and had come to class prepared, that was enormous for me. I didn't go to the kind of high school where that happened, and it was very empowering for me. And to be able to be here and to participate in that kind of an environment (pause) it was a very fulfilling academic experience. And people were always excited to be here — I was always excited to be here. I loved all the different seasons and it was — it's a great — it was a great place. It still is a great place.

DEAN: Did you see any issues of diversity while you were here, with race, class, gender, religion?

MERRILL: I'm sure there were (laughter) a lot of issues. I never was involved in any of those issues personally. I did have a good friend of mine, who had kind of a difficult time for a while, and while she was here she discovered that she was a lesbian. And for her, that was a huge kind of leap that she had to overcome, and once she figured that out for her, it was — it was cathartic, and it really helped her become much happier as a person. And so, I'd say for me, that was probably the closest that I got to any gender or racial — multicultural — issues. And I did have a lot of friends from different countries, which I sincerely loved hanging out with them. (laughter) And I always thought it was really amazing that Smith was a place that drew students from every reach of the world, so.

DEAN: Did you face any challenges while you were here?

MERRILL: Good challenges? Bad challenges?

DEAN: Good? Both? Yeah.

MERRILL: For me, personally, again, as I said, I'm kind of shy, and coming to Smith, I met a lot of people, but it took me a little while to kind of find

my niche here, just because I was shy and I had to work really hard overcoming that. And I think a big part of overcoming that, for me, was going abroad by myself to a place I'd never been, and spending time with people and getting to know them really, really quickly. That kind of helped me overcome that challenge, personally. In a good sense, I've said this before, but my — one of the greatest challenges I had here was just the other people around me. Different viewpoints, different languages, different cultures, just learning from all of those and having an opportunity to interact and kind of become a part of that diversity that was on campus here at the time that I was. And being able to learn from those people, and being challenged by somebody's question in class. It was very challenging in a very positive way.

DEAN: Did — What were your experiences with relationships and dating while at Smith?

MERRILL: I was dating somebody from home, so I had a long-distance relationship up through my junior year, and then my senior year I did not want to date anybody. (laughter) So, that was kind of the gist of romantic relationships. Relationships with my friends I had here? Delightful. We — One evening, my — some of my friends from crew, my first-year friends, we were here — I think, actually, it was after the school year had ended, and we had gone to a crew meet. And so, we were on campus, and we got a little pint of Ben and Jerry's, and we went down to the lighthouse, and we couldn't see the stars, and so we (laughter) stood on each other's shoulders and unscrewed one of the light bulbs down at the lighthouse, and so we sat and ate ice cream and watched the stars. And that was a very special moment for me, and I feel like those types of moments, for me, where I was very close with other people and — I think were very unique to this place and also very special, and I feel very lucky to have had those kind of experiences.

DEAN: Do you remember your commencement address, and did that leave any lasting impressions on you?

MERRILL: (laughter) I actually don't remember much of my commencement address. (pause) And I don't know if it was because I was so overwhelmed with taking the next step in my life, or if it was just because it was five years ago. I don't.

DEAN: That's OK. (laughter) What did you do the summer after you graduated?

MERRILL: The summer after I graduated, I went home and I worked in a chocolate factory, so it was a delicious, delicious job. I actually ended up working there for about a year-and-a-half, so, yeah. And then, after that, I moved to Prague — Czech Republic — to teach English as a second language for a year, and then I moved back home again, and

now work for an environmental consulting firm as a project assistant, and I've been there for about two-and-a-half years now, so.

DEAN: So, who have — going off of that — who have you become since Smith, as a person?

MERRILL: I think, in my post-Smith life, I have tried to seek out the kind of challenges that Smith presented to me. I like to participate in intellectual conversations whenever I can, whether it be with work colleagues or friends from home. I like to attend lectures — that was something that was really great, was that there were a lot of lectures and outside speakers who were — who came to campus, and I heard them speak or read, and that's something that I've enjoyed and continue to enjoy since Smith. And also, I continue to have an appreciation for art history. I don't work in the field, but having learned so much about art, and taken field trips to Boston and New York to go to museums there, or walk around galleries there, that's something that I really enjoy. And I feel like the — my — the grounding that I received in that field wasn't necessarily on the art itself, it was in thinking and reading and listening and writing. And I feel like that has kind of followed me since I've been here.

DEAN: Looking back, would you encourage other young women to attend Smith, and why?

MERRILL: Absolutely. I actually just left a letter for someone in the library - a work colleague of mine, his daughter was applying to Smith, and I told him that I'd be happy to talk to her about my experience here. So, we went out to lunch, and she ended up applying and she will be attending this fall. And when I was a student here, a family friend had visited campus and wrote a little note and put it in a book in the library, and then gave me the title of the book, and said, "You have to look up this book, it's my favorite book." And so, I went and looked up the book and I got my letter, and so I just (laughter) like, 20 minutes ago, did the same thing for my friend's daughter who will be here this next fall. Likewise, when I was still at Smith — I had just come back after my junior year abroad, and an acquaintance from high school was interested in going to Smith, and so I talked to her about it and she ended up coming here. And we went to New York on our fall break my senior year, together. So, I absolutely encourage women to come here because it's such a supportive, empowering environment, and there are so many opportunities I think that you get out of this education. And professors are very approachable and always willing to help with problems. I think the academic program is great, the athletic program is great. There's a lot of different social opportunities for you here, and just so many different opportunities for learning. And I don't think there's a better place to be, so.

DEAN: We only have a few minutes left, so do you have any advice for current and future Smithies, and would you have done anything differently?

MERRILL: Would I have done anything differently? No. I absolutely loved all the time that I was here. I am so grateful that I went on a junior abroad program, and so that would absolutely be my advice to any Smithie, is to do a study abroad program. Absolutely, it will broaden your horizons, you will learn about people and gain an appreciation for other cultures that I think is possible to get while you're here as a student, but I think living in it is a completely different experience. And as a student, being able to live in a foreign country is, I think, definitely an opportunity that nobody should miss. So, that would be my advice.

DEAN: OK, do you — Is there anything else you would like to add?

MERRILL: Enjoy your time here. It's a great place, and I always love to come back and visit, so.

DEAN: Thank you very much.

MERRILL: Yeah, thank you.

GEIS: Where is home, for you?

MERRILL: Seattle, Washington.

DEAN: Thank you.

MERRILL: Yeah, thank you.

DEAN: No, I'm good.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Holly Redmond, 27 May, 2011