

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Mariceleste Miller, Class of 1990

Interviewed by
Rachel Dean, Class of 2013

May 15, 2010

Abstract

In this oral history, Mariceleste Miller discusses her experiences living in Morris House and Park House, her involvement with theater, and her work as a biology major and math minor. She also describes the general campus climate and atmosphere (including racial tensions), Helen Caldicott's commencement address, and her current work with the Smith admissions office in Baltimore, Maryland.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Thomas Goodman 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: Miller, Mariceleste. Interview by Rachel Dean. Video recording, May 15, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Mariceleste Miller, interview by Rachel Dean, video recording, May 15, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Miller, Mariceleste. Interview by Rachel Dean. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Mariceleste Miller, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 15, 2010 with:

MARICELESTE MILLER

by: RACHEL DEAN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DEAN: Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this.

MILLER: Thank you for inviting them?

DEAN: What were the benefits in choosing Smith, over other schools, for you?

MILLER: I went to, actually, an all-girls high school, so coming to Smith is odd for many people, since it's all women. But, coming here, and I looked at about five other schools, all co-ed, it was just the atmosphere. I felt like I fit, and I belonged. To be honest, Williams was my first choice 'til I went there with people, and when I went there with people, I couldn't envision myself interacting there. So, I came to Smith basically after my own campus day, which was in, I guess, April of that year, and it just sold me. I just knew. It was that pit of your stomach feeling, and it was a good fit for me, and I just knew I would do well, and do more than I had done in high school.

DEAN: What were the reactions of some of your friends, and family, and peers, for attending Smith?

MILLER: Smith wasn't very well known. I mean, I'm from Maryland, which is not that far away, but it still didn't have a very broad, I guess, quantity to it, that people really knew of it. So, they didn't really have that big of an opinion, and the people that knew it, knew it was a very good school, and I was at the top of my class, and so I was very academic. It didn't surprise them that I would attend somewhere like Smith. So, my parents were supportive. I didn't have negative or positive, you know, it was all positive, because people were happy, I was happy.

DEAN: Were the older—

MILLER: Gotcha. Scratch it. (laughter)

DEAN: Were the older women in your family college graduates, and did that influence your decision to attend college?

MILLER: No. My mother did not attend college, and to be honest, I'm not sure any one female did in my family, at least not my very immediate family. So, no, that was—family tradition was not part of the choice. It just was something, like I said, I was very academic. So, there was no doubt that college was the next step for me.

DEAN: Were they excited then? Or how did they react to it?

MILLER: I guess so. My background's more blue-collar than I guess a large majority of Smith, so, you know, we're a working class people, so I don't know that they were necessarily overly excited. My mother was not very school-oriented. She was ready to get out of high school when it was time, so for her, more school was not necessarily something she would've looked forward to. So, it didn't bother her in the least. She was very happy for me though. She always wanted the best, and knew that that was something I needed to do. So, for that, she was quite happy, but no, there was no sort of traditional model that I was following, and people were—it was the thing to do for my prep school, so.

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

MILLER: I was prepared for college, which was something that was nice to know. You know, you go to high school, you do what you're supposed to do, and you know, you go to the next thing, and you hope you're ready for it. So, I felt very well-prepared, by my tradition. I did have classmates that were not, so I knew that there was a distinction between my background, and their background. So, I was very pleased with the academics that I found here. I was able to do a little bit of everything, and I found, even from the friend-level that I created, I networked across campus. So, I did have a very strong, sort of, house connection with people, but yet, coming back to reunion, I see it too. I knew people from different houses, depending on different things, whether the classes we took together, or the activities I was involved with. So, I was able to meet a lot of different people, and stay connected to them over the years. So, you know, that sort of bond that you hear that you get from Smith, you really do. I mean, I still stay very connected with people. The housing situation, you know, was fabulous when you visited, and it was tough having to—you know, we were actually in the beginning, a lot of changes. Now, the dining's very different, but even back then, we were at the beginning. We were the last, I think our freshman class was the last one that had linens delivered, and you could get them changed, and sent out, and they had a laundry. And no one knows about that anymore, because that was, we were about it. So, the traditions were still very apparent, and then we were making news ones at the same time. So, I was pleased to be a part of all of that. So, the campus itself was just beautiful, so that has always lived up to the expectations, without a doubt. So, I didn't really have very, many disappointments. You know, I enjoyed Smith for what it could provide you, and it was always providing you with something new, and something different, every year, every time you turned around, it was something.

DEAN: What house did you live in, and how did your house community play a role into your experience, at Smith?

MILLER: I lived at Morris House for three years, which is great, because I was a math science geek, so you just rolled out of bed, and it was good. And then my senior year, I actually moved to Park, and basically, because a lot of my friends, junior year, had gone away, and I didn't. So, there were two of us that actually moved out, in senior year, just for something different. And it was nice, got a really big room. You kind of knew what Morris offered, and I went to Park, and they offered something a little different. So, I had an amazing room my senior year, and I was quite happy. You know, you're doing your own thing senior year anyway, so I wasn't overly concerned that I didn't bond with the house, and in some respects, when you stay in the same house, with the same people, for four years, either it's great, or they really start to bug you after awhile. So, it was kind of nice to get out. But luckily, I had a good freshman roommate. I didn't have issues with that. I ended up picking out with a good group of people. Because it's a crapshoot, whether you actually bond with the people you're living with, or not. So, I was able to find a very good group. Honestly, I've stayed more in touch with the year ahead of me, which was another thing that I really liked about Smith. Because I do admissions work now, for Smith, that's one thing I say, you know, that was great. Because, you're in a house, you meet people from all levels, and it's not just freshmen, or first years that you're stuck with. So, I really do. I keep connected with years, beyond mine, which I think is really special.

DEAN: What clubs and organizations and/or teams are you involved in, and how did they impact your experience?

MILLER: Well I was never an athlete, never have been, never will. Sort of never will be, but I did a little bit of intramurals and I took some classes, but I had friends that were in basketball, and soccer, so you know, we got to go see events, because we knew people that played, which was fun. I did things with the Catholic community. I worked with the plays, and got some theatre background with them, which was fun. I mean, that was a little different, because it wasn't as crazed as being in the theatre department, and it was a little more low-key. So, yet again, that was another group where I met people, that now I have kept up with over the years, which were different from my house people because they were not in that group. I'm trying to think, what else did I do? I didn't do any guiding. I didn't do – that might have been it, all said. We kept busy. You know, I guess, proximity on Green Street, to the theatre building, and you know, the arts, I had friends that were involved with that, so I, you know, at the time, we could get theatre subscriptions through Smith, at Smith. So, you know, I did that for, I don't know if I did all four years, or at least two or three of them. So, I supported people that did things, and that was fine. That was good enough for me.

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

MILLER: I was a biology major, math minor, missed the double major by two majors—by two classes, which always annoyed me a bit, but math people are a little odd, so. At the time, we could get, you could get credits for your AP classes, but they wouldn't let it necessarily count towards your major, which we had a bit of a difference of opinion on, because that's why I did that, so I can progress in the major, but that's OK. I was close, but the biology was my favorite. Let's see, I didn't really have any specific mentors. It was one of those things, if I had one more year of school, I probably would've done a thesis, or an honors, or something, but four years goes fast. John Birktha was one of my, I guess you can say, field professors, because he did more, you know, outdoor plant ecology, science, and he was just amazing. The man just knew stuff. It was fabulous. The class I took with him was actually an outdoor class, where we went, every Friday, on a field trip somewhere. So, we got outside, and he would just know everything, you know, plant names, birds' calls, everything. So, that was just exciting to be around someone who, and he wasn't young then, just still soaked up education and enjoyed everything. Trying to think, Mary Laprod was an invertebrate zoology teacher, and she was just wonderful. And she wasn't even a full professor. I think she may have just been like a teaching fellow, but she was another one. She just made you enjoy classes. I overbooked myself I think that semester, and I was just so behind on things, and I almost apologized, I think, on my finals. I'm like, for the calendar class I took from you, I am really said I'm giving you this as my final, because it wasn't my level, but you run out of time. You know, there's just so much you can do, but I just remember things from her class. So, to me that was a mark of just a fabulous teacher, and one that enjoyed, you know, passing her knowledge onto me.

DEAN: How would you describe the campus atmosphere, while you were at Smith?

MILLER: It's probably similar to what it always is. You know, there's controversy. There's political activism. And yet, there's just everybody going about their daily life, and you could get involved, or choose not to. You could kind of do either thing, but I always found it very welcoming. I'd never—I wasn't in, I guess, an off group that might find issue with things, but I was always very comfortable here. We were—there was a lot of turmoil, and the college had to deal with it, and it seems like that's always around. You know, it's college, and students enjoy it, and the administration deals with it. So, I didn't find, you know, issue with how the campus sort of reflected—you know, we did what we needed to do, and I enjoyed it. I never had any issue going to school, coming from school, it was always good.

DEAN: What specific turmoil or conflicts were—

MILLER: We had a lot of African-American issues, back in the late '80s. The Otelia Cromwell Day started then, as is part of some race issues, and it doesn't seem

like that ever goes away, because you read the quarterly, and it's still here, and it's just different levels, and different topics. We had issues with the staff, with money back then. I mean, I see these things, I'm like, wow it's still here. So, it seems like every generation has this same basic problems that sort of arise, that you become interested in, and deal with. You know, they resolve and something new crops up. So, it's always surprising when you hear the stories, you're like, wow, the same stories, slightly different twist on it now. But, I'm trying to think if we had other—I don't know that we did specifically, other big things, but there just always seems to be something that there's some group that needs to protest, or point out the way things are, cope—I think at the time we were still trying to get them to get co-products off of the, out of the investment funds. So, there was a lot of divesting. That was the big thing back then. So, there's always something. It's college. (laughter)

DEAN: Did you see any other issues of diversity, based on class, or religion, or gender and sexuality?

MILLER: Well, it's there. I don't know that I saw it personally. Green Street was pretty low-key. You know, it's not—it was really science people. (laughter) They don't get into stuff like that, so I never personally encountered any issues. Obviously that didn't mean to say they weren't out there, but I didn't, you know, I was never involved with any problems that way, so like I said, I knew they were there, but it just was never in my little, you know, range of influence.

DEAN: What were some of the challenges, you faced, if any, while here?

MILLER: Challenges. Well, my dad passed away, actually my freshman year. Why that still bugs me after 20 years, I don't know. So, personally, I had to deal with that, and to be honest, it wasn't so much me dealing it. It was almost other people dealing with it, because I came back the same person. They were all waiting, I guess, for me to be a different person, and I wasn't. So, that was a big one freshman year. Beyond that, like I said, I was prepared for the academics, so academically I didn't really have issues. I guess I was just juggling. You know, you learn how to organize, or figure out how to handle it all, and do it all. So, I guess the bigger challenge was enjoying everything, and finding, by senior year, I ended up taking five classes my last semester, like an insane woman. Most of them were 100-level classes, because you're like, well, I never hit this area, and this area, and I got to get them all in. So, that's the advice I give to seniors that are coming here now. Look, you figure out what you want to do, and make sure, you write that list early, and do it all, because it's so different when you hit the real world. The things you can do at UMass, the theatre productions, things are cheap, they're right there, and you're never going to see that, for the most part, in the real world, depending on where you end up.

DEAN: How did—what were your experiences with relationships and dating, while at Smith?

MILLER: Oh, I didn't do a whole lot of that either. (laughter) Didn't do much in high school either, so it wasn't new, coming here, was the same for me. I guess freshman year we had more of an involvement, and it was just really the group I was with. You know, they tended to go out. We were the groups that, the first weekend when it's just freshman here go to UMass. OK. Then you discover, oh that was dumb. Everyone knows you're a freshman now. (laughter) So, they met different people, and you know, it was just odd. I didn't do a whole lot of dating. We did parties, and went to meet people. You know, I think I met more random people my senior year, but that wasn't a big thing for me. It was four years. I was here, really, for the academics. I really enjoyed that. I didn't want to have to worry about anything else. So, I guess—actually I did meet, I met people at home. We'd write letters and things. People would actually write letters, and I met a guy at a conference who turned out to be just a ding-dong. So, it was more like trying to get rid of people, than it was trying to hang out with them, because I discovered, you know, freshman year, I was realized most guys, if they were our age, were just still kids. You know, they call on the phone. Do you have a point to call me? Well then don't call me. I'm not here just to talk to you for 20 minutes about nothing. So, that wasn't major for me. I didn't really have to worry with that, or didn't feel like I needed to.

DEAN: Did your commencement address, if you remember it, leave you with any lasting impressions?

MILLER: Yeah, I hated it. She was horrible. (laughter)

DEAN: Can you elaborate on that?

MILLER: Helen Caldicott. Yes, basically she told us, that if the world was around in 10 years, we would be lucky. So, we had a pretty much doom and gloom speech, in the middle of the track and field house, because it was pouring rain out. So, it wasn't really just a good, overall thing, so that's my memory of commencement. She was horrible. I enjoyed, I'd be a junior ush for the year before, and Kenneth Galbraith did the address there, and I just remember him being fabulous. Well I got one, it wasn't mind, but at least I said there when it was good. She was horrible, she was horrible. I don't know how we picked her. I suspect that she was the only one left that they could find, so, oh my goodness. It wasn't just me, nobody liked her. We were all had that same—we were just talking about that today. (laughter) Didn't like her.

and her

DEAN: Who have you become, since Smith?

MILLER: I've become since Smith. Oh that's a good question. I don't know. Time passes rapidly, and you don't realize it. I've become, maybe, some of what I would hope I would've become, and not others. I mean, you have sort of a grand plan, and I assumed, you know, I'd be married by 26, and kids, and haven't gotten anywhere close to that, so that piece of what my impression of myself would be, never happened, or hasn't yet. There's still time. But, you

discover that life somewhat happens to you, and you are who you become. I had dealt with my mother, without my father. That's been a whole life experience. You almost learn things now, that you're like, OK, next life I'll know differently, but, who knows, if it isn't one of those, but you just, you can't change certain things, and you can just move on from where you are. You know, I was a teacher for awhile, which was good, and I've been an engineer for many years now, and I'm not sure I'm still satisfied where that is. So, there'll be something else coming along.

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

MILLER: Yes, and I do work with admissions now. (laughter) I interview, and go to college fairs. I still find Smith to be valuable as a single-sex institution. I think, you know, we're still in a society where that's difficult, and I'm an engineer, and I see that daily. There is just a distinction between men and women, and there should be. I don't ever want to be the same as a man. We can be separate, but equal, or different, but equal, but I think, for four years, it's very valuable for women to come together, and you know, not have all this pressures unless they want them, and find them, as far as interacting with relationships on a daily, constant basis. I mean, you're here for an education, and this allows you to really explore that, and there's time to figure out all that other stuff too, but I think, you know, it's a very valuable place. It's still very, you know, focused on the person, and helping a woman become who she can become, and being the level of the institution that it is, you know, it has the resources to provide that, so I find that very valuable, and I still find that valuable.

DEAN: What difference has a Smith education meant in your life?

MILLER: I don't have any big answer to that one. It just gave me different, you know, avenues to pursue, just for interest-levels. You know, I did math, I did science, I did art, I did history, and geology. I was able to do a lot of things here, and very well, with professors that were just very excited, and having to take classes at community colleges, and you know, state schools since then, you know, there is a difference. The teacher-level is different. Their interest-level in you is different. It's not TAs, it's people you can really get in contact with. So, I really appreciated that, and it was sort of, you know, when I was at Smith, I wished I had gone a year, or half a year at least, to co-ed institution, just so I can say, this is the difference, because I know there was a difference, and having (cough) undergraduate-level courses, I can see, it's still going to be different from an undergrad, but it was what I needed at the time. So, it continued to make me the person, and to give me the connections that I still cherish now, and still help define me, through my friendships.

DEAN: So you have any advice for current and future Smithies, and would you have done anything differently?

MILLER: The biggest difference would've been the going away, or going abroad. The other thing you just don't think about is the fact that it's all set up for you. You know, there's no, you're not setting up the trip later. I do a lot of traveling now, and I really wish I had done that, while I was here, but I guess I had four years, it is so short, and the first two years, really just figuring out who you are, and what you want to do. And then it's two more years, and they're gone. So, you almost need to grow up a little bit faster than you really are ready to, to really take it all in, and that is tough. So, that would probably be the biggest thing, and I'm happy with what I did. I mean, I don't regret it, necessarily. That would've been one more experience, would've been nice to taken advantage of, at the time. But I did, you know, what I should do then, and it was fine. I guess the best is to take—(cough) Excuse me. (cough) Take advantage of what the offerings are, here, because it is, the biggest thing we all have gone back, come back from later, is you don't find this connection out in the real—it's very hard to find it. You know, you don't have this group of people, all in one spot, you know, all doing the same thing, and being in the same, you know, family. It's very hard to find that in the real world, and the first couple years you're out of Smith, you're like, wow, there's no 2 o'clock talks about really deep discussions on the phone, or in the hallway, and to really find that group of people, you just don't realize what that means, so it's, you know, that's the kind of stuff, to me, you take away from Smith, and don't think about it. You know, it's not the diploma, it's not the honors that you got, it's the people you experienced, and the insights that you got here, and it's very difficult once you leave these hallowed halls, to find that without work. You know, it takes effort. You're not plunked down there again, unless you're really lucky. That's not to say it doesn't happen, but I did find, you know, my friends were all scattered, and I had a new network I had to create, and there's no class on that one, so it's hard to go back and do that.

DEAN: Is that why you come back for reunion, to like re-live that?

MILLER: Yes, I do, well, I'm close. I'm only six and a half hours away, so the drive is easy. So I enjoy seeing the people. I just enjoy the connection. So, yes, I don't want to miss anything, I guess, so. (laughter)

DEAN: You seem really involved in alumnae. Actually, my San Diego club sold me, and that's why I came to Smith. But, how would you describe the alumnae network, and the community, after you graduate?

MILLER: The Baltimore club is very strong, so it was very easy to pick up there. I might be more difficult. I know, I've talked with friends in West Virginia, and just in small places that they don't really have the connection, so I would imagine it's more difficult, but it was already pretty established. We're sort of dying off, sort of. We're not quite sure what's going on, but it's hard. It's still not easy. The younger generation, we haven't figured out how to tap into. The very old, and sort of middle alums, and then the newer ones, we're in very different worlds, technology-wise, and just how our culture has established ourselves, we're finding it difficult as a club to bring that together, and we're not quite

sure why, whether the digital age has made people less associated. They can be in two different places at the same time, and interact, but that's not the same as being together in the same room. So, you know, we're finding it tough to do that, but at least I felt like, while I can go, and be connected with Smith, because there was no other where to meet these people. So, I developed friends from completely different classes, that I never would have encountered, through the clubs, which is very good. I haven't tapped into any for employment advances, or assistance. I might need to do that soon, but just it's been more of a social connection, which I find very valuable, but it's, you have to see it out, you definitely need to, you know, make a little effort to get involved.

DEAN: While we're running out of time, is there anything else you'd like to add?

MILLER: No. I don't think so. I think I pretty much hit them all. (laughter)

DEAN: OK, well thank you very much.

MILLER: Thank you. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Thomas Goodman, May, 2011