

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Jean Mooney, Class of 1956

Interviewed by
Bethy Williams, Class of 2013

May 20, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Jean Mooney discusses her work as an Education major, issues of diversity and class on campus, and her career in education.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Jennifer Gao 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: Mooney, Jean. Interview by Bethy Williams. Video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Jean Mooney, interview by Bethy Williams, video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Mooney, Jean. Interview by Bethy Williams. Transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Jean Mooney, interview by Bethy Williams, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 20, 2011, with:

JEAN MOONEY

by: BETHY WILLIAMS
filmed by: KATE GEIS

MOONEY: And wonderful kitchen and my daughter lived a lot when she was here, always familiar with the place. They're digging up next door. What are they doing in Gillett?

WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm, they're renovating Northrop/Gillett.

MOONEY: Oh, Northrop/Gillett. OK.

WILLIAMS: OK, I'm Bethy Williams. I'm here with Jean Mooney from the Class of 1956 and it's May 20, 2011. Thank you for agreeing to be part of our project.

MOONEY: My pleasure.

WILLIAMS: So how did you choose Smith? How did you end up here?

MOONEY: I ended up here because my aunt was in the class of 1919 and she brought me out at one of her reunions when I was about 12 and stayed in a dorm and I thought, this is going to be my school, and I looked at a few other schools when the time actually came, but I just had always been in girls' schools — had never been in a co-ed environment, so I thought, maybe I'd better go to a women's college. So I didn't hit co-education until graduate school.

WILLIAMS: And did you have a lot of them in your family that went to college like your aunt?

MOONEY: My mother went to college. It was something new. I was the youngest of four, but the others are 10, 12, 14 years older, so my mother was an older mother, but she had gone to college like her sister. They lived in Pittsfield, so Smith was very close by.

WILLIAMS: And what was it like when you did make that adjustment to co-education? How was it different than Smith?

MOONEY: It was — oh, well it was very different. It was huge. I'm in a university. When I came to Smith, I had never been in a class of more than 28 girls, so to

come to a class of 600 was a big adjustment, and I didn't mind being away from home because I had boarded through high school, but the adjustment was — well, what I found most interesting initially was the intellectual challenge. That, for me, was the most enticing — came to Smith with the idea that I was going to be a theater major because I had done a lot of dramatics in high school, and in my freshman year, there was a girl in my house who was a theater major, and I thought, she works absurd hours. I just don't think I want to make that kind of commitment.

WILLIAMS: They still do work insane hours.

MOONEY: So I thought, no this is not for me. So I think I drifted for a while, and then decided on an Education major, mostly because I had so many nieces and nephews. I was not really thinking of career. We didn't think about career in those days, but I enjoyed it, so I signed up for an Education major and it was fantastic in those days, particularly when we got to go over to Clarke School for the Deaf in our site classes and in education classes just to see kids where development is atypical. And then I insisted in doing one of my full-time student teaching in the North Hampton schools, and then I did one wonderful semester in the day school, but in my senior year in the fall, I had become very interested in kids with disabilities, and I went home for a weekend and came back and met a girl from Mount Holyoke on the bus. She was majoring in Psychology with a minor in Speech Pathology and Audiology, and that had never heard of, and so she told me what it was all about, and I decided that is something I'm really interested in. So I went to my dean, my class dean was Miss Murdock, and I said, I'd like to go to Mount Holyoke and take a course. In the spring, they're giving this introductory course. So she looked at me and she said, we don't do that. And I said, well I know the transportation's a problem. It's seven miles away, but my parents said I could bring a car back. And she said, we don't do that. So I kind of persisted and she said, "All right, I'll talk to Dean Randall," who was essentially the provost. So Dean Randall called me and asked me why I wanted to do this and whatever, and I told her. I thought I was interested in this as a career. That was a natural follow-up to my Education major. She said, "I'll look into it" and then I never heard from her again till just before Christmas vacation, she called me and she said, "Well, you can do it." It went to the trustees.

WILLIAMS: Wow.

MOONEY: And the trustees went to the trustees at Mount Holyoke and they are willing to allow you to come and they will grant you three credits, and Smith has agreed to accept those credits. So I said, "Well great, and my parents would let me bring a car," and she said, oh no, no, no. The college will provide the transportation. So a chauffeured car came to my dorm twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays and picked me up and drove me to Mount Holyoke, and I had to drive onto that campus and get out of this limousine going to a classroom building, and when I got there, no other Mount Holyoke students had signed up for the course. So Miss [Haggardy] — it was a tutorial in her office, but I loved it because I had to do all the reading and answer all the questions, but it was just fascinating.

WILLIAMS: Wow.

- MOONEY: And then I found that girl again who had suggested this in the first place, and we decided to apply to grad school, and we ended up going to Stanford and getting our Masters in Speech Path and Audiology, which was from the medical school, and she then came back to Clarke and got certified as a teacher. So that's how I got a career. You know, in our day, we didn't have career planning. There was a little office in the — they would keep your references to send out. There was a part-time lady twice a week, so we didn't even know how to write a resume, and one of my professors helped me.
- WILLIAMS: Do you think that they just didn't expect women to get jobs?
- MOONEY: No, they didn't. We were told in our classes that we were being educated to be wives and mothers and to make a difference in our communities and I can remember Mister [Denuit?] saying, "I want all of you to be members of the League of Women Voters." In most, there are only 8% of my class went to grad school right out of college. A lot of them went later in life, but only 8% — no one ever talked to us about a career. My father did in the time my sister and I were young, so it was not a shock to them that I wanted to go on, but there was nothing here that promoted career awareness, career planning. It just wasn't done in the 50s.
- WILLIAMS: Were you upset with Smith for that?
- MOONEY: No, I didn't think it was missing at all because it wasn't even topic of conversation. When we graduated, some girls got married right away. Others just knew they were going to go to New York and work for TimeLife as a secretary until they got married, until they found somebody and got married, and that seemed quite logical.
- WILLIAMS: And what was your plan? What were you thinking?
- MOONEY: You know what? It was dumb luck for me. I did not have a plan for a career. I chose education only because it just seemed to be a perfect fit. If you're going to be a theater major, well teachers are on stage every day, so it seemed like a very natural fit for me and comfortable, and then when I tried it, I loved it.
- WILLIAMS: Right.
- MOONEY: And then it was by accident, again dumb luck, that I met this girl, and she had this wonderful career in mind, and I just thought, "Well OK, I'll do that." Because remember in our day, the guys didn't have to worry about employment at all because they had three years in the government, in the service, so a lot of women thought, oh well I'll just mark time. I'll get a job doing something. Some of them went to work for universities, you know, in administrative offices or something like that, and then they got married. But that little course over at Mount Holyoke launched me into my life's work, for which I am enormously grateful. Number one, that the trustees were willing to think outside the box. And somebody on the Board of Trustees really envisioned connecting the colleges, because Miss Randall said, "You had an advocate on the Trustees" and I think he paid the transportation costs. It wasn't budgeted, and I had no idea what it cost, but —

- WILLIAMS: So one thing I've noticed, I mean just talking to you outside and hearing you now, is that you were never — it sounds, I mean tell me I'm wrong, but you were never fully satisfied just staying on Smith campus, like you told me you did classes in the community and you wanted to take this class at Mount Holyoke. Can you talk a little bit more about that?
- MOONEY: You know, I didn't know it about myself at the time, but I think the interpersonal is a very important thing for me, and working with children became important, even having a junior recruit me as a freshman to come downtown Northampton to the, I don't know, the Boys and Girls Club down there and to volunteer an afternoon a week, just seemed like something I really wanted to do. I grew up in a community that was sort of a blue collar community, and my family always worked out in the community — very connected to the community, and interestingly enough, after being a first grade and kindergarten teacher and then a speech pathologist in schools, I went back for a Doctorate in Special Education and ended up in Teacher Education, but the part of my job I loved most was to begin to take the university out of the (inaudible) into the local community, and we began the effort to create full service schools, where the schools social working are seeing law and management — put teams together with our students and took them out into the community and to bring the services under the schoolhouse roof.
- WILLIAMS: Do you think that sort of interaction was encouraged at Smith during your time here?
- MOONEY: No, you know there weren't really interdisciplinary majors and connecting to the community was not sponsored by the college. I mean, I don't think it was a club or an activity. I think at that time, it was something that some students did, and they may have gotten into it through a church. I'm not exactly sure how that all started, but I imagine you, you're very connected to the community. Yeah.
- WILLIAMS: I mean you talked a little bit about your adjusting from a blue collar community at Smith. How do you think issues of class and race and sexuality and all of that stuff played out during your time at Smith?
- MOONEY: When I came to Smith from my environment, although I had been in private schools, they were private Catholic schools, you know, in the local community, I was overwhelmed quite frankly — socially, and I think emotionally overwhelmed, by the size, by the sophistication. I mean I had never heard of Emma Willard or Dobbs or Madeira or any of these other schools and I think the only person in my house who was worse off was a woman who graduated from Brooklyn High School in New York, and who was first generation Russian, Jewish family, and it was very hard for her — harder for her, I think, than for me. In my house, we had something very unusual, which is we had two African-Americans. They were more middle class than I was. One had been the daughter of a doctor, and she had gone to Emma Willard, and the other one, her father was a pastor and she was on scholarship.
- WILLIAMS: And those two African-Americans in your house, were they sort of segregated or did they interact with everyone?

MOONEY: No, not at all, and when the one from Emma Willard came, she roomed with the roommate she had at Emma Willard, so she had been very acculturated and both were wonderful. We all loved them, but for me, it was a first experience, as it was for most of the other girls.

WILLIAMS: So you think most people were pretty accepting and they were just like everyone else?

MOONEY: That's right.

WILLIAMS: Would you say that was the case for most African-American students at that time?

MOONEY: There were very few. I didn't know any others than those two, you know? No Asian — there were a few Asian women around, but I don't think the race, like any association, like at Boston College where I teach, they have the Asian Student Association, and what have you, and there's a lot of cultural identity. There was nothing certainly for them.

WILLIAMS: So about your life after Smith, you mentioned you're a professor at Boston College now. Did you expect that? Was that part of your original plan when you were going to Smith?

MOONEY: No, I just sort of followed, you know, the brook and the little tributaries — just sort of dumb luck. I went and got a doctorate at Boston College because I was married, had kids, and I couldn't go to Columbia or any place, or back to Stanford. I just — when I got my degree and finished, there was a large grant that came into the Department of Special Education, and they hired me in a faculty position, and I spent 35 years there on the faculty, which was a fantastic environment.

WILLIAMS: And did you feel — I mean, did you feel a lot of pressure as a woman in the 1950s to act a certain way or behave a certain way? Do you feel those pressures as a Smith woman?

MOONEY: I felt pressure as a Smith woman to make a difference and every job or environment I had taught in schools, I was in the title one with the low income kids, and I thought for me, the best way to make a difference is to get to teach you before they get to those kids and to help them to understand the nature or diversity and cultural identity, disability, and all of the special characteristics and endowments that children bring to a classroom, and that was where I found my niche. And so that worked out well. And I still get excited, you know, getting an email from a former student 20 years ago. Yeah.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Would you encourage your daughter to come to Smith?

MOONEY: She did.

WILLIAMS: She did come to Smith.

MOONEY: Class of '81.

WILLIAMS: Wow.

MOONEY: With a very different path. When she was getting ready to go to college, she'd come home every week from the Counselor Center Guidance Office with different, you know, catalogs. She wanted to look at the University of Hawaii, Chicago, Duke, Stanford, all these different places. I'd say, that's great. Isn't that wonderful. She came home one day and said, "I talked to my counselor and I'm going to apply early decision to Smith." I was shocked, but she got in and she came and she loved it and it's her 30th reunion this weekend, so it worked out really well for her. She was an economics major, but after five years out in the big world, she called me one day driving home from the Lotus development, and said, "I don't want to do this. Anybody can do this. I want to teach" so she became a teacher.

WILLIAMS: Wow, that's a cool story.

MOONEY: Family business. (laughter)

WILLIAMS: What would you — if you had to guess, what would you say the typical Smithie is like now?

MOONEY: I think — I don't know — a very, very intelligent, very energetic, and I think probably focused, far more than we were ever focused. I think a good self advocate, good at exploring options and opportunities, probably quite a good collaborator, because you do more project-based learning now. You have internships. You get out in the world, so I think you have enormous advantages to find yourself and your own talents and ways. I mean, just when we had last year a tour at Ford Hall for '56, we came out for a couple of days. It was so wonderful to walk down those corridors and see women's names on the faculty offices. I can remember choosing two courses only because a woman was the teacher, and I didn't have many women teachers. I think a lot is expected of you. So many things are open to you that your opportunities to excel are right there, but I think the sisterhood will take good care of you. The network is powerful — never heard the word "network" or "mentoring" or anything in our day, but you people are onto that, so that's going to be great. What's your major?

WILLIAMS: I'm a Study of Women and Gender and Spanish major.

MOONEY: Ahh.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, so it's very interdisciplinary.

MOONEY: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: So sort of a last question, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies like myself?

MOONEY: I think, don't get hung up on being absolutely breaking the glass ceiling. There's some wonderful things to do. If your niche is to go and be an artist some place, then I think you ought to do it and not think you're letting your college down or your family or anybody else down. I think it's just being a strong sense of self.

WILLIAMS: Do you think your people in your class are a little hung up on that? Like they feel like they have to be the best? I mean —

MOONEY: No, no.

WILLIAMS: Because the people in my class are probably.

MOONEY: Probably more than we are.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

MOONEY: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: I think there's definitely some of that.

MOONEY: More than we are.

WILLIAMS: But you're saying like, being a teacher is just as important as being a CEO.

MOONEY: It's extremely important.

WILLIAMS: Right.

MOONEY: It's extremely important as being a CEO. You know, they just get more money. I made peace with that a long time ago, is that my talents and whatever I was worth is I'm just somebody who can go run General Motors, and that's fine. That's fine.

WILLIAMS: Right.

MOONEY: It's the enjoyment of what you do that's the most important and also to feel productive, you know, and obviously connected to the community, which you already know about.

WILLIAMS: OK, thank you very much.

MOONEY: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jennifer Gao, July 2011.