

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Camille O'Bryant, Class of 1983

Interviewed by
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 18, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, Camille O'Bryant speaks about the critical role that athletics played in her Smith career and about discovering later the historic role Smith played in women's sports. She reflects on the people who helped her overcome the challenges Smith presented her with, including Jill Kerr Conway, and how that experience instilled in her the importance of giving back.

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: O'Bryant, Camille. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 18, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Camille O'Bryant, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 18, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 18, 2013, with:

CAMILLE O'BRYANT

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: This is Annie Ames and I am conducting an interview with Camille O'Bryant on May 18, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So I thank you in advance for being part of this project.

O'BRYANT: Oh, you're welcome. It's my pleasure.

AMES: So we are just going to talk about how you got to Smith a little bit. First of all why did you choose to attend reunion this year?

O'BRYANT: Well, it's my 30th reunion – second reunion weekend, and so I always try to come back every five years, but then this weekend my best friend's daughter is graduating. So I wanted to come and celebrate her graduation and see my friends I haven't seen for a long time. So that's why I'm here.

AMES: So how did you come to be at Smith as an undergrad?

O'BRYANT: It's a really funny story. I didn't know that Smith College existed, and my senior year of high school I am walking through the halls and a teacher just came up to me and asked me where I was going to college next year and I said well, I've applied to pen – University of Pennsylvania and Howard University and she said, "Well, have you ever thought of Smith College?" And I said, "I don't even know what Smith College is or where it is, and come to find out she is an alum of Smith College. She had graduated in 1968, and so I said, well, I will just go visit and see what it's like. So Martin Luther King weekend of my senior year of high school, so it would be January 15, I got on the bus, came with a friend, went in to tour the campus. It was really icy and cold and a really horrible day, and I went through the gym of all things, and I swam in high school as a swimmer, and my high school swim team was the Bananas, the Wild Bunch. And so walking through Ainsworth gym I saw the bulletin board for the Wild Bunch and the bananas, and I loved the swimming pool. And I said, I've got to apply to Smith College. So I did. And then they let me in, which is even more interesting, and so I got really great financial aid. I was far enough from home where I didn't have to stay at home, but you know, I didn't want to – I wasn't sure I wanted to go all the way to Washington DC or Pennsylvania. So that's how I got to be at Smith College.

AMES: Excellent. Excellent. What was it like when you first arrived?

O'BRYANT: Hated it. Absolutely shock. Culture shock. So it was the Fall of '79, it would've been my freshman year and you know, growing up in Boston and I wasn't really familiar with the whole vibe of Smith College at the time. It didn't matter about it being women only. That wasn't the problem, but it was I think more the crunch of the class differences and coming from more of a working-class background to seeing so many people who really never worked or had to work. That was a shock to my system, and I was really, really, very unhappy and dissatisfied with my choice in my first semester, but then I started getting more involved with things outside of my house, and even though I had made the decision to transfer from Smith College, I had packed up, wasn't coming back. Partway through the summer I was like no, I've got to go back. And I'm so glad I did. It was the best decision I ever made, and I've never had a – you know, still grew more and more in love with Smith College as the years went on.

AMES: Excellent, excellent. When you think about your time at Smith, what comes to mind first?

O'BRYANT: The gym of all the crazy things. I was an athlete and most of the people I knew was through my involvement in my sport. I was a member of the crew. You know, big team on campus then, big team on campus now, right?

AMES: Yeah, yeah, big team on campus forever.

O'BRYANT: And the boathouse and the pond and you know just doing, being able to do all the things I love doing. But when I think about Smith College the first thing that comes to mind has to be the gym because that's where I spent most of my time. And still to this day 30 years later, the people I knew through athletics are still really good friends. I'm watching their kids graduate from college now. Kids I used to coach swimming, their kids are graduating from college now, so it has just been a constant theme has been my relationship with athletics has been my relationship with Smith College.

AMES: What are your favorite Smith traditions?

O'BRYANT: Ivy Day, Friday tea. I miss that because even when I started being involved with sports, I wasn't around for Friday afternoon tea as much. I love Rally Day. I love convocation. I think anything and everything where the college comes together and you see alum, students, faculty and staff altogether. The years melt away. I think any of those traditions that bring us together are the ones that I favor the most.

AMES: That's a really beautiful way of saying that. That's something I haven't heard yet and I like it a lot. So you were clearly involved in a lot of extracurriculars, so –

O'BRYANT: Probably too many.

AMES: Probably too many. So crew, swim team.

O'BRYANT: Right.

AMES: What else?

O'BRYANT: Well, I sang in a gospel choir. It was called Genesis gospel choir. I did that my first few years as a member of the black alumni student organization I think it was called Bask or BLSA or BSA. I can't even remember anymore and pretty much I was working a lot, so lifeguarded, working the equipment booth and I helped out with tournaments and that kind of thing. I volunteered with the American Red Cross locally and so just – those were some of the things I was involved with as an undergrad.

AMES: And you said that your relationship to athletics here was your relationship to the college. Can you say a little bit more about that? Can you expand on that, because that was a really fascinating thing to say.

O'BRYANT: Yeah, well it's interesting. Even when I was a member of the Alumni Association Board of Directors from 2003 to 2006 a lot of the people that were on that Board of Directors none of them had been involved in athletics at Smith College. So I was often bringing a different perspective, like what about the students or the people who are involved in – you know, into collegiate sports, and I think what it helped me – it grounded me in a sense that for me the playing field – the field was a little bit more level, like the class differences melted away through athletics for me faster than they did anywhere else on campus. So I felt comfortable. I felt more at home, and then I got to know people across all the class years, so it wasn't just, you know, with people in my class or people in my academic classes or just people in my house. So it just was nice for me to be able to get to meet people from all around campus and I didn't feel so alone as much. So maybe I was growing up a little bit, but too I was kind of getting out of that little cocoon. Even Wilson House, I lived in Wilson House, the biggest house on campus, but to me it felt really small, right?

And so getting into the big wide world of athletics just kind of made me feel a little bit more in touch with the rest of the world. I didn't feel so stuck and I think I was one of the first people to join the Friends of Athletics and we've had a couple of reunions. So Smith traditions, I don't know if people realize this, but in the world of women's intercollegiate sports, the women at Smith were really the founding mothers of intercollegiate athletics for women in this whole country. So I teach now a class called Sports and Gender. That's one of the classes I teach at Cal-Poly and it's kind of fun, because when we talk about Title IX and the history of women intercollegiate sports, I can talk about Sandra Berenson and like – and I know that, I was here, you know.

AMES: Absolutely.

O'BRYANT: And so it's an amazing tradition, not just in this country but globally the impact that Smith has had on the opportunity for girls to be athletes is just outstanding.

AMES: And while you were participating as an undergrad, were you aware of the fact that you were following such a –

O'BRYANT: No, it really hit me after I graduated, when I was in graduate school and started reading more about the history of sports and I thought, all that happened at Smith College, really? And then I think when Sandra Berenson was inducted into the basketball Hall of Fame, I think it was 1985 she was inducted and I got to participate in the reenactment of the first intramural basketball game between the class of 1895 and 1896, and we did it at Springfield Civic Center. That was a blast. Yeah.

AMES: I feel like you probably know this already but the first game of basketball was played right here.

O'BRYANT: Right here, yep.

AMES: And it's crazy to be talking to you here and think about how much has changed and how, you know, the contribution of all the women that played sports throughout the years has really solidified –

O'BRYANT: Yes.

AMES: – you know, is really important. You know Smith is really on the map as being a pioneer

O'BRYANT: Yes –

AMES: A pioneer in the field of intercollegiate athletics. Let's see how would you describe a typical Smithie during your undergrad years here?

O'BRYANT: During my undergraduate years, I think the typical Smithie – this is going to sound – okay depending where I'm at, if I'm in my res – if I'm in Wilson House, she's a little bit intoxicated, back in my first and second year. I'm just keeping it real, y'all. And – but somehow, some way pulling it together, not missing class you know, doing her thing, but that's it, you know, doing her thing. You know, the typical Smithie back then was very unique but still found something that bound us together, right, something – some common interest in wanting to be – to distinguish ourselves whatever that was, that was pretty typical of the Smith women when I was here. And if it was with my athlete buddies, it was probably just sweating and working out and just being way too busy and never studying enough, never studying enough.

AMES: But somehow making it through?

O'BRYANT: Somehow making it through.

AMES: Somehow making it through. Did you go abroad during your time at Smith?

O'BRYANT: No. I did not. I didn't do junior year study, I didn't study abroad at all and I regret that.

AMES: How did you decide not to?

O'BRYANT: It was partly because of my sports. I couldn't imagine missing a year of training and competing with the crew. I mean that was the biggest thing. I don't even think it was about the money, you know, even though that would've been a challenge, it was just I didn't want to -- as much as I disliked Smith College my first semester, I couldn't imagine being away from it.

AMES: That's a sign, definitely a sign. Were there any professors or mentors that you had during your years here that inspired you?

O'BRYANT: Lots, lots and lots and lots. So probably one of my first mentors would be Rita Benson who has since passed away. She was the advisor for the synchronized swimming club, the lifeguards. She was a professor in exercise and sport studies. So she -- you know, I took my water safety instructor class with her. And she used to do the rowing on the pond and so I sort of hung in her shadow a lot, and we used to help run the head of the Paradise Regatta, which I don't -- I don't know if they even have that anymore.

AMES: No, but I've seen someone with a T-shirt and I asked them about it because it sounded so funny, and they explained what it was.

O'BRYANT: Yeah. And so when she retired I took over -- I took over her role. I taught rowing and on the pond I ran that regatta for a few years, because after I graduated I came back for graduate school after I got my graduate degree from Smith College and I was on the faculty part time for a few years as well as doing a lot of just coaching, volunteer coaching when I could.

AMES: Excellent.

O'BRYANT: Then I guess, Freda was one, Kim Barrett is another. He still is. I mean he's my brother, so he is the head swimming and diving coach here and even to this day if I have a question or problem and I'm like, "Kim, help me. Help me." So it's some good people.

AMES: Excellent, excellent. What was your house community like?

O'BRYANT: We were -- I lived in Wilson House all four years, and in my first year the seniors pretty much took the freshman for -- we were called first year students back then,

under their wing and got us in all kinds of trouble. We were pulling all kinds of pranks, literally – I don't know if I should even tell you some of the stories right now. I don't want to, you know, have people come out and get us now. But we were wild. And I don't drink. I never did drink. But I think we just partied and danced and hung out until all hours. I was just actually saying Susan Van Dyne was my class dean, my freshman class dean.

AMES: Oh, wow.

O'BRYANT: Yep, and I had been called into her office on a couple of occasions for not focusing on my schoolwork as much as I should be, you know, being concerned about me and my academics. And I just – you know, typical 18, 19 year old, I was like yeah, whatever. You can't tell me because I know everything, right. And now I look – I saw her this morning walking over to the – for Ivy Day, and she's like, gosh, can you believe I graduated? I'm like I can't believe I graduated. And now I have my Ph.D., but you know, I have them to thank for it, and I definitely won't – I'd be remiss if I didn't thank Jill Conway. That's another story I'll tell you if I have some time. But –

AMES: Yeah, please. I'd love to hear about Jill.

O'BRYANT: Okay, so she was president when I was here and it was a struggle for me to be at Smith College. I mean it's very generous with need-based aid and work study, but even then I was not making it – making ends meet and I got to meet and get to know the college controller very well. His name was Tony Szymanski. He has since died as well. And in between my sophomore and junior year, and my senior year, I had to deal with him that he would let me register for classes if I would give him my last four or five paychecks at the end of summer. And I would go to his office and I would write on the back of my paychecks, Pay to the Order of Smith College and that's how he let me pay my tuition.

AMES: That's incredible.

O'BRYANT: And when I graduated I still had a few thousand dollar bill. I owed the college, so I didn't get my diploma. And in between my – when I graduated and – so that year, academic year 1983-84, I was trying to think, what am I going to do? I can't apply to graduate school because I can't really get my transcripts. And when I knew I was getting this financial trouble, I had gone to see the deans and everything because it was a change in the Pell grants and I just lost part of my award in '82 and never quite caught up from that. And so I was walking down campus and passed the president's house and I knocked on the door, and Jill Conway was home and she opened the door and she invited me in. And I started telling her – she was asking how things were going, and I was telling her about my life since I graduated from Smith and I was just visiting because I knew people here, you know, that was still sophomores, juniors, seniors, whatever, and I said I really want to apply to graduate school but I can't because I owe Smith College. I think it was at that time \$3,500. She paid out of her

discretionary fund my bill.

AMES: Wow, that is not something you hear about every day. That is –

O'BRYANT: Yeah, and that's the kind of generosity – you know, talk about paying it forward, and so I'm very active in the alumnae association. I mean I may not be wealthy, but by any stroke of the imagination, whether it's \$5 a year I can give, or \$50 a year, whatever it is, I know if somebody is able to do that for somebody else, what Jill was able to do for me, then that's why – you know, that's what Smith is about.

AMES: Absolutely.

O'BRYANT: The networks, so I get all misty when I think about it still.

AMES: Absolutely, we have tissues right there, if you need. Wow, that is an incredible story.

O'BRYANT: Yeah.

AMES: Were you involved in student activism of any kind during your years here?

O'BRYANT: I'm trying to remember, probably. I'm thinking – it all kind of melts in together a little bit because I think when I was an undergraduate, there really wasn't that much that we were rallying around or protesting, but then when I was in graduate school, there was – Mary Maples Dunn had become president and she was one of the first presidents to write a – with whoever teamed up with her, a plan for diversity.

AMES: Yes, absolutely.

O'BRYANT: And Smith planned – starting with Otelia Cromwell Day.

AMES: Yes.

O'BRYANT: And so when that first started coming into existence, there was a lot of backlash, and there were a lot of really horrific things happening in the houses, like people doing just really nasty mean things and writing things on people's doors.

AMES: Yeah.

O'BRYANT: So we had rallies on Chapin Lawn, you know, just sort of calling people out to sort of acknowledge the difficulty of how we figure out how to communicate with each other across and through difference, ethnic diversity, sexual diversity, gender identity, everything you know, and so now I feel so much more proud. I know still sometimes I struggle on campus, but when I was reading about the student that wanted to apply to Smith College, a high school student, a transgender student, and they admissions office turned down, wouldn't even let her apply – or him apply, I just was like, really? That goes sort of against all of what Smith is about.

AMES: Yeah.

O'BRYANT: So yeah, anything that had to do with equity and diversity and social justice, I was probably in the middle of it somewhere.

AMES: Absolutely. So we talked about this a little bit with President Dunn's plan to diversify the campus but did you see the student body and faculty diversify while you were here?

O'BRYANT: Not as much my undergrad years, actually it got less diverse. When I first came, we had many more African-American students on campus, and I think even at Wilson House we had like maybe 15 black students in the house and by the time I graduated it was only four.

AMES: Oh wow.

O'BRYANT: And so the percentage of African-American students had dropped way off in the four years that I was at college. But now, you know, being around campus today and I can see just a rainbow of colors of skin, and not just black, brown, white, but just everything in between. And all the difference in expression of gender is just so heartwarming, you know, people would still wouldn't say the L-word when I was in college, you know. There's no lesbians at Smith College. I'm like, really?

AMES: I remember President Dunn had to address that onslaught of media reports about, you know, Smith College being pegged a lesbian college. You know, by Newsweek, and by The Los Angeles Times and by NBC at one point, and she really had to fight to combat that but also give people the space to not – not deny the fact that the college was accepting to lesbians but not, you know, label it a lesbian college, and said it was a very difficult time period.

O'BRYANT: Right, so how does an administrator, the chief officer of your campus sort of help people understand that Smith College is about more than lesbians? Right? But not said in a way that silences or is disrespectful to the lesbians that are here.

AMES: Absolutely, absolutely.

O'BRYANT: Right, it's – and she – she was I think pretty good at that. I mean she didn't – she really paved the way for a lot of good change on campus.

AMES: Absolutely, absolutely. What were your experiences with dating and relationships within the context of Smith?

O'BRYANT: I didn't date when I was here. You know, I think I was still growing up a lot. You know, I had a lot of friends who were in a lot of relationships and helped them when they broke down. And celebrated when they came together and you know, women's college on the weekends. I mean we had just got to the point – I can't even

talk. I think my freshman year was the first year that our house continued – or stopped voting on when men can be in the house. So that was the big thing, when are the boys let in? And you know how often can they come and can they stay? You know it was a big debate at house meetings. I don't know what it's like now, but I think people are very actively engaged in lots of different kinds of relationships. I just was too busy sort of being miserable the first year or two, and then once I got involved with sports, I didn't really have time for it and I wasn't feeling the need to or I had no level of interest in finding any kind of intimate relationships when I was in college.

AMES: All right, well, I would love to talk about you know, all these things with you for, you know, the rest of the day. We have about five minutes left and we need to do a little bit of wrap up and talk about some things. Why did you – well, actually, who have you become since you attended Smith?

O'BRYANT: Oh, gosh. I think I've become a person who respects and loves other people for who they are. I've become a teacher, an educator and I think one of the most exciting things about teaching is instill in other people a desire to learn, not – I'm not so much concerned about what you learn in my class, and how much you can spit back to me and memorize for a test. I want to see how much you've changed or what you've experienced opens up your mind or your intellect or your soul to something beyond yourself, and if that's the gift I can give people and that's who I become, I think Smith implanted – built that seed in me to be able to do that.

AMES: Absolutely. What difference has your Smith education made in your life?

O'BRYANT: It has opened up so many doors. It has connected me with people all around the world. Even to this day, when I'm talking – I'm in California, and I'm teaching classes, 60, 70, 80 students and every once in a while when I have a chance to talk about my alma mater, in that state of Massachusetts which is thousands and thousands of miles away, I don't ever miss a chance to educate people about the wonderful place and gift that a Smith education is for the people who get the chance to come and attend here.

AMES: Absolutely, and all right. I guess we're going to close on this one last question here. Do you have any advice for current and future Smithies as a graduate?

O'BRYANT: Take your time, you know. I don't even want to say this because I don't think I have to say this, but don't be ever afraid to ask for help, reach out. You've got a great family, a network, you are part of a community of people, women and men and everybody else who is on the spectrum of gender who really loves education, learning and helping others, and if you ever need anything, you know, just look me up. You know, I love to look out for current students and connect with alums. That's the greatest thing, that family that keeps growing and growing and growing. So those – that advice is to just know you are not alone, you are part of the family of people who would always embrace you no matter who you are and where you're from. That's a

great gift that Smith has for us.

AMES: Well, thank you so much for sharing your story with us. We really – this project wouldn't be possible if alums didn't come back and you know, talk to us about their experiences. I really appreciate it.

O'BRYANT: Oh, you're welcome, my pleasure. Good to be here.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2013.