

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Elizabeth Owens, Class of 2001

Interviewed by
Millie Cook, Class of 2018

May 20, 2016

Abstract

In her interview, Lizzie Owens remembers the exploits of Capen house, full of the parties, and pranks, and an indelible community. A transfer student, Owens also focuses on her time in the history department, including a class trip to Russia. Owens also highlights the Smith alumnae network in helping to find connections and friendships in her life post-graduation.

Restriction

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Owens, Elizabeth. Interview by Millie Cook. Video recording, May 20, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Elizabeth Owens, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Alumnae Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 20, 2016, with:

ELIZABETH OWENS
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: MILLIE COOK

COOK: Yeah, last time they weren't—

OWENS: They were all day drinking, so—

COOK: They weren't funny.

OWENS: Oh—

COOK: So, it was like just kind of painfully awkward—

OWENS: Yeah.

COOK: —the whole time but like this here — it's inspirational.

OWENS: That's great.

COOK: So good, yeah, cool. So I'm Millie Cook and I'm conducting an interview with Lizzie Owens on May 20, 2016 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be part of this.

OWENS: I'm happy to do it.

COOK: So, what's been your favorite part of reunion and coming back?

OWENS: Obviously, seeing friends, seeing old places that are still so familiar but it was actually — this morning I was walking down the stairs in the Campus Center. I saw these two little old ladies having breakfast, talking to each other, and it was that. It was knowing that no matter where I am, I can always come back here and I'll find somebody I know and we can talk and talk just like it was when we were here, and that level of comfort and that sense of home here is unlike anywhere else and I love seeing it through the generations.

COOK: So, where did you grow up and what was your life like before Smith?

OWENS: I grew up in Phoenix, Arizona and I went to a boarding school so I was very familiar with the East Coast by the time I applied to college. But growing up in Phoenix was — you know, we didn't really get snow. We had our cultural heritage with our — the cowboys and the Navajo would come and do performances for us. We had sandstorms instead of snowstorms so it was a bit of an adjustment coming back East.

COOK: How was the — why did you come to Smith? Why a women's college back here?

OWENS: When I was in high school, I was talking to a friend of mine who was going to Smith and she was a senior — a junior — and she said, "Oh, I'm going to Smith," and I said, "Oh, it's a girls' school. Why would you do that?" and she said, "You need to check it out." So, sure enough, that summer I went on a college tour and we saw a bunch of schools, and my mom said that at Smith, it was like a flower opening up. I moved to the front of the line. I asked a ton of questions. I was so excited to be here. I wanted to know everything. I wanted Smith more than anything else and so it was — that's — I found Smith through Mary and haven't looked back since.

COOK: Great. What house did you live in when you were here?

OWENS: Capen. The best house. (laughs)

COOK: What was Capen like?

OWENS: We were very insular. We loved each other. We didn't really want to hang out with other people. We had a healthy competition with Talbot, Lamont, and Albright, and Baldwin. We — I think we had the reputation for a while of being a little bit of bullies and hazing and we also really enjoyed a good party, and based on what I've heard about their current ones, I think that that reputation still maintains. But we went — we went into the house the other day and the entire basement is covered in graffiti and somebody had — I guess the current students had left paint out for alums to come back and continue the tradition, which was awesome.

COOK: Did you continue it?

OWENS: Of course, and I found my original graffiti from 15 years ago, so —

COOK: That's awesome! So what did you major in?

OWENS: History.

COOK: Why did you choose history?

OWENS: When I was trying to figure out what to major in, my dad, who was a business major and went to Wharton and was a very successful businessman, he told me that I should major in what I loved. He said, “You only have this one opportunity to study something purely for the joy, and had I known that then I would have studied a history or an English or a language.” He said, “All I know is business and I really missed out.” So I thought about what I loved and, obviously, it was history. It was no choice. I always knew I was going to be a history major.

COOK: Yeah, do you have any notable professors that you think back to?

OWENS: Well, I loved my advisor, Ernest Benz. He was absolutely amazing and I’m sure still is and I had a professor of Russian history, Miss Afferica, who was a force to be reckoned with and absolutely unbelievable, and the first day I walked into her class, it was — I signed up for it just because it fit into my schedule and it was an introduction to Russian history, “A Kievan Rus’ in a Napoleonic Era,” and she said, “OK, just so you know, this is the prerequisite for the January term class, ‘The Kremlin in Moscow,’” and I said, “I’m sorry. What?” I had just transferred in and so I was really confused, and she said, “This is the prerequisite in order to go to the Kremlin in January,” and I said, “I’m sorry. I don’t speak Russian.” She said, “It doesn’t matter. This is the prerequisite. If you want to come to the Kremlin with me in January, this is the class you take.” I went home and I called my mom and I said, “This is why I transferred to Smith,” and I went to the Kremlin that January.

COOK: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

OWENS: It was — I’ve travelled a lot and it was hands-down the most amazing experience I’ve ever had. Obviously, it was January in Moscow. It was very cold and Miss Afferica had a friend who’s the head archaeologist at the Kremlin and so she was able to give us unfettered access to different places. So, we went to the place where they had taken all the Tsarinas’ bodies after they had demolished the nunnery and they were all just haphazardly placed in basically a tomb and we were there and we were able to see it, and we saw “Sophia” written in like — like chiseled into a stone, and it was Sophia Paleologue, who was the mother of Ivan the Terrible, and we could their remnants. You could see where they were.

We went to a monastery two hours outside of Moscow and it was very dirty. Those men truly lived in poverty because that was what they believed, and we went to the church that was there and they didn’t have lights. It was just illuminated with candles and you could see just a little bit of sun coming through and you’d watch these old women with their babushkas, kneeling down and crying and praying to the icons. It was so phenomenal. It was just absolutely amazing and I never would have

gotten that experience without Miss Afferica. I also would never have gotten a chance to show some eight-year old Russian boys what it was actually like to sled down the hill at the Kremlin, so – (laughs)

COOK: That's wonderful. What was like just a couple — like was it even 10 years after the Wall came down?

OWENS: Yeah, it was in 1999. So it was — you could still very much tell like this was where they wanted Americans to see and what they wanted us to visit, and then if you kind of looked around the corner, you could see what was really going on.

COOK: Yeah.

OWENS: We were told we were not allowed to leave the hotel at night because none of us spoke Russian and it wasn't really a safe city for a bunch of 20-year old American women to be wandering around without any idea of where to go and what to do. There were some particularly amusing Russian things that we ran into, like the man pushing — instead of hot dogs, it was the vodka cart, (laughter) the vast amounts of the hats, which were very expensive. I was very disappointed. I wanted a beaver hat but, yeah, it was great, and I remember sitting and taking the class with the head archaeologist and she said, OK, now you can ask me any question you want. It doesn't have to be about what we've been talking about. And so somebody raised their hand and said, So do you think Anna Anderson — this woman who spoke no Russian — it was like, Nyet, it was not her. (laughs) She knew exactly what the question was. She was like, The Romanovs were buried. Anna Anderson was not her. But it was (laughs) pretty amusing that she just shut it down before the question even got out.

COOK: That's great.

OWENS: And we were warned many times in the room that we were in in the Kremlin not to talk about certain things because the room was bugged.

COOK: Wow!

OWENS: Yeah, and it turned out that part of the reason we were taking the trip was so that Miss Afferica could bring back paintings from a friend of hers that otherwise would not have made it to the United States, and then there was an exhibit of it. It was after I graduated so it must have been the fall of 2001 or 2002 in New York. I didn't get a chance to go but it looked like her plan worked.

COOK: Good, and did that trip color the rest of your Smith experience?

OWENS: Yeah, I mean, it was — it solidified my desire to study Russian history and I signed up for every class Miss Afferica offered, much to my detriment because she was — she was very much a task master and I remember once she came back from subbing for a teacher in Amherst and she said, “Those boys don’t know anything. I’m so glad we’re back here with you ladies.” (laughs) I mean, that trip just absolutely solidified my desire to stay in history and continue studying history. I think had there been more Russian history classes, I probably would have taken them as well, yeah.

COOK: Yeah. So cool. (laughs) So, a little bit jumping tracks. Were you active in any orgs on campus?

OWENS: I was. I played rugby for, I think, a year, maybe two. As a transfer, I didn’t really know where to jump in but I — one of the first people I met at Smith was like, You should join the Rugby Club. So I did — a great idea — and then I was involved in the house. The house — what is it? HP and—

COOK: House Government?

OWENS: House Government. I was like the House JB [Judicial Board]; things like that. I was the fire marshal in our house, which was a big thing back then. It was also why we got in trouble for hazing so— (laughs)

COOK: Oh, my! And so what did you guys do for fun?

OWENS: We had Tuesday night dance parties in the hallway. We just really — it sounds so silly but we just spent time with each other. We’d go down to Liquors 44. We’d pick up some stuff and we would just hang out, and have fun, and laugh, and dance, and sing, and do it all again the next day. But, yeah, we probably should have taken more advantage of everything that the Pioneer Valley has to offer but when we were having so much fun with ourselves, why go out? So —

COOK: Did you meet your friends anywhere other than the house or was it mostly your group was there at the house?

OWENS: My group was at the house. What’s funny is that now that I’m a few years out, 15, I have reconnected with people that I took classes with or happened to — also happened to be a Smithie and my friend I was referring to before who I was like, Are you a Smithereen or a Smithenpoof? She’s a Class of 2006. We didn’t overlap at all but she’s a very good friend of mine. Another woman who is also a 2001 — she and I are both in DC now. We hang out together all the time. We’re in the same book club together. We were friendly. We knew each other but we weren’t very close. I’ve become friends with — I’m a Smith Fund

volunteer for our class — I've become very good friends with the other Smith Fund volunteers. So, it's funny how it all works out that way.

COOK: Yeah, that Smith family keeps going.

OWENS: Yeah.

COOK: Did you have a favorite place on campus?

OWENS: Capen Gardens.

COOK: Yeah?

OWENS: Yeah, it was always beautiful. It was our secret place because nobody wanted to walk that far (laughs) and we had our gazebo. In the springtime, we would run a slip and slide through it, much to the gardener's chagrin that we were doing that but also probable delight that there were a bunch of 20-year old college students doing slip and slides in our bathing suits with margaritas in one hand and daiquiris in the other. (laughs) So, yeah, I — every time I come back to campus, I have to go visit the gardens, yeah.

COOK: Yeah. What were students concerned with at the time; like what political issues would people talk about?

OWENS: I was very apolitical. I was not involved at all. I found the level of political activity at Smith to be kind of overwhelming and so I protested protests by not protesting.

COOK: OK.

OWENS: But, I mean, I didn't really become very politically aware until I was out of college. I honestly couldn't tell you. I know people protested meat. People protested vegans. People — it was just — there were a lot of protests about a lot of things.

COOK: Yeah, and you protested protests.

OWENS: I did.

COOK: (laughs) Were you romantically involved with anyone during your time at Smith?

OWENS: For a long period of time or — (laughs) no, no, no. I was sowing my oats, as it were.

COOK: Very cool. Do you have any favorite Smith traditions?

OWENS: Favorite – well, the Friday afternoon tea. I loved that, being able to sit down and connect with people after a long week. At the time, we sat in our common room and watched *Total Request Live, TRL*, with Britney Spears doing “Hit Me Baby, One More Time,” and now there is the online Smith, “Smithies in a Cloud,” and there are almost 10,000 members worldwide, and every Friday we take a picture of what we’re drinking (laughs) and talk about our best of the week and the worst of the week, just like we did then. So it’s an amazing tradition.

COOK: That’s really great, and how has the Smith community helped you in your time past Smith?

OWENS: Well, with just finding jobs, the Smith Alumni Network is unparalleled. It’s — you say, I’m a Smithie, and somebody will say, Oh, you — I know someone else who’s a Smithie. Let me try and find her so I can help you. That has been incredible. I went to grad school in England and was able to connect with the Smith Club of Europe there and went to like a two-day conference. I’ve met speakers who went to Smith and I introduced myself at the end and there is always that connection there. I’ve been involved in the Smith Club of Washington, DC for 11 years in some respect and just being able to have that community wherever I go, knowing that they’re going to be there and being able to rely on them in whatever way has just helped me throughout life, whether it’s being able to call somebody up after I had my first baby and say, I need help. Can you come? and have them come running. It’s a strong connection and it’s helped me in basically every path.

COOK: So what has your life been like since you graduated?

OWENS: Well, I’ve gotten more politically active. That’s for sure. I am now — I’m 37 so, God, I’m 37. It’s — I’m a mom of two, two little girls, future Smithies, I hope. My — I’m happily married. We live in the suburbs of DC, which sounds really pat and typical, which is not ever what I thought I would end up with but it’s been an interesting journey. I moved to New York City in September of 2001, which was an, obviously, tough time to move there, was there for about two years, went to grad school in England and came to DC and got into my line of work, which is fundraising and development, and I started at the National Organization for Women; always a Smith connection.

COOK: Yeah.

OWENS: So I’m not there anymore and now am a fundraiser for an independent school. But what Smith did hone with me when I was an undergraduate was that even though I was not very politically active, I saw how people could actually get things done and so now I volunteer with a very small nonprofit that provides diverse to low-income families so it warms my soul.

COOK: Yeah, that's good. Do you have any favorite Smith memories, like favorite time with your friends that you remember having?

OWENS: Yeah, it's funny coming back and walking around, it's almost like all the memories just come flooding back. I don't know if I could really come up with one, one specific time that was the best. It was all sorts of things. I was talking to a friend of mine last night and she said something about having drunk too much and I said, "Well, at least I don't have to spend my birthday at Cooley Dick [Dickinson] again with you," because on my 20th birthday, she had to go to the hospital, which is really — I mean, it's terrible. She shouldn't have drunk that much, whatever, but it's a fond memory because she was totally fine and was just being completely ridiculous. But it was a lot of fun singing.

We — I lived in Capen, which was across from Talbot, which hosted Immorality, and we came up with the great idea to have a cocktail party beforehand and I had invited, I think, two friends from high school and it turned into seven, all men, who had heard about Immorality and they had to come, (laughs) and so we all got dressed and I gave them all my extension on their arms in Sharpie so that they wouldn't — they would always know how to call me, and I put it there because otherwise it would get washed off, and then I gave them all condoms because I said, "You have to be safe," and then we went out, and we were in our house, and we were having people just pouring in. We could not keep them out. One of Campus Safety came over to try to stop the party and she saw — I had a previous relationship with her — so she was like, OK, just try to keep it down a little bit. OK, we can do that, and then we tried — Immorality opened and I got shut down shortly thereafter. I think that was the year the water pipes broke from people trying to get in through the basement, and then they all tried to come back out, and the seven men that I had invited were there bouncing at the door to make sure that nobody who wasn't a Capen-ite could get in. So I saved the day.

We also — my senior year we had a terrible time with our fire alarm. We — it would either go off or we would do something stupid like, It's somebody's birthday. Let's light sparklers underneath the smoke detector. The fire alarm would go off. Then, it became a running joke and we used to — then we'd start pulling it and go outside. We'd do a little dance. We had fun. We would hug the firefighters and so now every time I hear a fire alarm go off, I think of Britney Spears because that was what we did.

COOK: (laughter) Just to wrap up, do you have any advice for current Smithies?

OWENS: God, take advantage of everything this amazing place has to offer. Come to the archives. Spend some time just sitting and looking at Paradise Pond. Go for walks. Take classes you don't even think that you could possibly be interested in. Join a club that you don't know anybody

else who's in. Go to lectures at UMass and Amherst because you never know what you're going to find out. This place is so amazing. Go to the Lazarus Center. Connect with the CDO [Career Development Organization?] and I am a fundraiser so I have to say don't forget to give to the Smith Fund. But just, God, take advantage of it. You're so lucky. You've no idea how lucky you are. This is such an amazing place. You will carry it with you forever.

COOK: Thank you so much.

OWENS: Thank you. I'm sorry. (laughs)

COOK: Good job.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June 2016.