

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Katharine Panfil, Class of 1964

Interviewed by
Julia Greider, Class of 2016

May 16, 2014

Abstract

Kathie Panfil begins her interview by recalling her time living in Albright and some of the house traditions in which she participated. She talks about the challenges of coming from a less prestigious high school than other Smithies. She discusses the student reactions to George Wallace coming to speak, as well as the overall revision of her political views that she went through while at Smith. Next, she remembers the assassination of JFK. She discusses her experience of the rules and regulations that the college placed on social life. Moving on to academics, Panfil brings up the importance of having enough focus in one's major and the influence of Dean Robinton. Finally, she recalls the expectation that she would get married right after college rather than start a career, and the extent to which she did and did not fulfill this expectation.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Kristofer Jensen, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Panfil, Katharine. Interview by Julia Greider. Video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Katharine Panfil, interview by Julia Greider, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Panfil, Katharine. Interview by Julia Greider. Transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Katharine Panfil, interview by Julia Greider, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 16, 2014, with:

KATHARINE PANFIL
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: JULIA GREIDER

PANFIL: All right, when you're ready.

GREIDER: OK. This is Julia Greider, and I'm conducting an interview with Kathie Panfil, Class of 1964, on May 16th, 2014 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this.

PANFIL: Glad to do it.

GREIDER: So just starting off, tell me how you ended up coming to Smith.

PANFIL: I was a scholarship student, and I was looking for money. And I know that when my own children were going to college, and as I've listened to other ones today, this is not such a big factor. But back then, if you were looking for funding for college, it was a wise thing as a woman to look at the women's colleges. So it was a very cold-blooded decision. It wasn't one where I was deciding that I'd prefer to be educated in a woman's world. However, I realize now that it was indeed a good decision for me, because I had gone to a private school that was only women. I had one sister, and I really didn't know a whole lot about interacting in a world that included women and men.

GREIDER: So what house did you live in?

PANFIL: I was in Albright.

GREIDER: OK. And tell me a little bit about the house community.

PANFIL: Well, Albright was a community that had a lot of traditions. I hope that's true of other houses as well, but as I remember it, I particularly remember playing bridge in the living room on Friday afternoons. I remember reading the *New York Times*, and waiting for the *New Yorker* to arrive. I remember tea on Fridays. That was a focal point of the week. And of course, having asparagus in the dining room, that was a big treat to me. (laughter) Fresh asparagus from Asparagus Valley. And I recall that one year, my junior year, I was the house person in charge of

making things special for freshmen. And I remember that with particular warmth, because that was fun.

GREIDER: Do you have a favorite tradition? Either a Smith tradition or a house tradition?

PANFIL: Probably my favorite house tradition was when the wreath, you know, and the candles, I'm trying to — at the minute, I'm not recalling the name of — who was the Swedish saint who's commemorated? And when the young girl walks around carrying the crown with the candles? But I do remember that as very lovely. And if you didn't know about that and you were a freshman, and you were awakened by people singing, and then by the girl with the candles on her head, of course that was magical.

GREIDER: Was that a Smith tradition? Or was it just in Albright?

PANFIL: I knew it was Albright. But perhaps it was other places at Smith.

GREIDER: OK. So do you feel like your house community experience affected your overall Smith experience?

PANFIL: I feel it was critical, because it was much more likely that I would spend time with people from the Albright House. And now, since I'm being housed up at Laura Scales, I realize that I really didn't go into the quad except, you know, a very handful of times. It was not likely that I would be there. And of course, the fact that Albright was — the path from Albright into what was now called the Central Campus was a short one meant that life pretty much was on that axis.

GREIDER: How would you describe a typical Smithie when you were here?

PANFIL: Well, first of all, I recall a longing for what I regarded as typical Smith garb, which would have been a cable-knit sweater. It would have been a shirt with a circle pin, which usually had initials. And the general — of course, we wore skirts a lot, and that it was a time when, you know, girls did that. (laughter) And I recall thinking that those students also had a much better education in terms of writing than I did. I was aware that they had written essays. I felt a divide between my educational experience and theirs, even though I had been in a private school in the Philadelphia area where I was also a scholarship student. But I was not in the kind of school where everybody was going to go to a selective university. It was a place where many of my classmates went on to two-year colleges. So it was easy to be the top of that group. And when I got here, I was very aware, particularly of the deficit that I had in writing.

GREIDER: Did you feel you had — there were class differences between you and other students?

PANFIL: Yes and no. Because my — and I work a lot now in retirement with students who are going — who are coming out of the immigrant community, and are going to college, and who are the first one in their family to go to college in the United States. But that term in the United States is very important, because those whose parents only had a third or fifth-grade education back home in Bolivia or wherever it was are facing a much greater challenge than the ones whose parents had a lot of education back home in Peru, or, you know, whatever is their home ground.

And I identify with that. My family had been a family with many college degrees and professional backgrounds until the Great Depression. And of course, that was not that long prior to when I and my classmates were entering college. So, you know, we're looking at one generation difference. And because my family had that background, there was the expectation that I would go to college. And there was an understanding of the kinds of support that I would need once I got there. On the other hand, I had friends at Smith who were also with the same financial divide that I faced who didn't have that kind of support and background at home. And it was an easy decision for those families to say, "Why are you trying to do this? You know, there's another kind of life that you could go after."

GREIDER: So let's talk about the social life a little bit. How would you describe the social scene at Smith when you were here?

PANFIL: Well, to me, it was wonderful, although I came with a boyfriend. I mean, I had a boyfriend whom I have now spent the last fifty years married to. So I always had one foot in that relationship. But to me, the opportunity, we had mixers, which was where I did in fact meet some people who went to local colleges. And so I had a bit of an experience dating individuals whom I met at these mixers. And that was a good thing, even though, in the end, I ended up marrying the one that I knew as I walked in the door. (laughter)

GREIDER: What about the social life with other Smithies? Did you have parties with other Smithies and stuff like that?

PANFIL: I don't particularly remember that. I recall my big sister was a wonderful resource. She was a junior and I was a freshman. And I remember partying some with my big sister and her friends. But that was because she sort of adopted me and, you know, pulled me into her group of friends.

GREIDER: So were you involved in any sort of student activism on campus? Or was there much going on at that point that you were aware of?

PANFIL: Well, some of us were talking at lunch about what we had done and how we reacted when Wallace — perhaps you've heard this from others — when Wallace was invited to speak at Smith. And I remember that in terms of sort of a coming of age for a lot of us about what were we going to do? And I remember that there some people who simply withdrew from it. And my guess is that perhaps in their later lives, they weren't terribly involved in social action, activist kinds of things. And then there were some of us for whom it was a great crisis of conscience as to what we would do. So some of us wore black armbands, and we stood outside. And I remember that the rationale for that was that we thought that freedom of speech should be a value that was strong at Smith, but that by that time, we'd read enough and we knew enough about what he had to say that we didn't feel that we personally needed to hear it another time, and we didn't feel that it was valid. But there were some people who were actually going to block his way. So that, of course, would have been the position that says his position is so morally invalid that we don't think that he should be speaking here. And of course, we've just seen a little bit of that (laughter) relived in the current discussion. And then of course, there were those who went and attended, and did or did not wear armbands. And, you know, there were various shades of thinking about it.

I remember being very attracted to a group, SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], which was the group that was involved in sit-ins and activism, fighting segregation. I wasn't involved in that. Now, I recall that coming from my own family, who were quite politically conservative, to Smith meant that I was often forced to ask questions of values that were the common, were the standard values in the community and the family that I came from. And by the time I left Smith, I was certainly far to the left of where I had been when I got here.

And in my experiences at Smith, I recall particularly that I wanted to go to the March on Washington, where I would have heard the "I have a Dream" speech. And that, of course, was 1963. And I did not go, because it was in the summer, so I had no one around me who would have gone with me. I would have gone alone. Although I almost did it, I didn't do it. And because I missed that, my poor kids — I live outside of Washington now — my own poor children got dragged along with me. (laughter) When I went to event after event where I felt that I was not going to miss this time. And I wanted them also to have the choice as they got bigger to understand that there were — we would respect them, but that it was OK to cross that line.

GREIDER: So in researching your class, we came across a lot of mentions of the National Student Association. Was that — do you remember that being—

PANFIL: No I don't. Yeah. Right. OK. Unless you could give me some clue about what —

GREIDER: It just seemed to be a group that — it was a national group that represented, or meant to represent the political opinions of students all over the country. And it seemed like — I don't know, it turned up in the *Sophian* a lot. But it's fine if you don't remember it.

PANFIL: OK. No, I don't. (laughter)

GREIDER: (laughter) So how did the campus react to JFK's assassination?

PANFIL: I just right now passed the steps of the library. And I remember that I was in the library, and I heard the bells ringing. And so I knew something, some big deal had just happened. And I came out on the steps. And so having passed right now the step where I stood, I was remembering that, you know, that's what happened. Everybody came out of the buildings, and they stood in the center part of the campus. And then after that, I remember going back to Albright House where we had a television in this one little room. And of course, we were all stuffed in there watching the television. And I recall the tears, and, you know — but I can't remember, is I don't remember whether there was any action that was generated from that. I just remember that it was like losing your innocence. It was a sense of now that this has happened, all our suppositions about what life is like in America are up for grabs.

GREIDER: How did — OK, going back to the social life, how did the rules and regulations that Smith had affect your social life?

PANFIL: Well, especially since, you know, my husband and I are moving furniture around so we can sleep in the same room fifty years later, was reminding us that on a weeknight, of course, we had to be there by 10:30, as I remember. And if you were late, you know, it was disaster. So I think you could be one or two — perhaps I was a minute or two late, but, you know, I don't remember ever hitting the big leagues there on what happened if you were late many times, or you were late more than a certain number of minutes. But of course, the society that we lived in was so much different from the society now that, to me, it never seemed outrageous. It just seemed very inconvenient that I had to be back by then. So I don't know, I mean, I think that the — I recall that, you know, men, of course, were almost never — there were a few occasions when they were above the first floor.

But I mean, I can't recall that as being — you're asking about the social relationships. This is a little different. I can recall one day that we had a room that was called the smoker, which was the room where people — only place that people could smoke cigarettes. And I didn't smoke, but it was also sometimes the quietest place to sit. And I was sitting with a typewriter, because of course, there was no computers. And I was typing a paper. And there was an unspoken regulation there that you would leave the smoker if somebody came in with a date and

wanted that room. But I was oblivious because I was, you know, focused on what I was doing. And I remember these hands reaching down from sort of behind me and lifting up my computer, and realizing that the man was black — young man was black who was picking up the computer and moving me into the other room. And going like this, you know, being — it was so unaccustomed. Such a thing I'd never seen before. And of course, a lot has happened in fifty years. We've got a long way to go still, but we've certainly — I don't think any Smith student would be shocked now to see the arms in front of them of a different color.

GREIDER: So were there just not very many black men on campus? Or black people in general?

PANFIL: Yes, that's true. Both of those things are true.

GREIDER: So what kinds of clubs or organizations or sports were you involved in?

PANFIL: Well, I was not a very sportsy person, so I took my required PE classes, which were required, as I'm sure you know. But I didn't participate in any other sports. And clubs, I remember there was something called the International Club, and I participated in that because I got to meet foreign students from other countries. And that was attractive to me, even though I'd never been more than a short distance away from home. And as it turned out later, I did spend a lot of my life in other countries. But that is something that, you know, I was being introduced to the idea through that club. And then I was active in my house. I mentioned that role. I don't remember what we called it. You know, coordinating activities for the freshmen. And then, because I was always trying to make a little money, (laughter) so there was — we invented something called the Philadelphia Bus, which was chartering a bus and selling the seats. And then of course, sometimes we'd make a lot of money on that, and sometimes not. But that did take time. Those are the main things that occurred to me.

GREIDER: So do you have any — do you remember a specific academic experience that had a really big effect on you?

PANFIL: Well, one thing that — I'll think of a negative and a positive. All right? A negative would be that I was an American history major. I was always interested in too darn many things. And I needed focus. And unfortunately, being an American history — I mean, American Studies major was perfect for somebody like me, in that it let me take courses in any old department I wanted, as long as America was in the title. And that meant it made it hard to learn a discipline. So consequently, now when I hear of people that are taking these broad-ranging majors, I think to myself I hope that that person has enough grounding in a discipline to be able to know the tools of the trade of whatever that is. A good one

that I had was therefore, I walked into a biology class that was, like, I don't know, Biology 312 or something. It was about health issues. And it was taught by the dean that we all remember, Ms. Robinson, so well because of her humanity. And so instead of me feeling like I haven't got a clue about what the basic building blocks are of writing a paper in this field, or, you know, (laughter) whatever it was, she gently guided me to be able to draw on what's something that I did know about, and make it work in that class.

GREIDER: So do you want to talk a little bit about her, Ms. Robinson? Was she an influential figure?

PANFIL: Well, she was influential only in that she did tea— rather than to teach big lectures, I don't recall her doing that. I recall her only teaching these small, seminar kinds of things, so that perhaps there'd only be 10 students in her class. And of course, that's an amazing way to be able to take a class. And she — unlike — since I spent a lot of my life in education, I'm particularly upset that there's a strong emphasis right now on, Boy, we know the way to do it. And you'd better do it the right way. Now, on the other hand, there's the way where you listen to who your students are. And I think that's what we all remember, that she listened, and she respected. And I think that kind of openness to the possibilities of what a student can bring is a gift.

GREIDER: So what do you feel was expected of you after you graduated?

PANFIL: Well, I joined the Peace Corps, which got me into another world. But I also got married. I certainly felt that most people at twenty-two should be thinking about marriage. (laughter) Now, I think it's a very good thing. I'm sure my peers think that too, that the idea of having more time to be who you are is a very good idea. But I knew many of my friends from home were already married by the time I was graduating from college. And so many of us were married — including me — were married the week of graduation. We'd done it. We'd graduated first. And the next thing was to get married. I also did not ever sense that I was expected to have a career. I always understood that it was important for me to have an education, because my children and my husband needed me to be educated, and I also would benefit from it, you know, that I'd be able to live my life in a fuller way. But I never expected that I would actually be professional anything.

GREIDER: So what have you done with your Smith education?

PANFIL: So, well, in my life then, I ended up working for the public school system in Arlington, and I was a principal of schools. I went into schools where the students were low income, multiethnic. And I have a Ph.D., which is in second language acquisition. That was always what was interesting to me. How do we do it? You know, how do we enable

these students to make it in this country? And we spent — my husband is an economist, and we spent many years living — my children were born abroad, one in Guatemala one in El Salvador. One, I went back to the United States to give birth to, but we were living in Argentina. And later, we lived in Tanzania. And some years later than that, we were in Australia. So in all those places, I found students who were speaking a second language, going to school. And the idea of second language acquisition and how different it is, the expectations are so different in different places. It continues to intrigue me.

GREIDER: So do you have any favorite memories or stories from your time at Smith?

PANFIL: Well, as I'm looking at — I mean, I'd say my favorite memories have to do with sort of, in my mind now, they're more like postcards. So for instance, skating on Paradise Pond. That's certainly a memory that is one that I think of as I walk around there. I remember going to hear music, or lectures about things that I knew nothing about. I probably spent too much time doing that. Because again, that's where I'm apt to be interested in too many things, so I don't have much of a grounding. But this was a wonderful place for me to be able to find open doors into new interests that I hadn't known about before.

GREIDER: So beginning to wrap things up. Do you have any advice for any current or future Smithies?

PANFIL: Well, one nuts-and-bolts thing that I like to mention is that the issue of the student loans — and I don't know what's happening to that whole thing here. I know it happens back in the Washington, D.C., area. I had a student loan, because I took so much Russian, I was having trouble with it.

GEIS [videographer]: Could you — you're touching your microphone.

PANFIL: Oh, I'm so sorry. (laughter)

GEIS: That's OK. Could you just — will you start that idea one more time?

PANFIL: Yes, of course.

CREW: OK, thank you.

PANFIL: Yeah. I'm remembering the importance that student loans had for me, but how different their use is today compared to the very beginnings. I think student loans were just beginning when my class was at Smith. I don't remember ever thinking that I would make a decision about where I would go to college based on the fact that I would take student loans. What happened was I was here. I had scholarships to cover everything. I

persisted in taking Russian. I got a C when I had to have a B in order to keep the scholarship. I knew that that was risky at the time that I did it. But I did also know that I could borrow the money if I lost the scholarship. So that enabled me to take a risk. I can't tell you that taking Russian turned out to be life-changing or even valuable. (laughter) But the student loan was a way to free me from the constraint of only taking things where I knew I'd get a good grade. Different from the students I work with now, where many times they're borrowing money in such huge amounts that I know that for the next twenty years, they'll be paying off these debts. And so I don't know this, but I'm hoping that students, Smith students today, are being counseled, and having the good sense to keep that burden one that they don't undertake.

GREIDER: All right. Well, do you have any other things that seem big to you from your Smith experience that we haven't touched on that you'd like to talk about?

PANFIL: I also hope that Smith students are able to keep more in communication with each other. And I think that they can, because of the electronics. The media is going to be very powerful in their futures, and I hope they can actually follow that path. (laughter)

GREIDER: All right. Well, thank you so much for doing this interview today.

PANFIL: OK. Well, you're more than welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Kristofer Jenson, June 2014