

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

KP Perkins, Class of 1985

Interviewed by
Rachel Dean, Class of 2013

May 14, 2010

Abstract

In this oral history, KP Perkins discusses why she decided to attend Smith, her involvement in extracurricular activities (including student activism), and her work as an Afro-American studies and French double major. She also describes the general campus atmosphere, particularly in regards to race, and her opinion of President Conway.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Kris Anne Hormann 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: Perkins, KP. Interview by Rachel Dean. Video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** KP Perkins, interview by Rachel Dean, video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Perkins, KP. Interview by Rachel Dean. Transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** KP Perkins, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2010, with:

KP PERKINS

by: RACHEL DEAN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

PERKINS: Just trying to stay awake now. It's like, No, it's not moving (unclear).

DEAN: Ok. This is Rachel Dean and I am conducting an interview with K. P. Perkins on May 14, 2010, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be present.

PERKINS: My pleasure, thanks.

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

PERKINS: For me. Yeah, that's an interesting question because initially I wasn't interested in going to a girl's school (laughs) and my brother encouraged me to apply and I said that to him, I said, I don't want to go to a girl's school, and he said, well, who said that you're going to get in? I said, well that's true. I can apply. And for me, I thought it would be isolating, you know, not having –m I'd always grown up in a coed environment, I don't have sisters, I had brothers, and so I thought it would be weird. And it was actually really empowering to get a sense of myself as a woman, and what that meant, because I came to school very much thinking of myself as a girl and actually had arguments with people, no, I'm not a woman, I'm a girl, and what that meant. And just seeing how empowering it was for women, and growing and discovering a side of myself that I didn't necessarily know that well, so that was invaluable and I was really glad that when a lot of other schools went coed in the '80s, I think it was, that Smith wasn't one of them, and I would have never thought I would have been this die hard. Well, you know, because it was good, it was really great.

DEAN: What were the reactions you received from your family and your peers about going to Smith?

PERKINS: Yeah, they were very positive. It had a high reputation and so I knew it was a quality school, and I was looking for that in terms of the caliber of

education so I knew I wasn't going to go wrong with it, and everybody was supportive.

DEAN: Were the older women in your family college graduates (unclear)?

PERKINS: No. I think I — my mother never went to college, my grandmothers didn't go to college. Some of my cousins did, but, yeah, in my immediate family I was the first woman.

DEAN: How did that influence you?

PERKINS: I think it was great, just because I love learning and that was something I needed to do as a person, but also just because I was exposed to so many things and had opportunities that I would not — (clears throat) excuse me, have had if I didn't go away to school. And it was also important to go away. (background noise) Sorry. That's my phone.

DEAN: That's okay.

PERKINS: (laughs) Sorry.

DEAN: So how did — (background noise)

PERKINS: Can I? Sorry. That's my dad's voice, I'm like, how am I hearing him? That's too weird. That's too weird. I just put his voice on there as a call thing, and I've never had it there before. So I was like, my dad is in here? Turn that off. (background noise) Oh, okay. Great. (background noise) Oh, hopefully turn that — (background noise) off. Oh, I'm feeling the lights or something, or a personal heat flash, so when I wash that off I'll put this back, okay? Sorry.

DEAN: So how did Smith live up to your expectations, or your hopes and fears?

PERKINS: Ah, good one. I think my fears were perhaps that I wasn't going to be able to compete with people who were coming from very rare privileged backgrounds, and had gone to the best prep schools and boarding schools and all that. And that was not true. So that was nice (laughs) that I didn't have to worry about that. It lived up to my expectations in that I knew if I went to a good school, I'd have opportunities afterwards, and that definitely was true. And, hopes — I'd hoped that with a, with a college education, because, again, my brother was saying, it's really important to pick a good school because then you — it just opens doors and it really did in ways I didn't expect — (Sneezes)

DEAN: Bless you.

PERKINS: Excuse me. — just even in terms of the name that people would be like, oh, you went to Smith and and and that can be good and bad, because I think there's automatic assumptions about, oh, how brilliant you must be, and okay, yeah, but I, just — people making assumptions has never really made me comfortable but — even Smith people do make assumptions about you that you're — you have a certain level of an intellect and all that so that was good. Yeah.

DEAN: What clubs and organizations and/or teams were you involved in, and how did that shape your Smith experience?

PERKINS: (laughs) I'm laughing, because I was just talking about this last night and I think my sophomore year I was in like 12 extracurricular activities first semester, and 10 second. It might have been freshman year. I dove into everything. I wanted to do everything. But I didn't do everything simultaneously, so I was a DJ and that was on the weekends; I was in Celebrations, the dance group; I was in the Bridge program; I was in the Film Club; I was in plays; so, I got a well-rounded experience, and got to experience different sides of Smith and meet a lot of different people that I wouldn't have met had I just stayed with my major, or stayed with my house, or whatever. So that was great, getting exposed to possibilities and things that I didn't know were out there, and discovering more about what I was interested in.

DEAN: What house were you in, and how did your house community play into your overall college experience?

PERKINS: As a freshman, I was assigned to Baldwin House on Bedford Terrace and that was a senior house pretty much and that was a lot of upper classmen and on my floor only, I think, five freshmen, and we all kind of got to know each other really quickly. And then I moved my sophomore year across the street to Dawes, the French House, and one of the reasons was I wanted a smaller house plus at that time, pretty much, all the rooms had their own bathrooms and that was a huge pull, I was like, yes! So I moved across the street to Dawes and then I went on the Junior Year Abroad program and then my senior year I came back and was Head Resident of Dawes, so, that was important in terms of the whole French bit and — and just having a little community, it was a smaller house, I think about 19 people, which I really liked.

DEAN: Were you involved with any activism at Smith?

PERKINS: I actually was awarded — I found this the other day — the first SOAR, I don't know if they're still giving it — it was the Student Organizing Against Racism prize and I wasn't expecting that, it came — it didn't exist before, so that was a surprise to me, but that, I guess, would be a

manifestation of a level of activism. There were all kind of things going on at the time. But I was interested in issues around equity for women of color, people of color, and I don't really remember anything else dramatic, but sort of generally I was an Afro-Am and French major, so that kind of tied in with my interests in African American studies and people of color and equity issues. And being at Smith, a place for women, that had always been important to me.

DEAN: So, did you see any issues and how did you see the general atmosphere at Smith and see any issues in racial tension or religion or class or gender?

PERKINS: I came in the '80s, I was a freshman in '81 and I participated in the Bridge Program which I think still exists, but when I — when I came there, it was the last year that it was just for African American students and so I was a participant and it was all African American, and then the next year I worked Bridge, and it was for women of color across the board. Those kind of issues were still of concern in terms of retention and people leaving or not feeling that they really were not either accepted or fully welcomed to the community, and I think that, for myself, having participated in that, that was never an issue. I think it was harder for some women who didn't participate in it, and they maybe had a harder time adjusting socially in some instances, not in every case, but that was still a factor then. And so it was interesting to me last night to meet some of the younger women of color and ask them what their experiences are like, and even in terms of numbers, it's very encouraging to see that there are greater numbers of women of color on the campus than in my time. So, it had improved in the '80s from what it had been when they first instituted Bridge, but it's nice to see that it's continuing to improve.

DEAN: So you said there were instances. Like what specific problems were on campus during your time here?

PERKINS: I think it was more about, in general, Ivy League schools or, or class — places that were not traditionally having a large population of color. Sometimes people could feel socially ostracized; not ostracized, but maybe not welcomed or not fully accepted or made to be a part of activities or information or aware of information about what was going on as much. I think prior to my time that that was more of an issue; it still existed in my time, as well, but I — some of that might be class, some of that might be people are coming from similar backgrounds so they tend to stay with people that they're comfortable with or have known already, so some of that's just human nature, but it can play out along race and class lines, and I think that that's what Bridge was designed to — to address and sort of reduce those types of barriers, those kind of artificial barriers, and give people an opportunity to get to know each other and feel connected to the community, to the town as well as to the institution. And that really

was positive for us, so we felt like Northampton was also our town and we belonged here, and knew our way around it and the five-college valley, and everything, so I personally appreciated that a lot.

DEAN: You said you spent your junior year abroad, where did you go and how did that influence you?

PERKINS: Yeah, I wanted to — I was, as I said, a double major in French and Afro-American studies and I had hoped to along with another friend of mine who had the same double major, we wanted to go to Senegal to tie our two majors together, but at that time Smith didn't have any programs to Africa. So we looked at other schools that did, because we would have had to go through another school, and we found one but we weren't accepted for financial aid so we couldn't afford to go. So we both went to France instead and became roommates in France. And that was a really positive experience; it was disappointing in the sense that I couldn't as overtly tie my two majors together, but it was a good opportunity — I took Afro American studies courses at the Sorbonne, so that was really fun to be in a French class and reading Toni Morrison and, and people looking at us and asking, oh, is that really what it was like?, and it was kind of an interesting perspective to be inter— to be reacting with students on. And I think just generally the fact that I went away and having to live in another country, my — all four of my grandparents were immigrants to the U.S. so that was an interesting reverse experience to go to another country and study and experience what it's like day-to-day to speak in a language that's not your native tongue, and that was fabulous. So it gave me a desire to do more of that, and I have continued to travel, and work abroad, and live abroad and, yeah.

DEAN: Did you do the Smith program in (unclear) in Paris?

PERKINS: Yeah.

DEAN: Okay. And how was it coming back, how did you react to coming back to Smith?

PERKINS: To Smith, the senior year? I think in a way there's always that tension between you want to go away junior year but then you wanted to be here for the four years, so in a way you were giving up a year of being away from Smith. And senior year is so pivotal, there's so many big decisions that you have to make, and you feel like you have limited time, so coming back you felt like, okay, this is the last bit of Smith and I have to get it all in. So, it was good to be back but it was also kind of felt pressed because I wanted to make up for that year I'd been away in a way. But I didn't culturally have any adjustments, it was great, and as I say I came back to Dawes and I like that house and I wanted to be there and it was great to be

back. And a lot of the people who were living there had gone away or were really interested in French so it was fine coming back. I enjoyed my senior year very much.

DEAN: So you said your majors were French and Afro American studies, who were the most influential professors and mentors and how did they impact you?

PERKINS: Yeah, absolutely. John Walter and (Jenal?) Butler, just huge, they were Afro-American studies professors, and why they stood out so much is because they also participated in the Bridge Program, because we had an academic portion to that program, and they were the faculty that we were exposed to. In fact, it was because of them and that whole Bridge experience that I double majored in, in Afro American studies; I was just blown away by that. So they were tremendous, and I'm still in touch with them, and, you know, today. And they were people who inspired us, and me in particular, to seek out what your full potential was, like, just discover it, you don't know, see how high you can fly. And that for me was so encouraging and I initially wanted to go off and be a professor and, and replicate that experience, because it had been so positive for me as an undergrad. And in a way they were mentors but they were also in a way like parents, and they were friends, and they were just wonderful colleagues now. I worked in higher ed later, and I think of them as colleagues. But they made it a really positive experience here for me.

DEAN: And Jill Ker Conway was the president then, how did you see her influence on campus and with the student body?

PERKINS: Yeah, she was definitely available and present and involved, and very much a force on the, on the campus. She was from Australia and she had, I think when I was here, had written her book? I can't remember when she wrote her book. But I think she's written a couple of books about her life in Australia and she was definitely an active presence on the campus. And I remember she left the year I graduated so it was kind of like I was glad I got to end with her, but I didn't get to know her very well personally. I — my senior dinner, yeah, but I didn't have a lot of personal contact with her, but she was a neat person that I — that I felt was good for Smith and represented the university well.

DEAN: What was the senior year dinner?

PERKINS: Yeah, when we graduated there was a dinner at the President's House, so she had all the seniors over. I don't know if they still do that or not. But, yeah.

DEAN: Yeah, they have tea.

PERKINS: (laughs) Okay.

DEAN: Did your, oh, what were some of the challenges, if any, of being at Smith while you were here?

PERKINS: (laughs) It's going to sound funny maybe, but for me, the winters, because you came in autumn and it was beautiful and it was lovely and, oh, I loved the whole tradition of Mountain Day, just loved that about Smith. And then it seemed like ten minutes later it was freezing cold and you were just under 18 feet of snow for the rest of your life it seemed like, until finals, when you were studying, and it got beautiful and you had to be inside studying, and so. That was actually hard for me, and when I went to grad school it made a difference; I chose to go to grad school in California because the other school I applied to was in Iowa, and they sent me this brochure with snow pictures and I just couldn't take any more snow.

(laughter)

PERKINS: So that was actually one of the hardest things. I think academics were — was fabulous. I was really inspired by the, the type of learning I had, and being stretched to new heights I didn't know I was capable of, and was really encouraged by, to see that growth year by year. Because I remember, I think it was my senior year, I was taking a final and I knew while I was taking it that I'd aced it, and what a great feeling that was. I mean, I walked out of there and I knew that I had aced it, and it was just — I don't think I've had that feeling since. (laughs) But it was wonderful to be challenged and to grow and to, to see the world in a different way than when I had come there. I began from freshman year and even from Bridge to see connections that I didn't recognize were there before, and to be challenged in new ways of thinking, that was, that was fantastic.

DEAN: Do you remember your commencement address and the impact that had on you?

PERKINS: Yeah, there was reference to that this morning in one of the sessions that we just made. It was, I believe, Beverly, yeah, Beverly Sills, excuse me, was our Commencement Day speaker. And I remember her talking about the difficulties of having it all, the career, the home, and the family, and her — I think she was speaking from her own experience, that it was really hard to have it all and be successful in all those, those three arenas, and some people felt offended by that. I didn't because I felt she was speaking from her personal experience and was just trying to pass on maybe some of her lessons learned. But the thing I really remember about graduation was Julia Childs was being honored, and in fact at one point I thought she

was the speaker because she was what I remembered and I remembered being surprised that she was as tall as she was.

(laughter)

PERKINS: I know that sounds silly, but yeah, those were the things that stood out for me at graduation.

DEAN: Who have you become since Smith?

PERKINS: Oh, so many people. Actually, there's still the same person all along, but I just literally have lived, like, tons of separate lifetimes. There's been a continual trajectory from the time I started here in terms of my studies and interests and what — being added on to that. I'm a continuous, lifetime learner, I love learning. I love growing and being challenged and stretched in new directions. And that was who I was before I came, but Smith really helped feed that, and it is who I am today still. I love learning, and I always will, I hope.

DEAN: Looking back, would you encourage your daughter or young women to attend Smith?

PERKINS: Absolutely. I don't have any children myself, but young women I do encourage to go to Smith, to consider Smith, too. And it's so funny when I hear that, I don't want to go to a girl's school, and I say like my brother told me, well, who told you you'd get in? But, you know, you can apply. I def— I definitely think it has something to offer, and I do encourage people to consider Smith, women to consider Smith, yeah.

DEAN: What difference has a Smith education made to you, and would you make the same choice if you had to do it again?

PERKINS: I would. I would do it again. It has been for me, not only academically was it a great place to be in terms of being challenged and getting a quality education, but personally just that whole growth in understanding and development of myself as a woman was huge. And as I say, growing up in a family with all boys and not having any sisters; I had a lot — I had female friends, but I had a lot of male friends, too. It was very nice to be, for three years that I was on campus, in an all-female environment and to have that experience. That was invaluable, and helped me to become aware of a side of myself that I wasn't as intimately aware of. I think that the expectation that women were intelligent and articulate and decision makers and fostering that, and that becoming a given, was really important in my personal development, so, I have a lot to thank Smith for.

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

PERKINS: Current and future advice. I would say, for me, one of the reasons I stayed and was attracted to it is that Smith was very welcoming and supportive. I saw the community, that sense of community here that — because I visited the school when I was looking —when I was a prospective student during exam week, which was a good time to come because I was sick during the regular Open House or something, and I came later. And to see people under pressure, and yet they pulled together and supported each other through that was the clincher for me, that's why I came. And my four years, that was true and consistent, that people were about people and very supportive of each other and it wasn't cut throat competitive and that made a huge difference, because many of the schools I applied to and considered going to were that. And I wouldn't have done as well in that kind of an environment, so, I would tell young women as they're looking for schools that you need to visit it and see what the environment, the community feel is, and if it fits for you personally, then that's where you go. So, for me, that was a vital reason that I chose Smith, that sense of community, the standard of excellent education, and just being open to new opportunities to try something different. You know, I gave a girl's school a try and it was a good thing, I was very glad I did.

DEAN: Would you have done anything different?

PERKINS: Well, when I was a freshman, I wanted to triple major and my year that I was a freshman was the year they stopped allowing us to triple major, and I would have triple majored had I been allowed to. Am I glad I wasn't able to? I don't know. I was interested in everything, and I think they probably made that decision because maybe it was too much for people academically, I'm not sure why they made that decision, but I would have done that, I would have been a triple major. And I probably — I would have definitely gone abroad, but I would have gone to Italy instead of France and visited France, rather than go to France and visit Italy, because I loved Italy once I got over there. (laughs) And, I had a really great professor, Charles Cutler, who I would imagine has retired by now. He was teaching Portuguese but he also taught in the Afro American studies department, and he said to me that I owed it to myself to learn Portuguese and I have to concur with him, I've regretted often that I didn't also major in Portuguese or learned Portuguese along the way. So, those are the things off the top of my head.

DEAN: Is there anything else that you'd like to add that I haven't asked?

PERKINS: No, I just think Smith is great and I just would love to see it continue and— and to shape the future leaders in the women's community around the world. Yeah. Go, Smith.

(laughter)

DEAN: Thank you very much.

PERKINS: Thanks. My pleasure.

GEIS: Just one other question. I was just interested in hearing about your brother, and it was interesting that he had such an influence on where you went to school, and that you –

PERKINS: Yeah.

GEIS: listened to your brother. Can you talk about that a little bit?

PERKINS: Yeah, sure. Let me just [blows nose] think about that. My brother was seven years older than me — is seven years older than me and so he was a big brother who really wanted me to think about my future. He told me, you know, you have to get good grades in school, you have to apply to good schools, because that's going to shape where you go, and he was the first person in my family, not to go to college, but to go to an Ivy League school, he went to Williams. And I don't know he kind of came to that conclusion to go there by himself, but he came home and said to me, these schools will open doors for you, these schools will make a difference, getting an education from there. So it was through his experience that I got exposed to that and thought about that and am very glad that I did listen to that. So when I applied to schools, I only applied to schools of that caliber. And so I wasn't really worried about where I went because I knew I was going to get a quality education. But it's interesting because I also applied to where he went to school and I thought that's where I was going to go, because I was following my big brother and I had a bit of a crisis when I visited the campus because I really didn't like it, it just felt cold, and this was my experience, but it didn't feel like a place that I would be happy at, and I was at a crossroads because I thought that was where I wanted to go. It was my number one choice, I'd gotten in, they really wanted me to go there, and they were offering me more money than Smith and I said to him, well, how do I decide? And he said, visit Smith, as well, visit the campus, and see what it's like and follow your gut and see what speaks to you. And when I came on campus, it completely was so welcoming and so supportive and I was, like, yeah, this is where I want to go to school. So I turned down the more alluring or attractive financial aid packet because I felt I'd be happier here. That's why I came to Smith. And I was definitely happy here, I'm remembering (unclear).

- DEAN: Thank you.
- GEIS: You said your grandparents were immigrants, from where originally?
- PERKINS: All four of my grandparents were immigrants. They came from the Caribbean. My father's side from Trinidad, and my mother's side from St. Martin and Antigua, so, my parents were first-generation U.S.-born in New York, and I'm second.
- GEIS: So you're a New Yorker.
- PERKINS: Well, by birth. (laughs) I didn't grow up there, though, so that's why I hesitate to say I'm a native New Yorker because we left when I was three, so, I don't know my way around the subway and don't know all the cool places to be in New York, but I was born there and when I go back I feel like a tourist, I always have to ask, how do you do wherever, yeah.
- GEIS: So home is where for you?
- PERKINS: Actually, that's a really good question, where's home? For me, it sounds like a cliché, but it truly is wherever I lay my hat because I was — I have many homes and right now if you say where's your address I'm shuttling between three places right now, between Chicago, New Jersey and Washington, DC because I've been living abroad and I just came back from Papua, New Guinea, I was living over there for two-and-a-half years, so that was home. And now I'm kind of in this three-city home until I go back overseas again, and I'm not sure where I'm going but I'll be going back abroad.
- GEIS: What's the reason for that?
- PERKINS: Why am I going abroad?
- GEIS: Well, why were you in Papua New Guinea, and—
- PERKINS: Oh! Well, in terms of the reason I was abroad as I was saying earlier my trajectory, my interests as a person that were developed here, I started off in Afro American studies which —for my exposure to that was the Bridge Program, and that was the first time that I was learning about my own cultural heritage background, because I grew up as a child of the '70s and there was literally one paragraph about African American experience which was the slavery, you know, being brought over as slaves, and that was it. So college was the first time that I learned about not only the African American experience historically and through the literature, but also the Caribbean American experience, which I had never had any

exposure to. And growing up as a child in an Irish Catholic neighborhood outside of Chicago, I would get these comments like, you're not like other Black people, and I didn't know what that meant, because Black people — many Black people in Chicago were from the south, and that's a very trad— different tradition and cultural experience than people coming from the Caribbean, so to read books and to be exposed to, wow, this is my history, was hugely eye-opening, and I just was so hungry I was like, I have to major, I have to learn this. And then that led to my interest in ethnic studies, other groups, at grad school and got my master's in that, and so learning about other cultural and ethnic groups, and from that I'd always been interested in people with — well, deaf people, and deaf culture, and how that was like another ethnicity. And from that I had been traveling a lot growing up and seeing the experience of people with disabilities in developing countries, and how the conditions were so different from here in America. Got me really interested in international development work, so I changed careers and got into that. And that's how I ended up overseas, working in Papua, New Guinea.

GEIS: So you're (unclear) repeatedly going back, like now, er—

PERKINS: No, it was originally a four-month —sorry, my allergies are kicking in — it was a six-month contract that turned into a four-month contract that turned into a two-and-a-half year contract. So I was the program manager for the Disabilities Program for Voluntary Service Overseas

PERKINS: which is a development organization that works through volunteers in Africa, Asia, and parts of Latin America (blows nose), excuse me, and parts of Latin America. And so I worked with —making sure that the volunteers who came over there, many of whom were physiotherapists or occupational therapists were in hospitals across the country and that they were doing work that was what the organizations or the hospitals and the government wanted them to do. That they were adjusting; that people with disabilities were being well represented. And then we started having other kinds of volunteers coming in and doing more capacity-building and right-space work, working with disabled people's organizations. So I oversaw all of that, and acted as the liaison between the organization, the volunteers, and the partner organizations on the ground.

DEAN: Wow. (laughter)

PERKINS: Yeah, long way from Smith, yeah. Thank you. Sorry about the allergies.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Kris Anne Hormann May 27, 2011