

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Sarah Perkins, Class of 2011

Interviewed by
Millie Cook, Class of 2018

May 21, 2016

Abstract

In this interview, Sarah Perkins, an Economics Major, talks about taking classes in the Five College Consortium, and finding community at Smith. Perkins was a member of the Smith Republican and Libertarian Club, as well as the Black Student Union, and the Christian fellowship.

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: Perkins, Sarah. Interview by Millie Cook. Video recording, May 21, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sarah Perkins, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Perkins, Sarah. Interview by Millie Cook. Transcript of video recording, May 21 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sarah Perkins, interview by Millie Cook, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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

Transcript of interview conducted May 21, 2016, with:

SARAH PERKINS
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: MILLIE COOK

PERKINS: Yes, I'm ready. Hi.

COOK: OK. So, I'm Millie Cook, and I'm conducting an interview with Sarah on May 21, 2016 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be part of the project.

PERKINS: No, thank you for inviting me. It's so great.

COOK: So how has reunion been so far?

PERKINS: Reunion has been — I think I'm on a euphoric high. My voice, I've lost it from cheering, a lot for my class, but it's been great connecting with people who have come from all around the world, and really have that pioneer Smith spirit. Reminiscing on the good, the bad, memories of my time at Smith and just knowing that I feel like I have done a great job catching up with a lot of people and keeping in touch in the five years. So it's really been like coming home, so it's been amazing.

COOK: So where did you grow up and what brought you to Smith?

PERKINS: I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and my parents gave me very limited choices of where I could go to school. I mean, it was either women's college or Catholic schools, or in-state and live at home, and I didn't want to stay at home. And we had family friends that went to Mount Holyoke and Smith. My parents were much older and so they went to — they lived during segregation, so it was a very rare when students could go to places like Mount Holyoke and Smith and Barnard, and a lot of their friends went, and so they really focused on trying to get me to go there or stay in state. So — but I chose Smith because I hated the football team. I didn't have the language to talk about patriarchy and oppression, but I really wanted to be on a place that focused on me and my academics and helping me get to be where I wanted to be. And I don't feel like I got a lot of that attention when I was in high school, and I wanted to go to a college where I could really focus on becoming a

leader and not just another number, where professors would know my name, and so like that's why I chose Smith. Yeah.

COOK: So what did you major in when you were here?

PERKINS: Economics.

COOK: And why did you chose economics?

PERKINS: I came in as pre-med because my sister was a doctor and my other sister was a nurse, and my parents wanted everyone to be in the medical profession, but I hate sick people, so — and I wanted to be the doctor on the *Today Show*. I was like, I can do that. I can work toward that as a goal. But I just really wanted to be on the *Today Show*, and I really liked business, and I really — I always wanted to wear suits and be in a board room, so I felt economics was really great way for me to understand how economies work and how people make choices and decisions, and it really interests me. And Randy Bartlett's class was amazing. It got me very excited about it. Jim Miller got me really interested in how the law works with economics and how we figure out how people think and work and what motivates them, and that's something that's always interested me, and I really like the discipline, so that's why I chose it.

COOK: That's great.

PERKINS: But I took classes all over. I really — I took a lot of classes at UMass, Hampshire, Amherst, so I was very interdisciplinary here at Smith.

COOK: What was the environment like going from Smith to the other colleges?

PERKINS: Like, UMass was great. I really wanted — Smith has such great communities, sometimes it can suffocate you. And going to UMass, it was actually really great for me because I took my foreign language there, and then I ended up being the only student in the class. So I thought I was going to get a big class, but I took Swahili and there wasn't a lot of people taking that. So that was great, that one-on-one attention. Then when I took other economic courses around the economics of sharing and around other classes about deeper involvement to statistical analysis, it was much larger and broader, and it was great. I got to really have to use my voice in classes, because a lot of other females in the class didn't speak up. A lot of men were in the classes, so it was kind of weird to kind of have that presence and be able to kind of be a change agent within my class to get other women to feel comfortable to have discussions, which is very rare. Because at Smith, everyone discusses everything at all times. And people were really kind. UMass was great; some of the classes were really interesting. I took a lot of higher-level classes and some graduate

classes, which was great — which was just a little bit smaller than their normal larger classes, but it was still great.

Amherst was OK; I guess it it wasn't my favorite cup of tea. I didn't care for it. Hampshire was amazing. I took sign language there. I mean, it was little bit like a camp, a summer camp there, but amazing food. People weren't as — I think people weren't as focused as Smithies. I think a lot of Smith women are very focused and passionate and they can articulate their ideas and they can articulate their positions very well, and if they don't know, they're going to find out, and there is a lot of emotion that is wrapped in why we believe, which is really that pioneer spirit of really wanting to be the best and work really hard, and learn. I didn't feel that at other campuses, but I did feel that the environment had a different part to offer, and I got to work with really amazing, accomplished, published, like, national grant writing professors at UMass, and really got to work with professors who were preeminent scholars on things, and it was a different lens and light. Yeah, you had to work a little bit harder there, but I enjoyed it.

COOK: What house did you live in?

PERKINS: I lived in two houses. I lived in Lawrence, my first house, which I did not like. It was a horrible experience there. It actually made me want to leave Smith. And then I lived in the quad my last three years, in King House, which was great.

COOK: Why was Lawrence so bad?

PERKINS: Lawrence, you know, is a very small house on Green Street. I think, a lot of — being the only African American in the house, I think a lot of students were just very uncomfortable or had questions that just weren't appropriate. It was a really intense community. You're either with us or against us. There's no space there for you to have stillness, quiet, reflection. Residential life there very much wanted to change my ideas and thoughts about living, where I just kind of wanted to be able to come home and relax and not be that person of color where you can pick and pry and ask questions — or just respect, I think, was really something that, like, a mutual respect for people — I think that was very troubling. And even if I disagree with you, that's OK. And I think being 18, looking back on it, like, that's a skill that a lot of 18-year-olds don't have. I think even in this current election season, people just don't have mutual respect and common courtesy, and I felt like that close community is great for some people, but most of the folks in that house had never seen person of color besides on TV, so it was very hard for them. Just cultural competency, which was completely lacking in that house. I think maybe it's definitely changed, and I know a lot of rules around housing and how communities interact have changed, just within the four years that I was there, so—

COOK: Yeah, and you found that kind of environment that you liked in King House?

PERKINS: Yeah, King as a home is a house of singles, which is great, so there is community. It's a distance from the campus. I felt like the distance from academic life and home life was very stark, and you can leave your work and your worries, but I felt like looking at Seelye or looking at Ford Hall and construction, just a lot of chaos being in so deep in Green Street, which was great when you went to get up and go to class, but I definitely wanted to be able to separate and have some type of balance. And I felt like the quad had that, as well as the camaraderie and the quad was great - I felt it was little bit more relaxed. More people were kind of like-minded, like, Let's have a great time. This is our home. Let's make this our home, but not a forced community, which I loved. And it was beautiful, I mean, King is a gorgeous, amazing home. Of course, like, brand new furniture and air conditioning and a beautiful [loggia?] and house meals, and so we had our own community, but the people were amazing and it was awesome. And then Scales, I spent a lot of time — Scales had very intense community, and I actually got to spend a great amount of time with Scales, so I loved it. I'm a quad person, so I wish I was staying in quad. Coming back from a reunion, staying in my first year house, it was kind of serendipitous — it was kind of bittersweet, and actually living with some of those same people who made my life almost like a living hell, but it was still, like, bittersweet, but it was kind of nice. I think we are adults now and we can reflect on things and some people don't change. You're like, Yep, you still have a personality defect. You know, I'm Southern, so common courtesy of holding doors for elderly, saying good morning, smiling at people, that's just very different from being cold and distant, so — but it was still nice. Yeah.

COOK: Were you politically active at the time?

PERKINS: Yeah, I was really big in the Smith Republican and Libertarian Club while I was at Smith, and that was really big contentions on campus. Students make a lot of — even coming back to reunion, people make a lot of assumptions about you without getting to know you, but I was a really big Ron Paul supporter; I was an economics student, so I was very much into his [scene around?] about people having individual rights and being able to legalize drugs and tax prostitution and come at it from a money standpoint and being able to be kind of radical in that sense of being able to lock up johns. I did thesis work on prostitution, finance, and economics and looking at that — yeah, it was cool. I got, I worked on economic policies in DC, which was great; I don't do that now, I'm really not a big fan of politics. I try to stay out of it. But yeah, it was really — you know, it was a very decisive time on campus. I think that at Smith, but understanding was not there for people who had different political persuasions.

COOK: Did you get a lot of push back for being in the Republican and Libertarian groups?

PERKINS: Oh, yeah. I mean, people threw rocks at my window election night in '08, and the president Christ was like, Did you see who did it? And I was like, Well, someone's throwing rocks at you, I don't think you're going to look at it. But that's a whole other conversation. But like, it was OK. I think Smith gave me grit and they made me work hard and it's not easy being a black woman at Smith College, so — period. And then having different ideas than what people assumed stereotypes are about black women was even difficult; I think being active in the interfaith — in the Christian intervarsity fellowship here, that — I got more push back about that, about my faith on campus. Yeah, so that was really interesting. Some people were curious. Some people just make assumptions about you. It was very interesting, but there, I think coming to Smith, where women are passionate about issues, you can see how people can rub against you. But I think it's taking that time to get to know people and really get to know their story before you make judgments and assumptions, I think that is something that Smith should really try to work on and make it better for all ideas, whether you agree with them or not.

COOK: Where did you find your space and your friends on campus?

PERKINS: The B43, or the Pioneer Valley bus. I spent a lot of time on that bus, going back and forth to UMass and Hampshire. That was kind of my safe space for a while. I think also Women and Financial Independence. I worked there, that was a major — I had an on campus job there. It was integral to my major. I'm still very much into teaching women about being financially independent and being financially savvy. Even on my job as I pull software, I try to take the young new hires and teach them about 401Ks and giving, so that was like a haven for me. The Black Student Union in Mwangi was my home, that place. I cooked meals late at night with Smith sisters. I studied there. That was a great place for me. The chapel, I did a lot of work with volunteering and interfaith. That was great safe space. Even my house at King was a great place for me, I loved it, yeah.

COOK: What have you been doing since Smith?

PERKINS: For Smith or like professionally?

COOK: Professionally first.

PERKINS: So I, the recession was really starting — was trying to add jobs when I graduated; it wasn't great. The bottom fell out my first year, so that was really terrifying, seeing Lehman Brothers go under, job offers rescinded,

so I went into the tech sector. I work for a large tech firm called EMC and I learned about the business world, and it was hard. Leaving Smith, and I had worked several international internships — it was a really hard working there at a place where people honestly don't care about the things that are personal to you, your values. People are not interested in that. They just care about your delivery and what you can do for them, and that was very different, because Smith really prepares you very well to focus on reflecting on yourself and getting your thoughts, but people in the workplace want things that are now and they want it fast, and they want you to deliver, and they don't really care about your orientation. They don't care about your new identity, your hair. They want delivery. So conforming to a corporate world, I worked there for a couple years in their leadership development program, was promoted, and as a good Smithie, I went to go work for a competitor and negotiated a new salary that was a little bit more – shinier, a better title. I, like, took what women in financial independence taught me, stayed there for a while at HP, and then went to another competitor and now I'm at Oracle Corporation. So I think when I want to try something new and I get uncomfortable and I have that itching to really do something that's like innovative and really critically think about what Smith taught me, I tend to try to find a new job or a new role. So I build software and it's great, and I get to lead teams all around the world building software, so –

COOK: That's awesome.

PERKINS: Yeah. It is awesome. And those skills at Smith, I use them every day. I wasn't the best writer here, and I was joking with one of my friends who really helped me with one of my philosophy papers, to really get a good outline, and just work on writing — she's also getting her PhD, but, you know, in English, and she's a fabulous writer. And I was like, I'm one of the best writers on my team. She's like, What? I was like, Yeah, I might not have been the best at Smith, but I'm better than the rest. So it's really kind of great, very full circle.

COOK: Just looking at the time, just for a wrap up, do you have any advice for current Smithies?

PERKINS: Persevere. The grit and the discomfort that you're feeling now will carry you for the rest of your life. And cherish the memories you have here, because this is such a unique place with such opportunity and history and tradition, and other schools just don't have that, so take time to honestly go to the botanical gardens. Go to the gym. Use Smith's resources and facilities till you exhaust them all because you will never get this time back. I still think now, Oh, wow. Why didn't I do that? Why didn't I go have tea at the Japanese Tea House? Or get up and go for a walk down by the pond? Like, those are things that you are going to miss in the real world when you get outside of Smith. Just remember you came here — I remember Deb Shaver, who is the director of

admissions, said, "You don't make mistakes. You're here for a reason." And you are here for a reason. You are here to make an impact in the world, whether it's in your community or a really large scale, but you do have the power to make change and whether you do that change like for one political side or not or another it doesn't matter. You can make change. You're a Smith woman, and you're fierce, you're beautiful, and you will survive. Like, you will, because Smith is giving you the skills on how to do it. And it's already in you, Smith brings it out, and yeah, that — I think that's my advice. Thank you.

COOK: Awesome. Thank you so much.

PERKINS: No, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June 2016.