

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

Sara Pic, Class of 2000

Interviewed by
Rachel Dean, Class of 2013

May 14, 2010

Abstract

In this oral history, Sara Pic describes her involvement with activism at Smith (including her association with the Lesbian Avengers and working for transgender student rights), living in Hubbard House, her experiences abroad in Russia, her work as a Russian Civilization major and with the Study of the Women and Gender, and her decision to go to Northeastern Law School.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Lauren Hinkle 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: Pic, Sara. Interview by Rachel Dean. Video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Sara Pic, interview by Rachel Dean, video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Pic, Sara. Interview by Rachel Dean. Transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Sara Pic, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, p. 3.

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project
Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2010, with:

SARA PIC

by: RACHEL DEAN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DEAN: OK. This is Rachel Dean, and I'm conducting an interview with Sara Pic on May 14, 2010, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this project.

PIC: You're welcome.

DEAN: What were the benefits in choosing Smith over other schools?

PIC: Well, I applied to Smith early decision, so in some ways, you know, it was a given. I mean, I didn't actually choose Smith in a way. I only chose to apply early decision. And then when I got in, I thought, Oh my gosh, it's done; I'm definitely going here. And I chose Smith, and I chose to apply early decision knowing everything that meant, because I had visited the campus and loved it, I thought it was beautiful here, and I knew so many alums. Not just you knew *of* alums, like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan and people like that, but I actually knew alums, even in New Orleans, where I grew up, who were just amazing. Like, I just thought they were the most inspirational, really some of the most brilliant people. And I kept finding—like, I would read a book, and at the end it would say, Oh, this is by a Smith author. And I actually—this is kind of random—but how I actually found out about Smith was when I was in elementary school, I won a contest where I met Ann Martin, and she told me when I was in sixth grade that she went to Smith, and that always stuck in my head. So I went to college prep high school, and it was like, I want to go to Smith just like Ann. Anyhow. So that's what I mean by that. I knew all these really brilliant women who went here, and I thought the campus was beautiful, and I loved just the course selection, so I think that was the benefit of choosing the school at that time.

DEAN: What reactions did you see from your peers and family and friends for attending Smith?

PIC: Well, my family was supportive. You know, even though it was very far away, they knew it was a really good school. Not many people leave—even at, like, good high schools in New Orleans, not many

people go very far. I was very unusual for that. But everyone supported it. They thought it was a little weird, but they supported it. And they'd certainly never heard of Smith, most people. Now, the people that had were very impressed. And, you know, certainly some people are like, A women's college? Why would you do that? New Orleans are so heavily Catholic, and so there are a lot of Catholic girls' and boys' high schools, and so most people just want to get out of that system. And, you know, even then I thought—I mean, I had read everything about a women's education. I said, "Well, you know, we're more likely to have successful jobs and careers." At 17, (laughter) that's what I'm telling people. But it's true.

DEAN: What clubs and organizations or teams were you involved in when you were at school?

PIC: I was a big old activist. I was pretty much—if there was an activist organization, I was part of it. I would say the ones I was most involved in, I was a peer sexuality educator, and that was very important to me. I also worked in town. I got an internship and then worked at the family planning clinic in town, so the two went together for me, you know, teaching people about their health and being responsible for their health, even though that's not—well, actually, I do health law now, so I guess that is kind of related. So I don't—I'm not a practitioner. But I also just did general activism. I was involved in National (inaudible) Women's Day of Choice and Day of Action, and we did fire-eating. I taught everyone how to do fire-eating, which started actually with the Lesbian Avengers, but it's a way of saying, you know, you may try to hurt us, but we'll stand strong regardless. So you eat the fire because you're standing strong. But you have to do it safely. (laughter) I was very about teaching everyone how to do it safely. And I always helped with Celebration of Sisterhood.

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

PIC: I was in Hubbard House, and I was there all four years. I loved it. I can't imagine living anywhere else. I mean, I loved it from the start, and that's why I stayed. I know some people just want to try other places. I didn't feel like I needed to do that. It felt like home. Honestly it felt like my home, and I still think of it that way. I'm actually there for a reunion, and I was so excited when I saw it. I was like, I'm back at Hubbard! It's a little strange, I'll admit, like in a good way, but I'm like, Oh my gosh, it looks exactly the same. But I mean, I—you know, it was like I played the piano every day. I had my piano, and you knew all the kitchen staff and you got to be friends with them, and just obviously my classmates. So even though I—I actually went abroad, but I, like, begged to get back into Hubbard.

- DEAN: So you went—did you go abroad, and where did you go, and—?
- PIC: I went to Russia. I went to a small town—well, actually, medium-sized city—outside of Moscow, four hours north of Moscow, called Yaroslavl, and then I did an internship at Moscow at the Center for Women and Gender Studies.
- DEAN: How do you think that affected your experience, and would you advise other students to go abroad?
- PIC: Absolutely. I mean, you know, that is, like, the one thing that I always tell people. It doesn't matter who you are, what your major is, you should go abroad. And one of my friends, I think she was our HR, actually, she went to Hungary because they had a math program there. She was a math major. But I mean there probably weren't any other math programs anywhere. She didn't speak Hungarian, you know, but she could actually go there. So I always tell people, "It doesn't matter what your major is, you should figure out some way to go abroad because it's a life-changing experience." I mean, it really did impact me for the rest of my life. It is incredibly difficult, especially if you put yourself in a culture that is very different than ours and also where, you know, you might be not that great with the language, or even if you are, it's just culture shock alone. And that was hard, but it was an incredible experience.
- DEAN: Do you have one specific story or example from your studying abroad that shows how it changed your life?
- PIC: (pause) Oh my God, that's awful. The only one I can think of is kind of slightly negative. Let me see if I can think of some good ones. I mean, really—this isn't one specific story, but just learning about culture shock really and learning that, you know, where you go you might not fully—it might seem like an alien place, you might as well be in Mars. I mean, and you have to remember, well, we're all people, we're all human, and that kind of interconnectedness of all of us. But we can be so different just in terms of how our culture is raised—or how we're raised in the culture in our society. So.
- DEAN: What was your major, and what—who were your favorite professors or mentors that advised you?
- PIC: Well, I was a Russian Civ major. That was kind of by default, to be honest, because I got so many credits from going abroad, and, as I said, I think it's so important to go abroad, so I figured, you know, just a couple more classes and I finish the major. My—but my major that I loved, that I was really passionate about, was Women Studies, now the Study of Women and Gender. And yeah, I mean, it probably—you know, my mentors would be the people you usually hear about—Susan

Van Dyne. I had one mentor, though, who was only here for a year. She was here on a post-doc, and she was teaching a class that we always joked about. It was called Queer—Queer Globalizations, Local Homosexualities, and Transnational Formation. And we always just joked, we're like, It's gay people in the Third World. That's what it was about. And it was great. It was a great class, and she was hugely influential on me because she was incredibly brilliant. You know, I remember just offhandedly one day saying, "I want to teach a math class about queer numbers." What are queer numbers? But, you know, she's very [academic in the head?], but the reason she influenced me is because everyone was pushing me to get my Ph.D. in women's studies. I was tracked to do that. Susan had, like, said, "Oh, you're going to go here." That's how it kind of works with the Ph.D. And I didn't really want to do that, and Anjali—Anjali Arondekar was her name, by the way—Anjali was like, Well, what do you want to do? I said, "I think I might want to go to law school." I said, "I'm not really sure, but, you know, that's what I think. I think I want to have more direct impact." And she said, "Well, go to law school, then." She said, "You know, go to Northeastern. That's where Urvashi Viad went," who's the former head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, a hugely influential queer scholar, and a friend of Anjali. She said, "Go to Northeastern; that's where she went." And actually I did end up going to Northeastern and when I was there found out that Northeastern is the top—like, of Smithies, the number one law school is Northeastern. I didn't know that until I went. Like, that's the, percentage-wise, where we most go.

DEAN: So when you're on campus, how would you describe the campus atmosphere, and did you see any issues of religion or class or race?

PIC: Yeah, definitely, although a lot of the class issues, you know, were there, but the one—like, I noticed them primarily in the fact that, you know, students on financial aid with work-study had to work in the kitchens, which felt at first really weird. You're like, you know, you're serving your fellow students. But after time, honestly, my friends who weren't on work-study started to be jealous of us because, you know, that was a big chunk of us, and we banded together. We actually—the work-study students had a bond. We had these parties in the kitchen, basically. And I had friends who weren't on work-study tell me they were jealous of us, even though it was such a class thing. You know, we were doing it because we needed the money, you know? But so yeah, it was a very obvious class difference. Religion, I don't remember that being an issue; everyone was pretty accepting. A big issue that was started while I was here that, from what I understand, is still a big issue, is transgender men, and I did a lot of activism around that, you know, allowing transgender men to stay in school here. And that was really big. And, you know, yeah, the campus atmosphere, I mean, really, overall, people are very—I mean, it was just supportive, you know. I mean, that was the thing is I think, you know, if anything, everyone's

worst enemy was themselves because they—in the sense that everyone was competing with themselves more than anyone else. That's not necessarily a bad thing. You know, I think it's good to have a bit of healthy competition with yourself, and we wanted to keep improving. And I felt like I learned so much from other students, and I think everyone felt that way, that there's just this real culture of learning from each other.

DEAN: So what specific activism did you do with transgender men and keeping them being allowed to stay here?

PIC: Well, like I said, it was just getting started, and the dean of the college—who might still be here, I'm not sure—at the time said that—had issued some statements saying that they should not be able to stay. So we did a lot of—it was a lot of awareness-raising, actually, to be more honest, because it was—to be frank—because most people didn't know what it meant, and they're like, Well, they're men; they shouldn't be here. And it's like, Well, no, actually, you know, they were born and socialized as girls and as women, and they already got into the school, and if they want to stay, there are a lot of difficulties being a transgender man, staying in a women's college, in your life after anyhow, so if they want to stay, we should support them. Because it's not—there's not a—you know, this binary that people are stuck into—men, women—it's hard, because I do believe in the value of a women's education, so in that sense I do believe in that binary in the sense that it's important to have this, but that's because we're historically, you know, marginalized, disenfranchised group, and so these men who grew up as women and as girls, I feel that they should have access just as much. So a lot of it was just outreach and awareness and education.

DEAN: What experiences did you have with relationships and dating while you were here?

PIC: Honestly I was so busy I really didn't date that much. (laughter) And, you know, I found this out years later that people were really intimidated by me because I was so involved in so many things. (laughs) Which is just funny to me. I was one of the few people who actually was an out lesbian before they came, you know. I don't actually think that Smith has higher numbers than other schools. I think there might be a bump when people are here, but I think afterwards. But people come here because of that. It was one of the reasons I chose it, because I knew it was an accepting school, that it was a really, really good school, and that I'd be safe, and that was huge. So people were intimidated by me because of that. But I also was just busy and, you know, doing other things. My one serious relationship actually was with a townie. Yeah.

DEAN: That's interesting.

PIC: A non-Smithie, yeah.

DEAN: So what year did you graduate, and with your commencement address, did it leave you with any lasting impressions, if you remember it?

PIC: Well, sort of. I graduated in 2000, and the commencement address— (laughs) to be quite honest, more than anything, I remember the debacle leading up to the commencement address, which is that Jodie Foster had agreed to speak and we were all so excited and it was kind of like, I'm sure, like Rachel Maddow speaking here, you know, on Sunday. I mean, it was like, Oh my God, Jodie Foster. And then she backed out, like, because of a movie thing, like last minute. And so we ended up getting an artist who actually has some pieces in the museum, but I didn't know her, and I'll be honest, I didn't follow art very much, so I can't really say that her address left much on me. I do remember the year before it was Liddy Dole, who I was actually really excited to see as one of the—you know, she may be a very conservative politician and I may have a lot of disagreements with her, but she—you know, I'm thinking, Well, she's one of the first women to graduate from Harvard, she's had this really huge, you know, interesting life. And she talked mostly about land mines, which was her cause at the time, and that was really, really important, but I kept thinking, How is this relevant to my life? She couldn't connect it back. Because it could have been, could have been, you know, but she failed to do so. But then again, it got us thinking about why she wasn't able to connect it back, I guess.

DEAN: So what did you do the summer after you graduated?

PIC: I stayed in town and I worked at the clinic that I had been working at. I started looking for jobs. I didn't plan to stay long-term. I'd seen people say and get caught in kind of a vortex here, and it seemed to take them longer to get their lives—to advance their lives. Not that there's anything wrong with Northampton at all—I love Northampton—but I think people often stayed because they don't want to let go. And so I wanted to stay here for the summer and think about next steps, and so while I was here in the summer I stayed in this job that I loved and started thinking about what I wanted to do next, and I ended up moving in the fall to Washington, D.C.

DEAN: So what did you do after, and who have you become since Smith?

PIC: Well, while I was working at the clinic I really firmed up my desire to go to law school. I mean, in particular I had one experience that just hit me. I mean, I did pregnancy tests for women all the time, and for teenagers, all the time, you know, and we send people off to get abortions, I did abortion counseling, all that. But I remember counseling this one teenager whose test came back positive, and she was

going to need a judicial bypass waiver. And that was standard, you know; it was just part of kind of what I did. And it's like, all right, you're a teenager, you don't want to tell your parents, you know—because a lot of times, people just didn't want to tell their parents, I'll be honest, but that's OK, it's their bodies and I think that's fine. But this girl, what really hit me was, I mean, she would literally be beaten badly and kicked out on the streets by her parents if they found out she was pregnant. And I'm thinking to myself, What crazy fucked-up world do we live in where a pregnant teenager would wind up [beaten?] on the streets, and that we think is OK, or at least we'll allow that, you know, to happen, but she has to go ask permission of a judge to get an abortion? You know, like, I just—I thought that was insane even though it's something that we've come to really accept in this country as part of our policies around abortion. And that's when I was like, you know, the law's a really powerful thing, and I decided to go to law school and always intended to do public interest law and always have. I'm now a litigation director at a nonprofit that does health care access for low-income people. That's primarily what I've done.

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

PIC: Absolutely, yeah. Absolutely. I would love it if they did.

DEAN: And why?

PIC: Well, you know, I still follow what goes on here, and I think, you know, I think the value of a women's education, a women's college education is not any less; if anything, maybe it's more. I don't know. Because I think as women start to advance more in society there is more of a need for it because we are going to continually be, you know—people are going to continually try to cast us in negative lights. I mean, you look at the presidential campaign and Hillary Clinton and the incredibly sexist media. And I may completely disagree with Sarah Palin, but they treated her just as sexist as well, I will say, both of them. So I think that it is really important, and I think that's going to continue. I don't think that—you know, we're not in a post-feminist world, you know? I mean, this is—we're still really struggling for really basic rights, and certainly women all over the world are. And this college really gave me an understanding of the rest of the world, too. I mean, it was such—you know, meeting people from around the world and studying abroad and really getting a global perspective.

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

PIC: Any advice? Well, study abroad, which I already mentioned. That's like my thing that I always hammer people. And, you know, get

practical experience. I think it's important to try to tie your studies into the real world. So, you know, as a women's studies major, I worked at a family planning clinic; it made sense. You know, I went to Russia, and I was very fortunate to do an internship at the Moscow Center for Women and Gender Studies, you know, getting this kind of real-world experience and meeting real people. To get—I'm not going to say it's the Smith bubble, but actually just an academic bubble—to get out of that a little bit I think is important. And take advantage of everything there is to take advantage of. It's funny, because, as I just said, I did all this stuff, I was so busy, I was an activist and everything, and I remember I moved maybe a week after school started, after I graduated, and I had been an intern at *Meridians*, another thing that I did, which was the journal on feminism, race, and postcolonialism, transnationalism. And I met the new intern, I was kind of training her, and she was telling me about how she was really involved in this one conference, and I was thinking to myself—it's a conference that was held every year at Hampshire—I was like, I never did that my four years. Oh, no! How could I have graduated?! It's just funny that it's like I did all these other things, but it was like, Oh, I didn't do enough! Honestly, now I can look back and laugh a little bit because I was so involved. But, you know, it's like throw yourself in and get as much out of it, even if that means taking a million classes. That's fine. The professors here are amazing. So just, like, do as much as you can. You know, take advantage of your friends, too, and just be around them.

DEAN: We only have a few minutes left. Is there anything else you would like to add that I haven't asked?

PIC: No, other than, you know, I think that this is a remarkably unique place. I mean, there really doesn't—it doesn't exist anywhere else. And some people might call it a bubble. I don't think that that's the case, though. It's not even—it's not really utopia either, we're still part of the world, but it is a really, really vibrant, safe, very special place, and I just hope it continues to be so. You know, I'm really happy to be back for my ten-year reunion, get to see what it's like now, talk to other—to students like you.

DEAN: Well, thank you very much.

PIC: You're very welcome.

GEIS: I had one quick question, just because I was curious about your Moscow experience.

PIC: Yeah.

- GEIS: What was the difference for you being here versus there culturally, in terms of what you were learning? Like, what was—I'm sure that's a huge question, but—
- PIC: Sure, sure. You mean, in terms of what I was learning about life or studying?
- GEIS: What you noticed. What you noticed in the culture in terms of what—the work that you—describe what you were doing there and then just the differences between being here and being there.
- PIC: Well, I mean, I was there in 1998–1999, you know, fairly recently post-Soviet, and when I was there, the ruble crashed. And we literally got a letter before we left saying, “Hey, don't worry, from what we know, there is still food on the shelves,” I mean, things we would never think about here. We got there, the ATMs are empty. You can't just go to an ATM and get money because there's no money. And the ruble is so volatile, I mean, (inaudible) gambling, you know. And then I was thinking, OK, well, I have money, and even though, actually, as I said, I grew up fairly, you know, low middle class, struggling middle class, but there I was completely wealthy. I mean, I actually used to buy Pringles because I would get homesick and I would hide them from my roommate because I was embarrassed by how much I'd spent on them, even though they were like a dollar. But a dollar there would, you know, buy them an extravagant meal. Like, that's what I meant by, you know, you get such a perspective.
- I remember talking to, you know, one woman who was—and I lived in the dorm, actually. I lived in the dorm with all Russian students. And, you know, I remember her just saying, you know, “I want America.” That's what she kept saying. She's like, Oh, I want America. I want to be in America. There's no (inaudible) ever going to America, really. I mean, I shouldn't say no way, but, you know, it's very, very small opportunities, whereas, like, here I am, I'm just on a student visa, I can just stroll on in. You know, it was—not that it's that way, I think, after college, it's still pretty hard to get in, but very different.
- Very, very nationalist as well. I mean, we're so much about—I mean, granted, we're very stratified in terms of race, I think, in a lot of ways, but we really do value this melting pot, even though it might not always show up, like what's going on in Arizona, but they're very nationalist, you know. And I remember once—this was really hard to believe—so my name is Sara. It's a Hebrew name. I'm not Jewish. And I told someone my name, and he immediately said, “Are you a”—he said, “Are you a yid?” which is a derogatory term for someone who's Jewish. And just like he said it just, like, completely, you know, as if that was a normal thing to ask someone. And I was like—I didn't even know what to say, honestly, because though I'm not, I just couldn't believe I'd just been asked that. And I said no, and I actually ended up hanging out and talking with him for a while, and we

just talked about, you know, the differences in our countries. Actually, it was a very interesting conversation, and I didn't want to let that one comment stop me from talking to him, but it was still so shocking that someone would do that.

And, you know, in terms of my experience at the—you know, working at the Center for Women and Gender Studies, I mean, it's just they are so—I was about to use the word “far behind.” That's horrible, I don't want to think of it that way. But their country's so different in terms of how they think about gender than here even, and so women are struggling for a lot of rights that we might take for granted here. Then again, they have some things that we might not have as much access to, you know. So I think it's important to remember that it's like you should never feel like you're—you should never patronize, you know, a country or wherever you're living, whatever problems they have, but just kind of look at it for what it is and think about, OK, well, this is a huge country with all these people, and this is their culture, and here I am, and I'm an interloper, really, coming into it, and so a lot of times I just sat and listened and tried to just kind of absorb that experience.

DEAN: Thank you.

PIC: Does that help?

GEIS: Yeah, I was just curious. Thank you so much.

DEAN: Thank you.

PIC: Yeah, no problem.

GEIS: Great job.

PIC: Oh, I guess I need to take this little thing off.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Lauren Hinkle, May 2011.