

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Laura Pires-Hester, Class of 1961

Interviewed by
Sarah Dunn, Class of 2011

May 20, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Laura Pires-Hester describes how she decided to attend Smith, what the overall campus atmosphere was like, her experiences living in Albright House, issues of race and class, the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, her work to increase the racial diversity on campus, her life and work after Smith, and what a Smith education has meant to her.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Susan Savoy 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: Pires-Hester, Laura. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Laura Pires-Hester, interview by Sarah Dunn, video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Pires-Hester, Laura. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Laura Pires-Hester, interview by Sarah Dunn, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted on May 20, 2011, with:

LAURA PIRES-HESTER

by: SARAH DUNN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DUNN: This is Sarah Dunn and I'm conducting an interview with Laura Perez Hester.

PIRES-HESTER: Pires.

DUNN: Pires, sorry. Hester. The class of '61 on May 20, 2011 for Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you again for being a part of this.

PIRES-HESTER: It's great to be here, thank you.

DUNN: Can I have you spell your name for us, your full name?

PIRES-HESTER: My last name is P-I-R-E-S hyphen Hester. First name is Laura.

DUNN: Thank you. So how did you come to find Smith College and choose Smith as a place for you to (overlapping dialogue; unclear).

PIRES-HESTER: Interesting question. First of all I come from a small town in Massachusetts, Wareham, and I went to the public schools. No one in my family had ever gone to college and my sophomore year there was an influx of, not an influx but there were several new teachers that came to the high school and one of them, I found out, was a graduate of Smith College, Ann Drummy. That was unusual. And that same year the town and the school system got a guidance counselor for the first time and as I learned about it later there were teachers who told the guidance counselor, Esther Matthews, the late Esther Matthews, I have to mention her name because she just died within the last year and she was so important in helping me make a decision that really affected the rest of my life. Teachers told her that she ought to do something with me, that here was a student, Cape Verdean student, Cape Verdean-American student, who was very smart and needed to go to a good college. I had made a switch from the college course to the business course my sophomore year, mostly because my Cape Verdean friends were in the business course and I think I felt that I should be with them. At the end of my sophomore I decided that I had learned all I needed to know

about general business and bookkeeping and typing and I had to go back to the college course.

So, Esther Matthews and Ann Drummy actually drove me to Smith to see Smith. I have a picture of myself standing on the side of Paradise Pond. I was a top student in my class and was eligible for the top scholarship but again as I learned later, story from my guidance counselor, in that group there were three people including her, the top prize was \$500 and there was a discussion as to who should get that prize and she said, "Laura has already been accepted at Smith and she's a top student," and someone on the committee said, "But if we give it to Laura, a student like her, who's going to come back and pick cranberries?" Cranberries is something that a lot of Cape Verdeans, including my family, were involved in at the time. So that's a longwinded story about how I came to Smith but I had no idea about the Seven Sisters or college and when I got here I had many, many hours and nights of wondering, What am I doing here and how did I get here and do I belong here? But since my family was really supporting the decision, although they didn't know what it really meant, I knew that I had to stay. There was no question that I would drop out, as one of my young cousins did several years later who was also very smart and I helped her to get into Smith and she dropped out before Thanksgiving because she was homesick. And I said to myself, that would have never happened when I was in college. But that's how I got to Smith College.

DUNN: Wonderful. How would you describe the campus atmosphere here during the time you were here?

PIRES-HESTER: I was a very shy student and I came to Albright, which was the scholarship house, so I participated but not gregariously. I found it that the other students were, in the house were supportive. I had particularly a senior and junior that I was in a three room suite with and they were very supportive of me. I thought that with my public school education, I looked around at everybody else and thought that everybody was way ahead of me in terms of academics, but it was physically a great place. Interestingly enough, at the end of my first year they had this competition as to who would be song leaders, and I don't even know if that happens any more, but I found in a house meeting when they asked if anyone wanted to volunteer or to nominate someone else I found myself raising my hand. Which was, again, one of those what are you doing, you know? I wasn't in the choir. I had brought my violin but I wasn't good enough and I knew I wasn't good enough. I would have to practice eight hours a day if I wanted to be even in the training orchestra so I stopped that. I didn't play the piano and everybody, I think, was shocked when I raised my hand but I went on through the different competitions, there were like three or four rounds, and every time when I would come out, down to eight and then down to four and then it turned out that I was one of the two, I was stunned. And the other

person, Joyce [Geiger?], both of us, she sent me some pictures of myself in 1957 when I came in.

So I guess the experience was, it was new, it was, I had nothing else to compare it to. I knew that I had to work hard, which I did. And that story of the song leader, I guess, is one of the strains that I think I found throughout my life, not only at Smith but afterwards professionally and personally, that this push/pull, and I think most women feel it, where you find yourself in a situation and wonder why or how you got there but you keep going and oftentimes it leads to something else which you had no idea was around the corner. It was an interesting experience, very interesting experience.

DUNN: So you mentioned being in Albright. You said it was a scholarship house. What did that mean at Smith for you and for the women in the house?

PIRES-HESTER: It was a small house and as I remember we had lots of singing after dinner and there were several students who played the piano and one student in particular who knew all the Rogers and Hammerstein songs. And we had small groups that were really close together. There are six or seven of us who came back this year and although we haven't kept in touch I think it was a good experience. I worked in the library. I did [ed?] work study and we had to do like serving the dinner and doing the dishes afterwards. But I don't think it was at all overly demanding. It was just a way of the institution getting some assistance to students who needed it and hopefully broadening the spectrum socioeconomically of the students who came to Smith.

I was at the time one of the eight women of color on the entire campus and as some of the alumni talk to me now, no one ever asked me what I was but I knew that there was a question. And when someone did I would talk about being Cape Verdean which most people didn't know anything about. And most of the, all the other students of color were really the same economic background as most of the other students and one of those students of color was in the graduate school so it was a very tiny group. And I remember that when there were mixers in the house, as I said I was very shy, someone would always run up to me when there was an African-American man downstairs, you know, that I should go down. But I wasn't very outgoing in terms of social life. When someone invited me to go up to Dartmouth for a weekend my response on the telephone was, why do I want to do that? I had no idea. They had a form that your parents had to fill out as to whether you would be allowed to go out to another campus and I didn't know what that was about so I didn't have that permission to go, to do that. Later I learned what it was about so that changed a little bit.

But it was a learning experience for me and it was rough in some parts. I know that I had, I did feel, I have some evidence that I did go to

the counseling office several times. But again, I think it was this question of what am I doing here, how did I get here, do I belong here, etc. But it's a terrific network of students and I recommend it. I try to get my friends and colleagues, their women, daughters, their daughters to consider Smith. And of course many of them don't want to consider an all women's college but I think that helped me to get outside of myself a little bit. I'm not sure that if I had gone to a coed college that I would have even gotten to the point where I did in terms of my own development and sense of myself.

DUNN: It helps a lot, I think. So did you feel very accepted here or did you feel like Smith was a very accepting place as one of the eight women of color on this campus and during that time?

PIRES-HESTER: I didn't feel discrimination in a sense. It wasn't that. It was just the fact that there were so few of us. I think there were three of us in my class and they were both from large urban areas, had gone to private schools, and we got to know each other and I became friends more with the, first one student and then there were two students in the graduate school, partly because it was right across the street that they lived, on, what's the road that goes (overlapping dialogue; unclear). Bedford. So we became friends and I used to do things with them socially. And I did go on Yale weekends. I was dating someone at Yale for the last two years.

DUNN: How was that?

PIRES-HESTER: Didn't go anywhere. But I went to the prom there so that was a good experience.

DUNN: A lot of dating going on around that time. It definitely seems dating was starting to really come to light in the 50s.

PIRES-HESTER: Right.

DUNN: Were there a lot of opportunities to go to different colleges or were there opportunities for the men to come here?

PIRES-HESTER: Always on Saturdays there would always be this, the campus would change. You know, when you were coming back from, I think I had a classics class on Saturday mornings so when you would come out of the morning class suddenly there was a different presence on the campus. And also because I was part of a very small group there was this organization that doesn't exist any more called National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students. So you know that that was formed many, many years ago. And what I found later is that the men in the local colleges, Dartmouth, Yale, Amherst, Princeton, etc, that they had pictures of all of us, since there were so few of us. So I think that's how the person from Dartmouth got my name and number. I didn't do a lot of dating. It was sparse.

I mostly studied on weekends and I certainly spent a lot of time during Saturday in the library. The trek between the library and Albright was very well worn. And one of my fondest memories is of winter and the snow falling at about 5:00 going back from the library to Albright House. It was a very lovely time, both in the atmosphere as well as the time of day. And Sunday supper was very informal. It was a buffet, we didn't have to get dressed, and it was very different from the dinners during the week which were more formal. And I'm not sure that that happens any more but that was a good part of the experience as well because we were asked to, invited to invite faculty members to come.

DUNN: For Sunday?

PIRES-HESTER: Not for Sundays, for the Mondays through Fridays, for dinner. And it gave us a chance to see them in a different setting and then it gave other students a chance to be introduced to them. So I think there are some traditions that were good ones, at least for my time and my experience.

DUNN: Did you go abroad at all?

PIRES-HESTER: I did not.

DUNN: Was there a very different pressure for you on campus on a scholarship? Did they ask you to maintain a certain, were you required to maintain certain GPAs or?

PIRES-HESTER: I think we did. We were just talking about that last night at the dinner table. And I gather that we did but I didn't feel a lot of pressure and I did pretty well. So I guess I was able to fulfill the requirements and be able to get the scholarship assistance during the four years. And remember that my freshman year, first year, tuition was \$1,900 and when I finished at the senior year it was \$3,600. So there's been quite a jump. Of course \$1,900 then is much more today, but. And I still had support from my family. My late brother used to run benefit dances in the New Bedford to support my education. I say my late brother, he was 50 years old and was killed by a drunken driver on the same day that my father died in 1980. So that was quite a –

DUNN: Intense.

PIRES-HESTER: – traumatic shock.

DUNN: It sounded like they supported you a lot. That's wonderful. Early 60s, I mean things were just kind of starting. Were any civil rights things happening that you remember on campus?

PIRES-HESTER: There wasn't a lot of activity but I do remember Doctor King being asked to come and spoke, I think spoke in probably John M. Greene and then there was a reception afterwards. And I was just beginning to be aware of that, of the civil rights movement. I was not individually

involved in a lot of social action. When I went to New York to go to graduate school in social work in my first year one of my classmates, and friend, was Mickey Schwerner and he decided before he finished the first year to go down south to Mississippi and then it was not long after that that he was one of the three civil rights workers who were found. That was a, even in the school of social work, in a very liberal school of social work, I remember that I was told by one of our mutual professors, he said, "I notice that you're a friend of Mickey's and maybe you can talk to him." And I said why. He said, "Because he's being seen as a radical and he should be careful" or something, which always kind of astounded me. Mickey was a very committed person and a wonderful friend. We had begun to know each other through what was then called the Social Work Recruiting Committee where students from colleges were recruited to come to New York and work in social service agencies and he was part of my cohort. So that's how we became friends and then we wound up at the same school of social work.

DUNN: So what did you expect as a Smith graduate in terms of marriage, work, family? Did you feel expectations put on you when you were leaving?

PIRES-HESTER: Well, I had family expectations. My expectation from my family that I was going to do something. And I think with the experience of the Social Work Recruiting Committee and working in New York, that's how I made the decision to go to a school of social work. And I considered going to Smith because it was right here and I had been here but, again, in the context of other people helping you to make critical decision points in your life, I took a seminar with Howard [Berard?] who was then the dean of the School of Social Work and I went to see him a couple of times and I was trying to decide. I had applied to Chicago, New York and Smith. And he finally said to me after the second or third visit something to the effect of Laura, we would be glad to have you and I think you would do well here but I think you really want to be in New York. So that, again, helped me to make my decision to go to New York. It didn't occur to me that I would be getting married any time soon. That was not on my radar screen at the time. In fact, I didn't get married until '69, until I was almost 30. So that was, it was expected that I would do something meaningful and earn a living as well as do something with a purpose and make a difference.

DUNN: Still is. It's still there. So what difference has a Smith education meant to you? Would you make the same choice if you had to do it all over again?

PIRES-HESTER: Would I make the same choice to go to Smith? Absolutely. Absolutely. I think that philosophically and personally I believe that there is still a place for an all women's college, even though I know that there are a lot of, many more men on campus and in classes than there were in late 50s and early 60s. But I think the kind of culture that is built within a women's college and the atmosphere for learning and the

focus on teaching, teaching and learning, not just research, is very important in helping to develop human potential and especially potential in women and girls. So I try to sell it, I must say to a lot of competition these days, but I still think it's a good option and I still think that the kind of emphasis that the college places on the teaching process and the relationship between faculty and students, in addition to doing their research but the focus, and the smaller classes in addition to the lectures, I think that's very important and hopefully will continue to exist as an option. It's not for everybody. I know that there are young women, there's a young woman in my church who is very urban so I don't think that Smith would be a good option for her. But for me it was a very good option, an opportunity.

DUNN: How many other reunions have you come back to (overlapping dialogue; unclear).

PIRES-HESTER: I've been to several. I served on the board of the Alumnae Association for three years, 1980, I guess '80 to '83, so I came to those. I guess I came to my fifth and then I came to my twenty fifth and forty fifth. So I've come to a few.

DUNN: How have you seen Smith change and what do you think of the changes that you see here?

PIRES-HESTER: Well, there are a lot of more buildings on the campus. And I think that the kind of emphasis and development of say the sciences and engineering for women is very good and I've seen that grow over the years. And I think the options for women have expanded. You know, Sophia Smith's will said that she was building an institution that would be about helping women create power for good and I think that that still exists. In the session that I attended this morning at Alumnae College on schooling in the twenty first century one of the faculty members said that Teach for America, Smith College has the largest number of applicants for Teach for America. I didn't realize that but I knew that there were many and as I told you, I served on the board of Teach for America in its beginning years. So I think that there's still that power for good that is being generated through the college and through its students and alumnae.

DUNN: Do you notice the increasing of women of color on campus and how is that –

PIRES-HESTER: No.

DUNN: You don't?

PIRES-HESTER: I don't.

DUNN: Interesting.

PIRES-HESTER: And in the 80s I served on the African-American studies advisory committee.

DUNN: With Nell Taylor?

PIRES-HESTER: Yes. And Cheryl Sutton. And I know in the 70s there was a big increase but as I was leaving, I remember distinctly when I was leaving the alumni association board I remember having lots of conversation on the board about recruitment and admissions and the cost of tuition. And one of my great concerns was that the representation of students of color would become harder and harder, and not only students of color but also the diversity of socio economics, because once you look at the sticker price of, what is it today, close to 50?

DUNN: What they tell us, it's 50, yes.

PIRES-HESTER: 50,000?

DUNN: Really it's about 70-80,000 to actually have a student here but –

PIRES-HESTER: So when a family looks at that price they don't even think about Smith. And I don't know what the numbers are today of the representation. I know that there have been a greater number of international students but I think that's still a challenge that not only Smith faces but other colleges face as well. I didn't have any biological children in either of my marriages but I know that if I did and was looking at colleges I think it's a, I'm on the board of Anderson University in Indiana and one of the things we talk about as a board is how we compare in tuition to public and other colleges and particularly now you're seeing, I think what's happening, one of the patterns that's happening in places like New York is that maybe students are considering going to a community college and maybe transferring because many of the community colleges are now developing these honors programs and trying to attract students that might ordinarily go into a college like Smith for the first year. I think economics is really driving a lot of college choice that students and their families are voting with their feet. So I think that remains a challenge.

I don't see a lot of alumnae of color at reunions. Several years ago, I think it was with the advisory committee, we started an alumnae association reception for women of color alumnae and I know I went to that at the forty fifth reunion and I probably will stop by tomorrow but I haven't seen a lot. I haven't seen the other two students in, two alumni in my class. I think they'll be coming but I haven't checked to see if they're here. So I think that's unfinished business, not just for Smith but a lot of other places.

DUNN: Do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

PIRES-HESTER: Work hard. Take advantage of as many opportunities as possible. If I were doing it over again I would probably try to take advantage of a year abroad. My late second husband really introduced me to overseas travel and we used to do at least one trip a year in addition to going to Jamaica, which he was from, every year and doing other local travel. But I haven't done that, he died in 2000, but I haven't done a lot of that since then and I think that that is one of the things that we should all do is really see how the rest of the world lives. Our last trip was to Turkey and we had done Russia and several times to Europe. When I married him he had been to Europe and North Africa something like 32 times and had gone when you could do, he had the photo books, when you could do Europe on \$5 a day. And he believed in it as a way of learning and experiencing different people, different places, different languages, etc. So that's something that I would probably do differently today.

DUNN: Thank you.

GEIS: One question. This is kind of large but could you just give a sort of overview of your time after Smith and your career trajectory, just sort of where you went and some of the choices you made along the way, any thinking behind those choices.

PIRES-HESTER: OK. After Smith, as I said, I went to the Columbia School of Social Work. And at that point I made another critical decision to go work in a new program that was not a typical social services program. It was Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited which was funded by, it was first a demonstration funding, federal funding, Bobby Kennedy and the Kennedy administration had a lot to do with the forming of the Office of Economic Opportunity. [HarYOU?] came even before that. And I worked with a person who was my faculty advisor at Columbia School of Social Work. So I was there for three years. It was an experience that I will never forget. I learned a lot from the teenagers that I worked with. Hopefully they learned something from me as well. We had a wonderful experience preparing for the March on Washington, which was like a surreal experience.

And then I went to work with a woman who was developing, again, a new program called Women's Talent Corps which is very much the idea of the Ada Comstock Scholar, although for low income women, to bring them into a training, first a training situation where they would work in schools in human services, in mental health, mental retardation, developmental institutions, legal services, etc. And then we developed a new college called the College for Human Services which is today Metropolitan College of New York. And after that I went to work with, in New York City but again with a new program that was being developed to bring the automation of social services information into the city of New York. It was statewide automation. It was called the Welfare Management System and I was director of training.

And before that I decided, between the college and going to work for the – oh, I went to work for a foundation in the city and I decided that I wanted to, I read a book called Patterns of Race in the Americas and the author referred to an anthropologist at Columbia, Marvin Harris, so I decided that I wanted to do that kind of work. I got a grant from Ford Foundation to do oral histories. I wanted to do some work on the Cape Verdean American experience which at that time there was none, very little existing on either the history of Cape Verde or the Cape Verdean American experience. So I got a grant and it was through that that I came across this book. I went to speak to Marvin Harris, who had done his work in Brazil, was familiar with Cape Verde, and he said, “Why don’t you come and do doctoral work here?” So I applied. It was in my first marriage. I was not accepted and my husband at that time, I thought OK, that’s it, obviously I’m not qualified. My husband at that time said, “But you don’t know why you weren’t accepted and you probably should be.” So I went to talk to the admissions person and all she could tell me was that I had never taken an anthropology course and I had been out of school for so long. So I was accepted and in fact, when it came time to do the comprehensives I ranked, I tied with a young man, Jewish, who had come directly from undergraduate school. And that was a shock to the professors.

So I got my doctorate in anthropology, then I worked for the city. Then I got married again. I was divorced in ’85, got married again in 1990. I was working at another foundation in New York, the Edwin Gould Foundation for Children, and I left there in ’94 and then in ’98 I started working at the DeWitt Wallace Funds for Children. That time I was also on the board of the New York Theological Seminary. I left the fund and went to be the vice president at New York Theological Seminary until 2006. And since that time I have not been employed but I’m on the board of the seminary, on the board of Anderson University, which is the alma mater of my late husband, and chairperson of the board of trustees at my church and on a state commission in Massachusetts which has been formed to promote and support an historic schooner that is 117 years old and was built in Gloucester and has an illustrious North American history, Artic, Grand Banks, fishing, etc and was sold in ’47 to a Cape Verdean who used it to bring people and cargo back and forth between Cape Verde and the US. And I’m still doing those things.

I also went to Cape Verde for the first time in 1981. So I went to the island where my family was from and I went to the house where my father was born and all of his siblings. My 101 year old aunt, the last of the siblings, just died a couple of weeks ago. It was quite a loss. I’m named after her. And I also went back in 1987 to Cape Verde. So I’ve been to Cape Verde twice which was a mind blowing experience really.

DUNN: That’s a lot. That’s a wonderful life.

GEIS: We need a day for everybody.

DUNN: I know, we do need a day.

GEIS: How do you feel?

DUNN: I think we're pretty good (overlapping dialogue; unclear).

GEIS: OK, thank you so much.

PIRES-HESTER: You're welcome, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Susan Savoy, July 2011.