Abstract

In this interview, Ryan Rasdall looks back on his choice to attend Smith and the community he found in Wilder House. Rasdall, a Study of Women and Gender Studies Major, talks about the impact the newly formed department had on him. Rasdall also talks about the atmosphere on campus leading up to the 2008 election of President Obama.

Restrictions

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


Transcript

LAWRENCE: That’s going to be cool. Have you done that before?

RASDALL: Not here, but I had some Smithies come to my job in New York, to chat about what I do in past, post-Smith.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

RASDALL: I’m looking at the camera like, Are we recording now? I don’t know if we’re recording. Let me go, Check one. Check two. One. Two.

LAWRENCE: (laughs) All right. Do you want to start?

RASDALL: Sure.

LAWRENCE: All right. I’m Sunny Lawrence, and I’m conducting an interview for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project on May 21, 2016.

RASDALL: It is the 21st.

LAWRENCE: Can you say your full name and your graduating year?

RASDALL: Sure. My full name is Ryan [Ashley Fossett?] Rasdall. I graduated in 2011. I majored in women and gender studies and minored in Afro-American studies. I don’t know if you even asked that, but I thought I’d just throw it in there.

LAWRENCE: Awesome. I want to start by quickly asking you what your life was like before Smith and how you ended up coming to Smith.

RASDALL: Oh, that’s a big question. So I was born and raised in New York City. I grew up in Manhattan, and I don’t know how much detail you actually want for the whole thing.

LAWRENCE: As much as you want.
RASDALL: So how I ended up at Smith. So I have to go back to high school a little bit. It was just my mom and I living together. My father had passed away when I really young, and we had moved to Georgia in 2001 from New York City. It was like the middle of my sixth grade year. It was really hard, and we were struggling financially a lot and just like moving from place to place to place. And so midway through high school my mom got a phone call — and I was having a rough year anyway, just socially with friends — and my mom got a phone call for me to — from a friend of hers who was like, Hey there’s a boarding school. Like, a bunch of boarding schools are coming down to Atlanta to do interviews and meet people. Do you think Ryan would be interested? She was like, I don’t know. I don’t know if Ryan wants to do that. And I was just like, Yes! Let’s do that. I didn’t even know anything about private school or boarding school. I didn’t know what it entailed. I just was like, I need to get out of Georgia because I always used to tell people like, I can show up to class and smile and pull of an A. And it was not challenging for me at all academically.

So, I interviewed for two schools. Interviewed with — I think was — Phillips Exeter, and I interviewed with Miss Porter’s School. And I was accepted at Miss Porter’s School, and I went there for my last two years of high school. And while I was there, it was challenging because coming from Georgia, where I wasn’t very academically challenged, I had to transition into the school environment that was extremely academically challenging, and I felt like I was doing the catch-up that a lot of students, perhaps, they do when the get to college. And a lot of my friends did when they got to Smith. And I was doing it in like my eleventh grade year and my twelfth grade year of actually like, Oh. I have to actually read really hard materials and, you know, take statistics and take calculus and do a lot of really, really hard things. But it was it was actually like one of the best things that I ever did in my entire life.

And so while I was there, I was meeting with my guidance counselor about colleges, and I didn’t — I was first generation and my mom and my dad didn’t go to college. None of my siblings really did. One of them went to John Jay — and she had just graduated — but I didn’t have anyone who went off to school. I didn’t really have a road map to follow. And so I took a bunch of exams, not exams, but tests being like, Well, what do you prefer? Do you like a small classroom? What kind of campus size? What kind of dorms do you like? And so she threw out smith as an option. And I was like, Oh. I’ve never heard of it. And so Smith was like 45 minutes from Farmington, Connecticut, so I had one of my roommates parents drop me off for a day of Smith. It was a visitor’s day for perspective students. And I came on campus, and I just fell in love with Smith College. And so. I ended up looking at like Mount Holyoke and Barnard, but I had already fallen in love with Smith. And I had made that decision, so I applied early decision my senior year at Miss Porters. And I went.
LAWRENCE: Nice.

RASDALL: So that’s kind of my fast story of how I got here.

LAWRENCE: When you first got here, what did you find the transition into college like?

RASDALL: Oh, it’s another good question. It was challenging. So I was already — because financially my mom wasn’t working, and it was already a struggle being at a private school there. And then transitioning here, I was doing work study, and I was still taking care of my mom in many ways. And then on top of that trying to be competitive academically, but I didn’t quite know what I was doing. So I felt like I was taking the most random of classes. I was taking like geology, like learning about — which I really love — I love learning about plate tectonics and volcanos, and I was taking Roman and Greek art. And I just didn’t know. I was just like, Oh, That class is interesting, and that seems interesting. I didn’t know what a major was.

LAWRENCE: (laughs)

RASDALL: I was just like, I just took the most random of classes. And then I kind of knew I wanted to be a SWAG major, and I remember my senior year in high school I emailed the head of the department about an article that I had read. And she replied, and she ended up being my advisor, which I was really happy about. Susan Van Dyne. I don’t think she’s any longer –

LAWRENCE: Yeah. She’s around.

RASDALL: Oh, she’s around?

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

RASDALL: That’s good. But yeah, it was just the transition academically wasn’t super hard because I had already been really done the catching up in high school, in private school. But it was challenging just because it was a larger campus. There were a lot more people. My school was — my high school — was about 300. Altogether, my graduating class was maybe 80 other girls. Now Smith was, I think, 2,000. But it was still small compared to other schools. So. Generally it was fine. It was just little things that were challenging.

LAWRENCE: So you ended up being a SWAG major and an Afro-American Studies minor, right? Can you talk a little about your academic journey here?

RASDALL: Sure. I know I took intro to SWAG my spring of my first year, and I knew after I took that class that I wanted to major in that. I was just drawn
to the critique and study of gender and how our society views it. I think it had a lot to do with the fact that, you know, I was raised by my mom, and I saw how she struggled with that. And as like a black woman in America, how she was treated. And I didn’t have the language to articulate any of that, but, you know, you see it, and you internalize it. And so I loved that the SWAG department here was talking about race and gender, socioeconomic class, all that. So I’m currently applying to law school. I’ve recently looked at my transcript, so I know I took — I’m trying Carrie Baker, I think my junior year. My senior year I did a fantastic study abroad seminar with Doctor Jaffe. We went to India, we were pretty much creating our own culturally sensitive curriculum for Tibetan woman –

**LAWRENCE:** Oh my God.

**RASDALL:** — who had been displaced and are currently living in India at a university there.

**LAWRENCE:** Wow.

**RASDALL:** We taught like sex ed. I was co-chair of the Peer Sexuality Educators while I was here. So sexual health, sexual education was a big part of my experience here at Smith. My mom was a teen mom and just like sexual health wasn’t really talked about in my house, even though it was something that obviously had an impact on our lives. And so I just kind of ran with that passion and took it, while I was here, and it’s continued even after Smith.

**LAWRENCE:** Yeah. Where are the biggest places that you found friendship and community during your years at Smith? I think it definitely starts, at least for me, it started in the pre-orientation. So I did a hiking — like a really challenging — hiking group. It was Hiking 2 or Hiking 3. I don’t even remember what it was called. And that’s where I made my first friends here at Smith. So they took us out to — I don’t know if it was still in Massachusetts or they took us to somewhere in Connecticut — and we just did a lot of hiking over a couple days. And that was fun. So I made my earliest friends there, and they continue to be people that I have spoken with and then gotten to see here during the reunion, which is really nice. And then I think also your house is another space where I made a lot of good friends. I’m actually here staying with my roommate from my first year.

**LAWRENCE:** Oh wow.

**RASDALL:** So we’ve stayed in touch with everyone. We were a good cohort in our house. I was in Wilder. Even though I left Wilder for my sophomore year
— and I lived in Tyler house for that year — and then I moved back to Wilder. But yeah, I think the house system here at Smith really encourages friendships and community. And then of course you meet people in your classrooms and in your classes, and then just like the extracurricular groups. So the Peer Sexuality Educators, which was like a big part of my experience here. But mainly my [Prio?] group and the house was where I made a lot of my community and friends.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. So everybody — Smith has this rep of like a gay school, and it seems like it was a very strong gay/queer presence here while you were here. Can you speak to that a little.

RASDALL: (sigh) Yes. I don’t even know if I was cons— I don’t even know if I was a part of like a gay group. That was a really challenging part of my — I was coming out during my first year as a gay, but now identify as trans and straight. But I don’t know if I was a part of a gay community or a gay group. I definitely interacted with a lot of lesbians or queer identified people while I was here. But yeah, that’s a great question. I don’t even know if I like considered myself to be a part of that group. I felt like I was just living my life and trying to accept who I was, at the time, while studying and being in classes and also trying to manage that with my family and coming out and being OK with that. So.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. Was there any kind of a transgender presence here?

RASDALL: (sigh) So I probably — because I didn’t identify as trans while I was here. There were a few trans guys that I wasn’t super close with any of them at the time. But it was definitely talked about, but I think now that the country is talking about it a lot more, people are getting a lot more attention. I just don’t feel like it got a lot of attention at the time that I was here at Smith. But that was also probably because I wasn’t tuned in to the community at all.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

RASDALL: So. But yes, there were trans guys here, and it was, you know, I had a friend or two who was trans, but I just didn’t have the space mentally to even begin my journey to going there. So I don’t even know if I have the answer to that.

LAWRENCE: It’s all good.

RASDALL: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: But you did come out as gay here?
RASDALL: Yes. My first year I definitely, towards the end of the year became — came out to either my friends or my family. Definitely by my sophomore year, I was way more OK about myself after telling my mom, who was super supportive and my close siblings. So then, totally embraced it. Did the stereotypical shaved your head thing that people say happens at Smith. So that happened sophomore year.

LAWRENCE: Did you have any really important relationships or friendships that kind of defined your Smith time for you?

RASDALL: Yeah. So like my roommate and the all the friends I made in Wilder were probably some of the closest friendships that I made here. And then my fiancée — who was then my girlfriend by my junior year — she was in Comstock. I was in Wilder. So they’re joining houses as you probably know.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

RASDALL: And so I would hang out a lot in Comstock, and I’m still really good friends with a lot of her friends in Comstock House. So those have been the most defining friendships for me.

LAWRENCE: Do you want to talk about your relationship with your fiancée a little more.

RASDALL: Sure. So we were both co — Like we were both super interested in reproductive health and sexual health. We met during a January — it was like before classes started — it was junior year. It was 2010. I should get that right because that’s when we met. That’s our anniversary. So we met during this retreat that Emily Nagoski put on for people who were interested in sexual health and gender and gender diversity. So we had — I think it was — a two or three day convening before classes, just talking about — getting a refresher, I should say. And so I met her then, and I found out that she was Emily’s intern, and I was super jealous. And I was like, That’s awesome, and I would love to work with Emily Nagoski.

And then we just — It took off from there, and I didn’t realize that she lived in Comstock, so we were literally — It didn’t take very much. We never had to go outside to see each other, and we’d go back and forth between our houses. I think I mainly spent a lot of time in Comstock House, for the main part.

And she was an Anthropology major, and I was a SWAG major, but she taught me a lot about the work that she’d been doing and how she’d been traveling. And she’d done a lot of work in Africa, Tanzania and Ghana and such over her lifetime. So I was really impressed. And yeah, we ended up graduating together, and we moved to Boston together and lived with her parents for a year. And then we moved to New York in
2012 after backpacking around Europe together for six weeks. And then we’ve been living there ever since. And we got engaged back in December. So.

LAWRENCE: Congratulations.

RASDALL: Thank you.

LAWRENCE: I love when Smithies get married. It’s my favorite thing. Did you have — so sounds like you had a lot of important friendships. Did you have someone who was like either a professor or an older student or anything who was someone you really looked up to?

RASDALL: Oh that’s a great question. Well I think I really admired, and spent a lot of time, thinking about my class with Carrie Baker, the Gender and Law class. And it’s funny now because I never considered law school while I was here. It’s not even something I thought I could do. It was not on my radar, and now it’s something I’m actually applying to do later this fall. But just everyone in the SWAG department. I just really appreciated the work and the research and the time that they put into teaching that subject. I know it’s like only 30 or 35 years old as a major here at Smith, but it was something that I really valued. And just in general Smith just centers women and centers, you know, the most vulnerable. And so I felt like that was a really important aspect of my time here, and I was really passionate about the major itself. So Carrie Baker, Susan Van Dyne, who was my advisor. There was another professor here when I was here. He’s no longer here, I believe, but he taught LGBT history. I think his name was Daniel, but I don’t remember his last name. So those are probably some of the professors that I admire the most.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. And you also worked with PSE a lot with Emily Nagaski.

RASDALL: Yes.

LAWRENCE: Do you want to talk about your work with PSE a little?

RASDALL: Sure. PSE was probably one of the best things I ever did. I just really enjoyed learning and talking about sexual health. We did a lot of workshops and education. We’d travel from houses, and during Tease on Fridays or Sundays, we would go and we’d come up with fun games. And we’d hand out condoms, and we’d show how to properly use both internal and external condoms. We’d talk about pleasure. We’d talk about everything. We’d have like Oh My! come from downtown and do like a workshop on, you know, G-spot or sexual sex toys or whatever, sensations. Everything. I just loved it. I think because a lot of — in our culture in general, we’re just like super not comfortable talking about sex
or sexual health or sexual pleasure. So I just felt like it was something I was super comfortable talking about. And then, right after graduation, I ended up working at Good Vibrations, which is a very women centered, feminist sex adult store. I loved it. It was great. I got to do that for a year. I did workshops. Sold a lot of toys, but had a really great time doing it.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. Was there ever — did you always feel like you fit in at Smith or was there ever a time when you were like, I don’t know if I belong here.

RASDALL: (sigh) That’s another good one. I think I always kind of felt like I didn’t fit in at Smith in many ways. I think because I didn’t feel like all of my friends understood, especially because I was coming from a very low-income family and background. I just didn’t feel like my friends always understood how I had to live my life and how things worked for me, but I tried my best to explain it. And then, you know, there were times that I didn’t feel like I always fit it with the students of color at Smith and then there were times were I felt like I probably didn’t fit in with the queer students at Smith for a variety of different reasons. So I think I’m always doing that critique. Like, Do I fit in here? How do I feel? And then I’m feeling it especially now as like I’m coming back as a trans guy. Like, Do I belong here? Do I fit in here? What’s my role? Do I go up to someone and be like, Hey, what year are you? And have them be like, Oh, are you someone’s husband or partner? And I’m like, Yeah I’m actually an alum. And how do I — when do I have that conversation? How does it change if I see someone who’s maybe a class of 1956? I don’t even — it’s just something I’m constantly negotiating right now. Like, When do I fit in? When is it OK for me to say something and be a part of the Smith community? Which I know I am, but it’s also a challenge.

LAWRENCE: I’ve heard trans guys say that they respect that this is a women’s space, but it also is alienating to be a guy in a women’s space.

RASDALL: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Is that real?

RASDALL: It’s definitely real. Definitely want to — even when I was talking before I came in here, talking to Kelly via email. Is it OK? Do you want this story or — I definitely want to make space and support the archives documenting the lives of women here at Smith. So. And she said it was fine, I’m documenting all Smithies. It’s something I’m trying to be constantly aware of, and I think that’s the role of an ally. The role of someone who’s not a member of a community is to uplift those stories and make sure that those stories and those voices are being heard. So I think it’s important.
LAWRENCE: Yeah. So Smith has struggled with racism on campus for years and years. And I think there were a couple high profile incidents while you were here. Can you talk a little about what you remember about race and racism on campus?

RASDALL: Yeah. So I think my first year, the big incident — that was 2007/2008 school year — there was a party. I don’t even know what the party was called. I really don’t know what the party was called. I didn’t go to too many parties. I was like a loner and lived in Neilson Library. But I think it was a party where another Smithy dressed up as Whitney Houston, her partner or her boyfriend or someone she was with was dressed up as Bobby Brown, so they went in black face or something. That was a major issue on campus, and at the time we had this online — I’m trying to think of the word for it —

LAWRENCE: Forum?

RASDALL: – forum called the Jolt, I think it was called. And so people were just commenting on the Jolt. And the thing about the Jolt was you could be anonymous. And so they were just like — lots of people were just like really upset about it, people who were defending the person who was doing it. People were upset, and this was just like this really big swell of anger and frustration that was happening our first year. And that was like, I’d never witnessed anything quite like that.

But Smith was really great about having some follow up discussions and forums after that. I remember they invited Tim Wise, who’s like — he’s a white guy but he does all a whole lot of anti-racism work around the country. He’s written a lot of books. I know that he has spoken at the White Privilege Conference, and he’s just done a lot of work around that. So I remember going to that talk and really, really liking what he had to say. Smithies were talking about it over diner, in their dorms. It was just like a big, big issue. And so I think the campus was moving in the right direction of trying to grapple with this and understand, Why did this happen? What can we do to be more supportive? To be a better — make people feel safe on our campus? So that was big. I’m trying to remember. That was probably the defining thing that happened my first year. And there may have been other instances but I may not have been aware of.

LAWRENCE: Do you feel like people of color in general felt safe on this campus?

RASDALL: I don’t know. I definitely don’t want to speak for anyone else.

LAWRENCE: Like the people that you knew?
RASDALL: I think people that I knew — and I definitely felt safe. But depends on what you’re talking about. It’s hard to talk about — it was sometimes hard to talk about it in classes, especially if you’re talking about sociology or a SWAG class, where people are talking about their own experiences and someone — the idea that comes to my head is the Women’s Movement of the ’60s. You know, women matter. Women should do more work. Women of color were like, Hey, actually we can’t leave our men behind because they experience racism like we do.

And so just I think talking it in class about your own lived experience, especially mine, I didn’t always feel safe to say, Hey, I grew up poor. Hey, I didn’t have these things. I remember in a class a professor was talking about, Oh, we have this — I think the Gardasil or some new HPV or vaccine had come out — and the professor was saying, Well, all of you should get it. It’s really, really important. And I was just like, Well, all of us don’t have health insurance. All of us don’t have the resources. It’s not covered. It’s like $180 per shot. It was just like when people made assumptions about folk’s backgrounds or access or resources. And that oftentimes rode hand in hand with race. And so that was always a discussion.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. I feel like a lot of people feel like Smith has a tendency to be kind of elitist sometimes. Is that something that you felt?

RASDALL: Yeah. Definitely. I think any place of higher education, especially places where there are a lot of people living with a lot of socioeconomic privilege can have that feeling to it. Smith is just like really, really smart and really, really great, and that’s what I love about being here. But it’s important to have those conversations and acknowledge the privilege that exists –

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

RASDALL: – within the classroom, within the community.

LAWRENCE: So you were here during a really historic moment in American politics, which was the Obama campaign for presidency. What was that like on campus?

RASDALL: That was probably one of the best things. I still have a “Smithies for Obama” t-shirt, and I remember — actually, I took a photo. We had a cutout of then-Senator Obama. I used to work in the — I’m forgetting the name of everything. Forgive me. It’s been five years. In the athletic building, the gymnasium. I used to work there. And they had a cutout of Senator Obama, and I just remember standing next to the cutout. And he just like lived there for a while.

LAWRENCE: (laughs)
RASDALL: I don’t know whose cutout that was. It was just outside someone’s office. But then the night of the election, which was super nerve-racking and scary, a lot of students went to the Campus Center. And in the upstairs room, they had the big projector, and we were just watching the election happen. And we were like chatting, and we weren’t drinking because it was the Campus Center. And I was underage anyway. I was like 20, I think. 19 or 20. And I just remember when they and CNN and a bunch of places were just calling it that he had won. The entire Campus Center just erupted in cheers. Everyone was crying, and we were hugging each other. That was probably one of the best memories I have until the next memory I had. I walked downstairs. I was like, All right, I’m going to go home now. This is like, Great! I’m going to call my mom. I walked out the front of the Campus Center, towards Chapin Lawn, and there was a pack of 20 naked Smithies —

LAWRENCE: (laughs)

RASDALL: — running. Just cheering and running, and it was awesome. Then, about 10 seconds later there was Pub Safe trying to catch up with them, but they were just like, Ah, one second. They were just trying to catch up. So that was probably one of the best memories I have of the Obama election. So yes, following that was pretty historic, and it felt amazing. And as we’re entering into the end of his presidency and now upon potentially our new leader also going to be a historic and kind of scary again feeling of the politics of this country.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. So, you talked earlier about not going to parties. What did you —

RASDALL: First half.

LAWRENCE: Sorry?

RASDALL: First half of Smith. I feel like the beginning of Smith, yeah I didn’t go to very many parties.

LAWRENCE: Oh, did you start going to parties later?

RASDALL: Once I met my fiancée, it was party town.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. (laughs) What did you do for fun otherwise?

RASDALL: I hung out with a lot of my friends. We either watched a lot of TV. I’d never had my own TV until I got to Smith. In boarding school there was a TV in the common area, but you weren’t allowed a TV in your room. So I somehow got a TV when I got here. Like maybe 10 inch or maybe 11
inch; really big heavy 50 pound TV. But I was like, Yes! I have a TV. I have cable. So we’d watch a lot of shows, or I’d go downtown and hang out with people there. I’m trying to remember what I did for fun. I was pretty lame my first couple years here. I did a lot of studying in Neilson, like I said. But yeah, I think our house, our seniors, and our house committee was really good about creating space and fun activities for us to do while we weren’t in class.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. Did you have favorite places around here that you went a lot?

RASDALL: I guess definitely the Campus Center. Chapin Lawn was probably — like we were always meeting on Chapin Lawn. It was like the place to be to grab food, hang out, sip coffee, take a nap, read a book, talk about class. I’m trying to remember. Definitely by the pond. And I remember when I first — the first day when I got here, there were new Smithies going down to the pond to jump in the pond with a rope swing. I don’t even know if it’s still there.

LAWRENCE: It’s still there. Yeah.

RASDALL: Yeah. I remember doing that. And definitely taking the kayaks out and going down the river was another. I like being outdoors.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

RASDALL: Camping and stuff. So that was amazing. I loved that I had — that was one of the reasons I chose Smith. It was like I wanted to have a space where I could do outdoor activities and canoe and hike and get around and be around nature. I didn’t want to be stuck in the confines of a big tall, cement city. I just really liked being — I liked having all trees and having all the bushes and all the chipmunks —

LAWRENCE: (laughs)

RASDALL: — and all that. I wanted that experience.

LAWRENCE: Totally.

RASDALL: So that’s why I chose — one of the reasons why I chose — Smith.

LAWRENCE: Do you feel like since graduation you’ve taken your experience and your Smith education to your life with you?

RASDALL: Definitely. Especially around — I think what makes Smith unique is seeing what I was saying before, the idea of centering women and women’s stories. And so definitely in the real world, where women are
not centered and women’s stories are not valued, it’s definitely something that I carry with me and I carry with me every day.

LAWRENCE: Yeah.

RASDALL: I know, especially as a trans guy now. I’ve seen the way that sexism works and how men view women, how they talk about women when they don’t think there are any women around. And it’s disgusting, and it’s so messed up. It’s unique for me to now be on that side of it and now going out of my way to make sure that women’s voices are included. And like, who’s not at the table. Let’s think about that. And lifting up the voices that aren’t being discussed, if it’s women or trans women, who’s voice is not here and valuing that and making sure that others are aware that that’s happening. So.

LAWRENCE: Well, unfortunately, we’re out of time, but that’s an amazing place to stop.

RASDALL: Thank you.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. Thank you for being here.

RASDALL: Thank you so much. This was great.

LAWRENCE: (laughs)

RASDALL: I think I’m sweating under this light. Do not put this in the video.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June 2016.