

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Katherine Reymann, Class of 1996*

Interviewed by  
Sunny Lawrence, Class of 2017

May 14, 2016

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Katherine Reymann, former member of Emerson House and the Smith College Crew Team, looks back on her time in both communities, as well as the close friendships she formed there. Reymann remembers the social dynamics and tensions between the quad and the rest of campus, and the rise of activism in quad houses in support of minority students.

## **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*

**Bibliography:** Reymann, Katherine. Interview by Sunny Lawrence. Video recording, May 14, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Katherine Reymann, interview by Sunny Lawrence, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Reymann, Katherine. Interview by Sunny Lawrence. Transcript of video recording, May 14 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Katherine Reymann, interview by Sunny Lawrence, transcript of video recording, May 14, 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 14, 2016, with:

KATHERINE REYMANN  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: SUNNY LAWRENCE

LAWRENCE: All right, cool. I am Sunny Lawrence. I'm here doing an interview for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. It's May 14, 2016, and I'm here with — could you say your full name and your graduating year?

REYMANN: Kate Gunnison Reymann, 1996.

LAWRENCE: Awesome, hi. Thank you so much for being here today. I wanted to just start by asking you what was your life like before Smith, and how did you come to Smith?

REYMANN: I grew up in Sacramento, California, and I went to — I have two younger sisters who sadly did not come to Smith. I went to a big high school in Sacramento called McClatchy High School, and by my junior and senior year, I was in kind of an honors program for English and history, and I was also on yearbook, and I did student government, and every leadership position was run by a woman, or a girl, or whatever, in high school. You know, the president of the student government my senior year was a woman, like, all three editors of the yearbook — I was one of them — was a woman, my two really good friends ran the newspaper, and a lot of my classes just ended up having a lot of women in it, and I loved that. And I started to kind of realize that that's what I would be looking for in a college, and so I started looking at colleges.

My mom had this huge book of colleges, the Yale Guide, and so I started reading through it, and I got to the one about Smith, and the nice thing about the Yale Guide is it's kind of, like, not just numbers. It's actual descriptions of the campus and quotes from people, and I was reading about the housing system, which just seemed amazing. And there was a quote, and I will never forget this, there was a quote from a woman who said, "What could be better than coming down to Sunday brunch in your pajamas?" And I thought, Why would I want to go anywhere else? That sounds phenomenal. So I toured, and I loved it, and I applied early and amazingly got in. I don't think I would get into Smith now, but I got in back in 1992, and I opened the envelope, and the first thing my mom said is, "You can't come home for Thanksgiving

now!” because I was going to be going away, so far away. But I just loved it. I absolutely loved it. It was just this wonderful, incredible place, and now, 20 years later, I still — it is very hard for me to describe the Smith experience to anyone and have them fully understand how special it was. That’s kind of a long answer to your question, but.

LAWRENCE: You’re good. What was it like transitioning here when you were coming from so far away?

REYMANN: It was — there were things I’d totally forgotten about. Like, a friend of mine reminded me yesterday that on the first snow, I woke everybody up by running down the hall saying, “It’s snowing! It’s snowing!” because it never snows in Sacramento. So things like that, that was definitely a major transition. But I know that a lot of people said, “Oh, I don’t know. It’s the east coast, and that’s going to be weird coming from California,” but both my parents were from the east coast. My mom grew up in Pennsylvania and my dad on Long Island, and we vacationed a great deal, when I was growing up, in New Hampshire. So going to the east coast didn’t seem to be such a stretch to me. I had family here, and so for that part, that wasn’t, you know, kind of a major transition. I was just so excited to be here. It just felt like I loved being in high school, but I really loved just having kind of this brand new life, and it was exciting to be the only person going to Smith. And that’s kind of the way I wanted it when I went to college. Being in California, a lot of people go to the UC system which is phenomenal, and I just really wanted someplace brand new, and I got it here. So, yeah. So there were definitely transitions, and I remember being so excited to be home at Christmas. I just missed my family and things, but after, I feel like that was the only semester I really ever was so excited about going home. After that, I was like, I don’t want to go home. I just want to stay here forever.

LAWRENCE: So you were in the quad, right?

REYMANN: Mm-hmm. I lived in Emerson House.

LAWRENCE: Did you find most of your friends in your house, or did you find community outside your house?

REYMANN: I found a lot of friends in my house, but my first two years, I was on the crew team. I was a coxswain, so I had — that allowed me to find friends kind of across campus, which I was actually really happy about because — I mean, if you live here, you know your house is everything, right? And so even though I lived in a really big house, I liked the fact that I had friends kind of on Green Street and in different parts of campus and that I could go and hang out with them and stuff. So the crew team kind of was my community outside of the house. My junior I went away for a semester to Washington, DC, and then my senior year was — I think by

my senior year I was like, I don't want to leave the house because I really — like, we really did so much together because it was our last year, and I think all of us felt like this time is slipping away so quickly.

LAWRENCE: Did you feel like you had people you looked up to, whether it was upperclassmen or professors, people who were mentors?

REYMANN: Yeah. I would say that I had good friends in my house that were a year or two years ahead of me who really were helpful in so many different ways. Just, you know, a shoulder to cry on or to ask about classes and things like that. And it was really one of the things that I loved about Smith when I was looking for colleges was finding that community in the house where it wasn't just a freshman dorm, where you instantly had so many people there to help kind of guide you along the way. So I was an idiot about, like, professors and stuff. I think now, oh my gosh, I could have gone to help. They could have helped me so much more if I had just approached them, and I think I was a little too intimidated to do that, but that's life. You look back and you go, Why was I a government major? I should have just majored in art history.

LAWRENCE: Were you a government major?

REYMANN: I was. I was. It was kind of something I just fell into doing, and, you know, you look back now. And I interview prospective Smithies when they're applying, and I say so often, I say, Unless you absolutely, absolutely know that you're going to be a doctor or something, and you know you want to be premed, oh my gosh. Do whatever you want when you're in school. It's just, Smith gives you so much flexibility to do that, and I wish that I had kind of pushed a little and said, "No, I really want to take art history," or, "I really want to take education classes," and things like that. I think, Oh, I really wish I had done that. But that's life.

LAWRENCE: Were there courses that you took here that you feel like have stayed with you?

REYMANN: I loved Art 100, but I didn't take it till my senior year, and I really regret waiting to take that. I really wish that I had — because I loved the class, and I thought it was such an amazing, amazing class. There was another class, too, that I honestly cannot even remember. Maybe it was Art 100, where I had to do a lot of research about Emerson and about my house, and I did a lot of the research from the archives, and write, like, kind of a history of the quad and why the buildings were built the way that they were, and it was a really fascinating thing. That paper has stayed with me.

LAWRENCE: And you worked in the archives, right?

REYMANN: I did.

LAWRENCE: Can you talk a little bit about your relationship to them and what you think they bring to the college?

REYMANN: I worked in the archives my senior year. My friend Kirsten had been working there her junior year, and so she helped me get the job here, and it was honestly one of the most fun jobs I've ever had. I just loved it. We would go through the stacks downstairs, and we would make scavenger hunts for each other. And so we would start with a clue, like, in a box of pictures from 1926, and then we'd say, once you've found it, you'd move on. Just going down there and opening a box and reading a letter from a student to her parents in, like, 1911 or whatever, it was so fascinating, and I loved it. And I love that. I still have all of the letters my parents wrote to me at Smith because I'm like, Someday I'm just going to give them all to the archives. And I have saved so many things, especially now that I think, Oh my gosh, so much stuff must be lost through emails and texts, and those are just gone forever, and I just loved the physical stuff that you could see, and the pictures, and to go through and see, you know, women from 100 years ago who walked the same walks that I did, and went up the same stairs of Seelye, and that connection to the past at Smith I thought was so fascinating and wonderful, and so yeah. I just think this place is so important.

LAWRENCE: Did you always feel like you fit in here?

REYMANN: At Smith?

LAWRENCE: Mm-hmm.

REYMANN: Yeah. I did. I never felt — I just felt accepted from the get go, and it's just the most — people ask me about it. You know, I mean, there are a lot of crazy smart people here doing amazing things, and even if you're not graduating summa cum laude, you're still surrounded by that sense that you can really do anything, and I think that really — I tell people so much, going to Smith was the best decision I ever made in my entire life. It's made me the person that I am today, and even if I'm not running a Fortune 500 company, it just gave me strength and I just knew I could do whatever needed to be done, whether that was running a PTA or, you know, doing whatever, just knowing that I could do anything. And there's nothing really — I mean, Smith says a lot of it overtly, but it's just kind of that sense after four years of, like, Oh, I've got this. And I just love, love, love that about Smith. So I always felt really, really comfortable here.

LAWRENCE: I keep hearing that from alum after alum of, like, the feeling of you can do anything. Do you think it's the fact that it's a women's college that has something to do with that?

REYMANN: Yeah. And I don't even know how to explain that. I mean, it's just, there's just something so empowering about it, and I don't think when I was here I would stop and say, I feel empowered. It was just kind of day after day of being around women who were just doing really great things, and smart, and interesting, and just talking about everything all the time. I remember right after I graduated, I was so tired. I was so tired, and so sad about leaving Smith, and I realized, I thought, Oh my God. I just spent four years talking. That's what we did. I mean, it was just kind of the nature of the group of my friends. We didn't go to Amherst to parties, and we didn't really go to Boston or travel a whole lot. We loved being here. It just felt like home, and I think just that sense that there was no distraction of guys, and there was no — there was just, we didn't have to deal with any of it, right?

So that was just, it's incredibly relaxing when you don't have to deal with — and it's also, you know, there's no competition there, right? Every dollar for sports is going to women's sports, and every dollar in the classroom, and every professor is there for the women who are here, and the football team isn't getting a bazillion dollars while women's lacrosse is getting nothing. So I do think that there's a huge part of it, and again, 20 years later, I think I still struggle to articulate why it was so important that it was just women, but I just know that it is, and I know that it would have been so different. I talk to friends who went to coed schools, and I talk to my husband about his college experience, and it was just nothing like what I had, on so many levels. I mean, from the fact that — I don't know. No one else I know had candlelight Thursday dinners or Friday tea, although we had tea on Saturday in Emerson because we had so many athletes in our house. And that was always the way it was. We always had tea on Saturday, which I loved, too. It just felt extra special that we got that.

LAWRENCE: It seems like in the '90s there was a very widespread, like, feminist consciousness at Smith. What was your relationship to that?

REYMANN: Well, Emerson — so, when I started at Smith, I think the quad — and I don't know how this is viewed, and maybe it is still the same today — but the quad, I think, there were bigger houses, and I think people viewed it more conservative on campus. I mean, on a crazy liberal campus, you know, maybe the quad was, like, a little bit more conservative than the rest of campus, but it had kind of gotten that reputation. There was never — a black woman was not in my house the entire four years I lived there, which was an issue, and people would say, "Well, why are there no black women in Emerson?" And now I see pictures in Emerson and it's like, Oh, it's way more diverse than it was. The quad was definitely much whiter, and I feel like probably the entire campus was probably whiter in the '90s than it is now, and that, I think, the school to its credit has tried to step up and do a lot more in diversifying the campus. But when I was here, it was very white, and

the quad was much straighter, too. So it was a big deal when the quad started a celebration of sisterhood. I think that they kind of wanted to show the rest of campus that they weren't homophobic bigots living in the quad, that there were a lot of women who were really very, very supportive, and so that was like an exciting thing to be part of, and perform with our house, and things like that. So that was really a fun thing to do, but also felt really important for us to tell the rest of the campus that, you know, no, you're safe here, too.

LAWRENCE: Did you think of yourself as being politically aware when you were at Smith?

REYMANN: I would say — define politically aware.

LAWRENCE: Like, were you interested? Were there, like, social issues that you were passionate about, that you followed?

REYMANN: Yeah, I mean, like I said, I was involved in the celebration of sisterhood all four years that I was in Emerson, and so I felt like that was something that was really important to me. But I also remember things happening, and I just felt so removed. Well, I mean, I remember in 1992, I voted in my first presidential election. I voted absentee ballot for Bill Clinton, and it was my very first political election, and that was really exciting, and people were very, very excited about that. I guess I just felt like the campus as a whole felt, to me, very liberal, and so it was more like a reaction when somebody would be, you know, you'd be like, You're a Republican, but you're at Smith? That seems bizarre. But also things — I remember the Oklahoma City bombings happening, but I felt so far removed from kind of the outside world, and that's probably not a good thing. But so I would say that that was — I don't know if that's answering your question or not.

LAWRENCE: So you were on the crew team. Were you part of any other orgs, clubs?

REYMANN: I'm trying to think. I wasn't really. I didn't do that. I'm trying to think if I was in any clubs at all, which is pretty sad, really, because I was friends with people who were really involved in student government, and I feel like a lot of my friends were involved in a lot of different things, but I honestly don't remember. If I was, I honestly don't remember. I clearly wasn't so involved. Oh, I know. I did yearbook my junior year. It was actually a paid position because they couldn't find anyone to finish the yearbook, so I was like, Well that seems like a cool work-study job. So my junior year — my sophomore or junior year — I ended up, yeah, I did the yearbook because somebody had to put it together.

LAWRENCE: What was the dating culture like at Smith?



REYMANN: It's funny because I don't know if anybody in these interviews has talked about the Facebook group that somebody started called Friday Smithie Sip and Shine.

LAWRENCE: I'm in that, yeah. I'm in that. Do you want to explain what it is?

REYMANN: Yeah. So, I mean, it's only been kind of around for, like, a month or so, I think, like, a month and a half. But a woman from the class of '98 basically started a secret Facebook group for Smithies where you can only post on Fridays, which is when most people had tea, and you'd post a picture of kind of whatever your tea is that day, whether it's actual tea or a glass of wine or, you know, a water bottle or whatever, and your name, your house, your year you graduated, and then your best of the week and your worst of the week. And I'll cry talking about this because it's become such an important part of my life so quickly in that people are just posting in the most incredible manner, and telling these incredible stories about truly just their weeks and what's going on in their lives, and it's just these windows into all of these lives that are being lived, and you just think — and that is amazing to me because, you know, you leave Smith and you know that your Smith friends are out there, and maybe you get to see your Smith friends. I live in Salt Lake City. I never get to see my friends from Smith. You know, I get to see them at reunion, and maybe once in a while in between reunion, and to be able to open up and see, I mean, all these people I didn't even know at Smith, but these incredible lives that are not, again, they're just these really small moments.

And you just think, Everybody's living these really rich, varied lives, and everybody is struggling with stuff I'm struggling with, or maybe they're struggling with things I'm not, and you feel such empathy for them. And you think, Oh wow, I thought I had a bad day, but you had a really bad day. Or they're celebrating these, like, incredible, life-changing things — births and weddings, and it's an amazing, amazing thing, and it makes me so happy to have that out there. I feel like the archives should start archiving everything that is coming across because it's really an amazing thing that she's created, and I just love that it is there, and I look for — it's kind of like, I don't work on Fridays, and it's kind of just taken over my Fridays now.

LAWRENCE: I've noticed that there's a lot of alumni Facebook groups. Like, there's Smith Parents and LGBT—

REYMANN: Which I had no idea existed. Like, none whatsoever, and for as much as I know that Facebook is tracking my every move, I will never give it up because it's given me access in ways that I never could have had. I'm terrible about keeping in touch with people, and I love that it's there so that I can know what my friends are doing, and things like that.

LAWRENCE: And it really — one of the things that Smith tries to sell you when they're, like, marketing the college to new students is that there's this incredible alumni network, and I'm seeing it in action.

REYMANN: Oh, yeah. It's just amazing. Well, so many people, you know, say, "Well, I'm trying to get my book published, or this, or that," and I think people have been really respectful of not saying, "Well I'm trying to sell this or sell that," but saying, "I'm just struggling. I'm looking for an agent," and all of a sudden you'll have, like, 15 responses of, like, Oh, I know this person." Yeah, the connections that people make are just amazing, and it feels so Smith-like, too, like, Oh, I'll totally help you out on that." Yeah, I mean, I feel like they're accomplishing so beautifully what the CDO cannot. I mean, I know that they can, but it's just, it's an amazing thing to see happen.

LAWRENCE: So where has your life taken you post-graduation?

REYMANN: Oh, 20 years. When I graduated, I moved to Washington D.C. with a group of friends from Smith, and I worked at a nonprofit there, and then moved back to California and worked for a children's museum for many years, and then I moved to Sacramento, where I worked for legal services in northern California, running a program, and realized — I'd never realized that the law could help people in the way that legal service can help people who are really in underserved positions and cannot afford legal help, and so I decided I wanted to go to law school, and ended up, of all places, at the University of Utah, which in a million years I would have never thought that I would end up in Salt Lake City. But I've been there for almost 13 years now. I graduated from law school and got the job that I really wanted at Utah Legal Services, and I did housing work, and I also helped women get protective orders against abusive spouses or boyfriends. And I ended up hating being a lawyer. I didn't like dealing with opposing attorneys. I'm very, very — I don't like arguing with people, and people say, Well you should have done that in law school! And I'm like, law school is totally different than the real world.

So I, in the process, got married, and then ended up quitting my job. I really disliked it a lot, and I got pregnant a week later, which worked out perfectly, and I was at home with my son for the first two, three years, and when he started preschool, I noticed that they had an empty garden lot at his preschool. We went to the JCC preschool in Salt Lake City, so I started a garden program, and that grew into a garden and science program, and I ran that for four years, and just recently moved to Red Butte Garden, which is one of the state arboretums, and I do family and community programming there now. So, yeah, so that's where I am in my life. It's definitely — I don't know what I ever imagined I would be doing with a government major, but I do know, like I alluded to before, you know, all of these steps that I've taken along the way, I never doubted that I could do any of it, and I credit that to Smith.

LAWRENCE: Yeah. Thank you.

REYMANN: Thank you!

LAWRENCE: Thank you, Kate.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, June 23, 2016.*