

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Elizabeth Risberg, Class of 1984*

Interviewed by  
Nina Goldman, Class of 2015

May 16, 2014

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Elizabeth Risberg recalls both social and academic life at Smith, as well as her experience as a Head Resident. She talks about the political culture on campus, the Jeane Kirkpatrick commencement speaker controversy, and the Reagan election. Elizabeth recalls the weekly dance parties at Smith that were a source of stress relief for many students. She talks about her career change from journalism to public relations after graduating from Smith, and ends the interview by advising current Smith students to explore their options and go abroad if possible.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Ryan Malloy, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Risberg, Elizabeth. Interview by Nina Goldman. Video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Elizabeth Risberg, interview by Nina Goldman, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Risberg, Elizabeth. Interview by Nina Goldman. Transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Elizabeth Risberg, interview by Nina Goldman, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 16, 2014, with:

ELIZABETH RISBERG  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: NINA GOLDMAN

GOLDMAN: So this is Nina Goldman. I am conducting an interview with Elizabeth Risberg, class of 1984, on May 16<sup>th</sup> in 2014 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So, thank you for agreeing to participate.

RISBERG: Oh, my pleasure.

GOLDMAN: Awesome. And I guess let's start with how did you wind up at Smith?

RISBERG: I had a great guidance counselor in high school, in public school, and when she saw the results of my PSAT, she called me into her office and said, "I want to talk about colleges," and she had a friend who had gone to Smith, and who was a recruiter. So I compiled my list of colleges, Smith was on there, brought them home, and my mother had been here training during World War II as part of the Navy Waves class of women officers. And when she saw Smith on the list, she got so excited. She said, "I would really love it if you went there." So as it turned out, I got in and there I was. (laughter)

GOLDMAN: Cool. And when you got here, how was the climate of the campus? What communities did you find yourself getting involved in?

RISBERG: It was a complete culture shock, because I was from Los Angeles, and in a pretty busy suburb of LA, at a public school, a large public school, and coming here was a complete shock. I wanted to be here. I wanted to be in an academic environment, something where the classes were smaller, liberal arts education, and I was absolutely thrilled with the prospect of coming here. I remember one of the things that I noticed when I was first coming from Hartford on the bus was how green everything was here. And I didn't really think of New England as being green, but I loved the seasons. So in terms of the things I became involved in, I was involved in house committees, intramural sports, I did dance at the studio across the street, I lived in Lawrence House, and the newspaper.

GOLDMAN: Great. And while you were here, is there sort of a typical Smithie that you could describe? Or what were your perceptions of —

RISBERG: My perception is that there wasn't a typical Smithie. I was really impressed and awed by how different people were. We had very preppy people who had the turtlenecks with the whales on them, and the penny loafers. We had punk rock people. We had just a wide variety of people from all walks of life here.

GOLDMAN: How did you see yourself sort of fitting into — fitting into this diverse student body?

RISBERG: Well, at first I tried to embrace my California-ism. I remember my Hawaiian shirt, (laughter) my purple Hawaiian shirt that I used to wear, and I used to roller skate around campus. I even served Friday tea in my roller skates once, with the permission of the people in the dining hall. So I was roller skating across the hardwood floors. So I think I probably just — I embraced my individuality. It took a while to get to, I think. But it was interesting, and I learned from all different groups of people, and I had friends from all walks of life while I was here, and I still do today.

GOLDMAN: And I guess what your — what did your social life look like with all these different types of people in it?

RISBERG: We had great dance parties in the '80s. We had fantastic dance parties. I don't know if they still have it, but we had Thursday night club, which was at Davis, which was the student center there, and that was fantastic. Loved going there and dancing, and every house party we went to, we would just dance. This was the '80s, the music was awesome.

GOLDMAN: Can you tell me more about, like, I guess, Smith in the '80s? I know there was a political climate, definitely, like, student organizing was going on, but just in general, what — what were the — what was going on on campus?

RISBERG: Well, when I was here, it must have — was it my freshman year? Ronald Reagan was running for president for the first time, and I remember one of my classmates crying, and saying, "If he gets elected, it's going to ruin this country," and I — in retrospect, she knew a lot more about politics than I did, because I said, "Huh, that's interesting. I don't really know that much about him," but in retrospect, she was right. (laughter) And I — it was interesting because we obviously didn't have the Internet or any means of communicating, and we didn't even really watch TV at all. I knew very few people who watched TV. So all of our news came from the newspapers, which I didn't read regularly while I was here, so in a way, I was kind of insulated from a lot of the politics. We just didn't really have that communication with the outside world. You really had to actively seek it out and sully your hands on a dirty newspaper or magazine. So that was the only way we found out about

things. In terms of the politics on campus, there were a lot of student — small student groups that were organized, but I see that today, the activism is a lot stronger and a lot more diverse than when I was here.

GOLDMAN: And had you ever — were you involved with any of those groups, or?

RISBERG: Not really. I would read the literature; I'd listen to my friends, and talk to my friends about it. And frankly, I was so busy with studying and everything I was doing that I — and the newspaper, that I didn't really get involved in the politics. I'm sort of apolitical now. Don't get me wrong, I definitely have my opinions, but I don't volunteer for campaigns and things like that, because they — when I encounter politics that I don't agree with, I just don't have any patience for them, (laughter) so that's probably why. And I can't read comments on news stories and political news stories. So during election years, when they have the stories in the newspaper, where they have the reader comments at the bottom, I cannot read them. I'm not allowed to read them, because I go ballistic. (laughter)

GOLDMAN: And I guess while you're here, well, every year there's sort of a controversy that happens on the Smith College campus. Do you remember any controversies from the time that you were here at Smith?

RISBERG: Yes. This is fresh in my mind because of what happened this year with the commencement speaker, but Jeane Kirkpatrick was scheduled to speak here for the commencement when I was a junior, and I think we all signed a petition. Everyone in my house signed a petition to not have her come. At that time, that was pretty charged, and I remember that there was a great deal of debate about that on campus, and editorials in the newspaper, and so forth.

GOLDMAN: Can you — are there other things that you remember in terms of being at Smith during the Reagan years, I guess other than — I know that Kirkpatrick was a big — a big controversy. What were the opinions going around?

RISBERG: For the most part, I think most students didn't want her to be here, and I think that they didn't really agree with Reaganomics. But as I said, I also was insulated from a lot of it, because we were a microcosm. No Internet. No social media. So like I said, everything — all the information that you got was either from other people or from newspapers if you sought them out. So it was nice to be insulated for a few years, (laughter) until I got out in the real world.

GOLDMAN: And you mentioned sort of big dance parties happening. Are there other things that you remember from just, like, general social life at Smith, or things that you wound up doing?

RISBERG: We had great house parties. There were house parties every weekend, and you know, you would study. I remember studying and then going to the party, and sometimes coming back and studying some more. But Thursday, Friday, Saturday were usually the nights to do that, and to a lot of us, it was just a form of exercise and stress relief than it was partying. We didn't party. We danced. So a lot of us just danced, and didn't get drunk, and do anything like that. So it was just a real great way to hang out with your friends and burn off some calories, just release a little bit of stress. So.

GOLDMAN: And in terms of Smith traditions, did you — what was your perception of them? Were you, like, participating in them?

RISBERG: Oh, you know, I loved the Thursday candlelight dinners we had. I still use candles on the table at home. And loved the Friday tea. We all loved the Friday tea. It was just nice to take a break from what you were doing and do something civilized. (laughter)

GOLDMAN: And in terms of your academic work, do you have any, I guess, professors or mentors that made an impact on your career here?

RISBERG: Oh, absolutely. I think a few of my psychology professors definitely did, and in fact I was going to go look one up today. I'm going to be doing that tomorrow. But definitely had an impact in terms of studying things that I never thought I would like, such as statistics, and really loved it, and just encouraged me to be the best student I could be.

GOLDMAN: Did you have a favorite professor?

RISBERG: That's kind of hard to say. I had a few, and I had some language professors that were just terrific.

GOLDMAN: Which languages?

RISBERG: Spanish.

GOLDMAN: Great. Great. And your major was — what was your major?

RISBERG: Psychology.

GOLDMAN: Psychology.

RISBERG: Yeah, but I studied Spanish as well.

GOLDMAN: Mm-hmm. Great. Great. So — and — sorry. Did you — did you wind up going abroad?

RISBERG: I did. I went to Spain for the first half of my junior year through the program at Smith, the PRESHCO program. And I, in fact, just saw some of the people that I was in Spain with here at reunion, and we always just have such a great time when we get back together. It was such a different experience living there. Recently, I went back to the city in Spain where we went to school, found the school, I couldn't believe it, (laughter) it's just hidden amongst these narrow alleys, and went to the site of the old dormitory, which was about a mile or so away, and they'd torn it down and built a new one, so that made me kind of sad. But it was a tremendous experience living abroad, and I try to go back every chance I get.

GOLDMAN: Awesome. And when you — so when you returned to Smith, was it — how was that experience from going from abroad to coming back to Smith?

RISBERG: I actually wish I could have stayed another semester. Some of my friends did. But it was good. I — actually, I came back not only for my major, but also because I wanted to just do some other things, and I applied to be a Head Resident my senior year, and I think that would have been much harder if I had been away my entire junior year, and I also got put in another house for a semester, so I got to meet a whole new group of people, which was great.

GOLDMAN: And did that have an impact on your — I guess your social life, becoming a Head resident?

RISBERG: Oh, absolutely. I loved being a Head Resident. I was Head Resident of a big house, of Cutter, and it was a different house, because it was modern, and so it had a different vibe than some of the other houses that I had lived in, and I especially liked the incoming freshmen. I liked being able to be a mentor to them, and we had a lot of freshmen in Cutter House, and it was just different. People had their own rooms. They didn't have roommates, for the most part, and I loved it.

GOLDMAN: Great. Great. Did that — did that become another part of your community when you were — when you were here?

RISBERG: Oh, absolutely. The Head Residents were a pretty tight group, because we had to go through training together, and some of them were friends of mine, some were people I'd never even met, but you always have that bond, so when we come back to reunion, we all talk about how we were Head Residents together, and to be honest with you, when I look back on it, to be put in a position like that, a leadership position at a young age, I kind of scared myself. I said, "Wow, I did that?" So but I really had a really good time doing it, and I tried to be, you know, a very conscientious person, and as I said, a mentor to the other students, but it's — again, it's another subgroup, people you have something in

common with, and you build that bond. We were all Head Residents together that year, so.

GOLDMAN: And when you were — when you became head resident, did you have, I guess, the same — had you — did you sort of scare yourself in that moment of, like, taking on that kind of responsibility, or were you —

RISBERG: Not at all. (laughter) No, I embraced it. I thought it was great. I charged right in. (laughter)

GOLDMAN: Great. Great. And you wound up, I guess, probably becoming part of that house community as well?

RISBERG: Absolutely. I still keep in touch with people in the house who were not in my class, some of the underclassmen.

GOLDMAN: Great. Great.

RISBERG: I'm going to crash a reunion next year.

GOLDMAN: Oh, and you mentioned outside that this was — this is not your first — your first reunion. So I guess what — what brings you back when you do come back to Smith?

RISBERG: Oh, it's definitely the people, as well as just the experience of being here. There's just such a flood of memories I have, and I was walking around campus last night and today, and my housemate and I were trying to remember the last name of one of our housemates who was a few years ahead of us. I walked into the dance studio, and I remembered it immediately because she was a dancer. And then I just had all these memories of the smells of things, and the way things look, and the way things have changed is really interesting too, but it's just a — just a great trip down memory road, and the older I get, I think the more sentimental I get about it, and then of course, the people, because it's hard to keep in touch with so many people, and unfortunately, some of my classmates are not on Facebook, and it's just — it's easy if they are to keep in touch, but the ones who aren't, it's just much harder to keep in touch with. So, it's a great way to reconnect.

GOLDMAN: And I'm curious about the sort of dance — this dance theme of —

RISBERG: (laughter)

GOLDMAN: — just because it's come up a few times. When were you visiting it? Was it throughout your four — your four years here?

RISBERG: It was. I took ballet there. We didn't get credit for it back then, but I'm an ice skater. I was when I came to Smith, and then I took some time

off, and now I am again. So ballet is part of that, so I took ballet while I was here to hopefully keep up with the sport, and also just as a way of exercise, and I really liked it, and it was very convenient. It was right across the street from where I lived.

GOLDMAN: So that's a place of memories that you have?

RISBERG: Yeah, absolutely.

GOLDMAN: Uh-huh. Are there any — well, are there any other places on campus or in town that sort of have that significance?

RISBERG: Well, unfortunately, they closed Bart's, (laughter) the ice cream place. We were just talking about that. Love that place. The ice cream place on the corner. There's an Italian restaurant there now. You know, I used to go to the gym a lot, but the gym's a lot different now, a lot better, a lot bigger, but I remember going to the gym quite a bit, playing basketball and volleyball. And it was nice to, again, to be centrally located to that. So when I lived on Green Street, I spent a lot of time in that area, right off of Green Street.

GOLDMAN: And Bart's was a frequently visited —

RISBERG: Yeah, which is kind of strange, because I found out I don't really like ice cream. (laughter) They did have this amazing chocolate cake with cream cheese frosting. Someone just told me they had the recipe. She's going to send it to me. But it was just a good place to go and hang out. They had good coffee, too. They had cappuccino, things like that, so.

GOLDMAN: Great.

RISBERG: It was kind of like Herod's. Is that what it was called?

GOLDMAN: Herrell's.

RISBERG: Herrell's. Yeah. It used to be Steve's, so, yeah.

GOLDMAN: And so when you — I guess when you think about Smith, what comes to your mind first?

RISBERG: I think the first the thing is is that I'm proud to have gone here, because it really made me confident in terms of my intellect and my academic training and what I can do. And also the people. Just the people that I met that you establish this bond that you have forever. So running into someone you haven't seen in thirty years, and you still have that bond because you were here at such an important time in your life when you were starting college, and it's a bond you can't ever erase. You always have that in common.

GOLDMAN: Mm-hmm. Yeah. And I know that we talked a little bit about this already, but can you sort of give us a run-through of who you've become since you—

RISBERG: That's interesting. We don't have time to talk about all the jobs I had after graduation. I'm kidding. I was a journal—I ended up being a journalist, which is what I wanted to be when I first came to Smith, and I took the long road that was recommended to me by not getting a degree in journalism, and instead getting a liberal arts education and learning as much as I could about as many things as I could. So I worked as a journalist for several years, and at some point along the way, I got a master's degree in English literature, because I almost majored in literature as an undergraduate. I switched my major. But I just love words. So I got a degree in English lit, I taught writing and Shakespeare for a while, then I had an opportunity to get a full-time job as a communications writer, and I thought, Well, I'll give that a try. And I really wanted a full-time job at that point in my life, and since then, I moved in to public relations and public affairs, media relations, but basically a communications person. So that's what I do. So I work as a director of public affairs for a very large insurance company, and I also am active volunteering. I volunteer for US Figure Skating, and I'm a very active member of the adult skating committee that they have, as well as a competitor. Even at this age. (laughter)

GOLDMAN: Wonderful. And I guess as a final question, I'm wondering if you have any, like, advice for current or future Smithies.

RISBERG: I always say to students, go abroad if you can, and learn another language. It's really important, because that really helped me. The way that I became fluent in Spanish was by living there, and I use it all the time in my job. It's something that sets me apart from other people. And to take classes in as many disciplines as you can. I remember when I first got the catalogue for Smith, which was a paper catalogue back then, I went through and marked all the classes I wanted to take, and I realized that there was no way I could ever fit them in in four years. So but I took physics, I took astronomy, I took philosophy, and it's just a time in your life where you can learn about a lot of different subjects, and then you can pick what you're most interested in, and I also tell people, don't worry if you don't know what you want to be when you grow up, or even what you want to major in when you start college. I think there's a real pressure on these upcoming generations that you have to know what you want to do when you go to school or when you graduate, and I don't think that that's true. I think you should just embrace the experience and just follow your passions.

GOLDMAN: Awesome. Well, good. Thank you so much.

RISBERG: Thank you. It was fun.

GOLDMAN: This was great.

RISBERG: Yeah.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Ryan Malloy, June 2014.*