

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Paula Roberts, Class of 1967

Interviewed by
Vivian Andreani, Class of 2013

May 25, 2012

Abstract

In this oral history, Paula Roberts discusses her political consciousness starting at a young age, and how it grew and developed at Smith. She describes interning with Congressman Conte and Project Cornerstone, an experience that developed her understanding of racism. After leaving Smith, she talks about becoming a welfare caseworker and going to Law school.

Restrictions

None.

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kayla Ginsburg.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Roberts, Paula. Interview by Vivian Andreani. Video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Paula Roberts, interview by Vivian Andreani, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Roberts, Paula. Interview by Vivian Andreani. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Paula Roberts, interview by Vivian Andreani, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2012, with:

PAULA ROBERTS

by: VIVIAN ANDREANI
filmed by: REBECCA RIDEOUT

ANDREANI: This is Vivian Andreani and I am conducting an interview with Paula Roberts on May 25, 2012 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be here.

ROBERTS: It's great.

ANDREANI: So to start things off, how did you choose Smith College?

ROBERTS: I grew up in Massachusetts, and the conventional wisdom was that state schools were not as good as private schools, and I don't think that's still true, but at the time it probably was correct. So it was always a private college that I was going to go to and again, the conventional wisdom was if you're going to a private school, and you're a woman, a woman's college was the place to be. That if you were to be serious about being educated, that's where you wanted to go, and I was very fortunate in having parents who supported education for women and didn't think that it was okay for me just to be sent to the local teacher's college and be done with it. So here I was.

RIDEOUT: Let me just adjust the tripod just for a second. Thank you.

ROBERTS: No problem.

ANDREANI: Good?

RIDEOUT: Now I am.

ANDREANI: So your parents were supportive of your education?

ROBERTS: Very much. I joke about this, and I think it's half true. I was not a very attractive child, and I always had a big mouth, and I think my father thought that he was either going to have to support me for the rest of my life or I was going to get an education to support myself, and so he kind of thought that was cool. I also think he was a child of the depression and he had come from a family that was once very wealthy and his part of the family had lost everything in the crash, and so he had a very kind of love

hate relationship with the social status that was associated with Smith; and on the one hand he was incredibly proud that his daughter could get into a place like this, on the other hand he wasn't quite sure that this was where I should be going and I remember when I came in for my interview, because you had to have an interview at that point, show up and be seen.

The woman who did the interview asked him if he had any questions and he just looked at her and said, "What's the racial diversity here at Smith?" And so that was his kind of provocative way of saying, you know, where are you in the 20th Century and saying, you know, I'm not sure about all of this. I thought it was a perfectly good question.

ANDREANI: Yeah.

ROBERTS: So what an interesting probably of the times that was --

ANDREANI: So did you have a politically conscious background before getting here?

ROBERTS: My father was -- he would have called himself a Communist. That was his political philosophy. He was what we called at the time a yellow dog Democrat which was a way of saying that he would vote for any candidate, even a yellow dog, as long as they were a Democrat, and I don't believe in his entire life he ever voted for anything other than a Democratic candidate. So I grew up in a house where politics was very much a subject of discussion, and I had two brothers and their take on the world was to keep a very low profile and kind of stay out of that stuff, whereas I was always very engaged and so my father and I always had these discussions, serious discussions about -- and you know, if you grew up in New England, your high school education was all about how wonderful America is and how everything is just fine and of course, his experience had taught him very differently.

So it was great - it was a great way to learn to have those discussions and to be comfortable with them and of course, one of the wonderful things about Smith was there was a continual -- you know there was no break in that -- you got here and there were people who had very strong views and those were encouraged, and -- so I knew right from the beginning I was in the right place.

ANDREANI: So was it a politically conscious campus while you were here?

ROBERTS: I would say not overall. But there were pockets of people who were -- you know, it was the beginning of the civil rights movement, so there were a lot of discussions about racial justice and -- and very little discussion about gender at the time, either in the physiological sense or in the big world sense of what your place was, but again there were individual people who were raising questions, and of course, it was the height of Vietnam War and there was still a draft on at that point, so a lot of us were in relationships with guys who were facing being drafted, and you couldn't

escape that easily and so that was a -- the anti-war stuff was a big part of what consciousness there was.

ANDREANI: Can you describe your personal and like the overall experiences of Smith with the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war, like can you talk a little bit more about that?

ROBERTS: Yeah, I did a lot of volunteer work. There were opportunities to go into Springfield and tutor and that kind of thing, so that was kind of where you got started in meeting other people who were interested in the same kinds of things, and then my junior year I did a summer in Washington as an intern for Congressman Conte who represented this district and he was just a fascinating human being. But while I was there, there was something called Project Cornerstone, which was basically trying to reach out to young, white activists to get them more involved in racial justice and economic justice issues, and bless Congressman Conte, he gave me permission to go and participate in this.

So we spent two weeks living in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, which a year before had been torn by the riots, and we lived with families, and I actually worked with CORE while I was there before it became an exclusively black organization, but sort of that kind of immersion into what the civil rights movement was about and what -- what the ethos and philosophy was in the beginning of black power was, you know, a seminal experience of my life, I think, and I remember two things about that that stuck with me for all of my career after that.

One was getting on the subway in Bed-Sty to go into Manhattan and I thought of myself as not a racist, I was color blind, you know, everybody was the same. And coming up out of the subway into Greenwich Village and looking around and the thought that went through my mind was "white people." It was like, well, gee, you know, maybe we have some issues to work on here, that that is not the first thing that you should see when you look around and so that was one of those moments of yeah, racism is not the simple thing that I thought it was.

And the other that was really influential in the work I did later was one of the organizers I worked with said, "Look around. Look around you," and he'd say, "there isn't a single person within eyesight who wouldn't change places with you in a heartbeat." And that stayed with me through my later work of don't glamorize poverty. Don't think something is noble that really isn't that at the core here, you by birth got what everybody else wants and don't kid yourself or try to pretend that that isn't true. So those were both amazing experiences that then took me through after that.

ANDREANI: Were you at Smith when that happened?

ROBERTS: Yeah.

- ANDREANI: So how was it experiencing that and then coming back to Smith that has a decent amount of privilege. How was that experience?
- ROBERTS: It was -- I think -- the honest answer to that question is I had a boyfriend at Yale my senior year and I spent most of my time in New Haven, and so I kind of just didn't engage in it and got more into anti-war stuff because of a men's college campus, not surprisingly, that was -- you know, more of an issue. And so when we graduated a number of us wore black armbands and protested the war, but that was about as active, I think, as the campus got during that period.
- ANDREANI: So how would you describe a typical Smithie at that time?
- ROBERTS: Other than the fact that we were all white, I think there were maybe three or four students of color in my class. They were actually a pretty diverse group. In my freshman house, there was Hollister Douglas Houghton, whose family owned the Houghton Glass -- Corning Glass works and the woman whose father was one of the Alcoa heirs, and then there were Jerri and I, and you know -- and everything in between. Probably a lot more religiously diverse than what I was used to and just enormously bright women, and I think -- I was talking to someone this morning and we were saying one of the down sides of going to Smith is after you've spent four years with wonderfully interesting and bright women and you go out into the world and you don't find that at the drop of a hat, it's a bit of a shock. And all of us, I think, kind of spend our time trying to find those same kind of women and they most certainly are out there, but when it's a luxury that you take for granted, it can be a bit of a shock to discover that it is a luxury.
- ANDREANI: How did your -- what was your relationship with your professors and mentors? Did you have any of those here?
- ROBERTS: Not really. I had some wonderful professors, but I don't think I was smart enough to know that I needed mentors and so I just never made those efforts.
- ANDREANI: So you mentioned a relationship you had. So what was your relationship with dating while here at Smith and the Vietnam War and all those occurrences?
- ROBERTS: Probably not a happy one. You know boys would come trolling through the houses, you know, and there'd be the person who was on duty at the front desk would call upstairs, you know, "Any blonde-haired, blue-eyed girls from Minnesota, there's a guy down here who'd like to" -- so it was, to say off putting would be an understatement. And at the time, also because so many of the schools were not co-ed anymore, on weekends this place was deserted.

ANDREANI: Yeah.

ROBERTS: So most of the women who were still here were not here because that was what they wanted to be, they were here because they hadn't gotten invited to Williams or Amherst or Harvard or Yale or wherever for the weekend, and on Friday afternoons the housemothers -- we still had housemothers -- served tea and they would bake all these wonderful cookies and stuff, and that was sort of a consolation prize if you weren't going away for the weekend, you could at least get fed. It was highly caloric and not very good for you food, but who knew.

And I remember on Saturday night Sage Hall did Indie and foreign movies, and so if you were on campus Ingmar Bergmann movies were a big thing. But it was hard. And I was always very glad that I had brothers, because I knew boys and I knew about them and who they were and so I could take it or leave it. A lot of my classmates had gone to boarding schools that were all women and then they came to Smith and boys were kind of a foreign culture to them, and -- so I was always glad I at least had -- I knew the lingo.

ANDREANI: So there is a new morality wave going on at that time, sexuality and sex was being discussed in a more open way. What was your experience with that here at Smith?

ROBERTS: If it was going on here, I didn't know about it, I would say. One of the funny things was when I became sexually active which was during my junior year, birth control pills had just come out and the question was could you get a prescription. And for those that were smart enough to know, we did not wish to play Russian roulette, so there was this kind of underground people would tell one another that "this" doctor wouldn't ask questions about your marital status, because in Massachusetts at the time, it was illegal to prescribe birth control pills to someone who was not married.

So you learned to say you were "engaged", that was close enough for this particular doctor, and so you would get a prescription. But the other rather interesting thing about it was before the age of computers, if you got a prescription in Northampton, the only place you could fill it was in Northampton. So if you forgot to fill it before you left the summer or you know, whatever, it was an enormous difficulty to get it filled somewhere else. And I remember those being sort of --- interesting things.

The other thing about it was -- I mean we didn't know it at the time, but I certainly figured it out later was we were all guinea pigs for those pills and you know, as it turned out in retrospect, they were prescribing, you know, enormous numbers of times of over what you needed until they figured it out and that made me eternally skeptical about medicines. So when I go to the doctor now and they want to put me on a medication, I say, thank you, but no thank you. If it hasn't been around for

at least 40 years, you don't really know what the effects are and frankly we will control it with diet and exercise, whatever it is, because I'm not taking those pills, and it really as out of that experience that once I realized that they had no idea what they were doing.

ANDREANI: The Feminine Mystique had just come out when you were here at Smith, where you mentioned that there was not a lot of talk about gender but was there any kind of feminist awakening on campus? Was -- what was your experience with that?

ROBERTS: No, and I think probably a couple of years later I think -- '68, '69, the book had begun to have an effect and people were much more open about it, but I don't recall very much of the time that, you know, would be what you would consider feminist.

ANDREANI: Okay, how did you see regulations and traditions changing here during your time at Smith?

ROBERTS: I don't think they changed very much when we were here. Again, it was a couple of years later but I remember if you wanted to go away for a weekend, you had to sign out this little card saying who you were staying with, what hotel that you were staying in and all this contact information and when you came back you had to sign back in. And occasionally we would have days when men were allowed upstairs in the dormitories and if you brought a man upstairs, be it your father or your date, when you got to the door that went into the living area, you had to yell out, "Man on the floor." So no, things were still pretty old-fashioned at that point.

ANDREANI: Were you part of any clubs or organizations? How were you involved on campus?

ROBERTS: I was the equivalent of what would have been the student government treasurer. It had a special name which I forget at this point, but all of the organizations on campus that needed funding had to come through us, and we kind of decided what the priorities were and allocated money to people, and so a group of us and I chaired that, so it was a major part of student government for about a month during the year when you were making all these decisions and then it was considerably less intense.

ANDREANI: So were you actually present on campus a lot or did you -- you know, you had a boyfriend outside of campus, were you --

ROBERTS: My senior year I wasn't here a whole lot -- the three previous years I was.

ANDREANI: How did your Smith experience shape your political life after Smith? Did it shape it?

ROBERTS: I think it had two really important impacts. One was I learned to speak up. No matter what the context was. It never occurred to me that I didn't have a valuable opinion, and for the women I knew who had gone to co-ed schools, they had learned to keep a low profile and be quiet and write wonderful papers, but not really speak. So I came out of here with that skill. And the other was just a complete conviction that women could do anything men could do because I had seen it around me for four years and so when people would try to, you know, put me in a pigeonhole, no, I don't think so.

So my first job out of Smith was at an insurance company in New York, because my boyfriend went to New York to graduate school and so I went to New York. Another decision that I look back on and think, what were you thinking? You know, but -- so I walk into this insurance company and all the women are sitting at desks in this sort of communal area in the middle of the floor, and all the men have private offices around the edge, and I think it was my experience at Smith that led me to look -- take one look at that and go, uh-uh, no, no, we're not staying here. Because when you looked really close, the men were younger than the women, turned out considerably less educated, but the workplace was so gender-segregated that I could have spent my life there and never moved out of the floor, and that just was not going to happen, thank you very much.

So I followed my heart. I went to work for the New York City welfare department as a caseworker and my caseload was the South Bronx which was then largely Hispanic, upper Harlem which was completely black and Inwood which was sort of all the ethnic whites who had been left behind by the out migrations. So that was just a fabulous experience because it was really where my heart was, number one, but I learned an enormous amount. I also have said subsequently that that year was an argument for the existence of God because I was so naïve and had so little understanding about how the world really worked, that I looked back on it now and think I have no idea how I survived. I think just, again, with my Smith education, I walk into a -- you know, five story walk up that was falling apart, you know, with needles lying around out front and women selling their bodies and it never occurred to me that it wasn't perfectly okay for me to walk in and walk up those five stories and see my client. And again, I think that was really a Smith thing, it just never crossed my mind that I couldn't do that so I did.

ANDREANI: So did Smith empower you?

ROBERTS: Yes, in that very real sense and then when I went to law school, it was predominantly men and again, it just never occurred to me that I didn't belong there, and that I couldn't keep up with them.

ANDREANI: Did you ever hear any nasty comments because of that boldness you had?

ROBERTS: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Law school was a -- I went to Fordham Law School and it's a Jesuit institution and most of the students came through Jesuit colleges and most of them were first generation immigrants, so their view of the world was women belonged at home having babies and cooking and they belonged in law school, and they were quite resentful of women in school. And ironically, this was when the draft was the -- the lottery came in and so you had a lot less wiggle room about getting out of it, and so -- so the law school only took more women because it had slots it couldn't fill because the men were being drafted, so my law school class had the largest number of women they had ever had. There were 20 of us out of 400, and they thought this was enormous.

Now by the time -- by 1972 when I lived in Newark, I lived right across from Rutgers Law School, and their law school class was 50/50 men and women, so it was a time of just enormous change in that world.

ANDREANI: You mentioned that your dating experiences here at Smith were kind of sad, could you elaborate on that a little bit more?

ROBERTS: Well, you know, when you were dating people who you see only on weekends and only in these sort of drunken, party situations, you never really get to know somebody and again, because I had brothers, I kind of knew there was more to men than these creatures who showed up and took you drinking. But I think for a lot of people that wasn't true and that was - - so it was hard to watch people being really disappointed in these relationships and again a lot of struggle about sex, you know, a lot of pressure to have sex from guys and a lot of questioning about whether that was appropriate or not.

And then I think it must have been extremely difficult to be here if you were a lesbian or a transgendered or gay person because that was just not part of the conversation. And so I'm not sure -- I think of it as sad looking back. Again, at the time I was 19 years old. What did I know? I don't think I saw it quite that way but in retrospect, I think it must have been very difficult for a lot of people.

ANDREANI: So can you elaborate a little bit more? You said that it must have been hard for transgendered people, lesbian people here. Can you -- was there any kind of conversation or --

ROBERTS: Not that I ever was privy to, no.

ANDREANI: So how did Smith deal with diversity or outsider groups here?

ROBERTS: It didn't. It didn't is the honest truth. And one of the things that makes me contribute to Smith today is that when it finally woke up, it really did a lot to be a more welcoming place and to actively recruit students of color and open some of the gender conversations, and the women's engineering program to really think about -- you know, beyond the liberal arts, what do

women need to survive in the 21st Century and while it's obviously not perfect, and I'm sure if you live here there's all kinds of things you know that I don't know, but it is so different than it was when I was here, and I think that's a tremendous tribute to the leadership of the place that when they got it, they got it.

ANDREANI: So you are proud of what Smith has been doing now?

ROBERTS: Yes, and I think it's -- I look at my own kids' college experience and frankly their schools were not nearly as welcoming and diverse as Smith is today. So -- with the exception of my youngest daughter who went to FIDM in Los Angeles, a fashion institute and I think -- oh, 75 percent of their study body is gay, lesbian or transgendered, and so -- they have it. You know, they figured out how to create an atmosphere to be welcoming to people, but it's -- for her that was really a lot of fun.

ANDREANI: So with this change, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

ROBERTS: I think the biggest thing to remember is that your life expectancy is now somewhere around 85. You do not have to rush out there and do everything next week. And I think that was the hardest thing for me to learn. I remember waking up one morning, I was 24 years old, I was in law school, I was married, I had a kid and I thought, oh, my God, what am I supposed to do with the rest of my life. I've done all the milestones that were the things that you were supposed to do if you were of my generation and I had 50 more years, and it was like oh, my goodness. So I think that notion that you can start doing something and if it doesn't turn out to be what you wanted, you can change and you have the ability to do that.

And I think the wonderful thing I've learned about America is it really is the place of second opportunities. That if you are serious about making a change, you know, with community colleges -- people who, like my daughter, who dropped out at ninth grade because she just hated school, had a place go back to and you know, kind of rebuild and I think that's true even for really disadvantaged people and it is certainly true for people with advantages that you can decide this was not the right husband, this was not the right career or as in my case, it was the right career, I loved every minute of what I did and then I got to a point where I thought five more minutes and I'm not going to love this anymore, and so I went and did something entirely different, and that it is possible to do that in life.

ANDREANI: So we're wrapping things up.

ROBERTS: Yeah.

ANDREANI: Can you just talk a little bit about what your career has been like? Just can you give the detail a little bit and maybe relate it to your Smith experience, if you can.

ROBERTS: Yeah, I went to law school out of my experience as a case worker, wanting to change the world, and particularly dealing with women's issues in poverty. And at that time, the Supreme Court was the place to be to change the social world, and so I thought obviously that meant I should go to law school. And I picked Fordham for bizarre reasons, and it turned out that Fordham's goal was to get all of its graduates jobs on Wall Street. So this was not a good fit, but there were a group of women in my class and we quickly figured out that -- there were a group of us who had a different vision of what we wanted to do, and bonded, and again, I think that was out of the Smith experience that you look for where the smart, interesting women -- and so we all had a different idea about our career paths. So while we went to law school, we all did volunteer work in Legal Services, and with the Law Students Civil Rights Research Council and things like that, so that we kind of filled in the blanks and the ironic thing about all of that was after law school, I ended up in Newark, New Jersey, and there was a huge influx of money into childcare, and it was meant for community based childcare.

So I spent the next five years of my life helping low income women's groups set up community based childcare centers, and get access to credentials as childcare workers and ultimately teachers, and what did I need to know? Corporations, tax, all the things that in law school I thought I will never need to know this stuff, why are they making me learn it? It turned out to be exactly what I needed to know. So again, that kind of notion of you just never know where it's going to lead you. So I spent five years in Newark doing that work and then ended up moving to DC where I spent the next 35 years doing advocacy work around low income women and children's issues and particularly child support enforcement.

And again, it sort of -- at the time it was totally counter-intuitive. People's reaction to it was, well, the government should be supporting families, not fathers. But it occurred to me, and again, this goes right back to my Smith experience, that if you believe biology is destiny, then you believe that father's should be supporting their children. If you don't think that biology is destiny, then two people made that child and two people ought to be responsible for raising that child, and we ought to make that a societal norm that we're not ever going to get men to think differently about things unless we kind of make that connection.

So I worked with a lot of low income women's groups for whom that child support was the difference between having to have 3 jobs so that their children had no parent present, or being able to work a single job and have some other money coming in, so that was really fun to do and when I started we had established paternity for 17 percent of the nonmarital children in this country and we collected child support at some point some time during the year for about 19 percent of custodial mothers and when I

finished we were establishing paternity at about 75 to 80 percent for nonmarital children, which of course is where the population is booming and get collecting child support in about 70 percent of the cases on a regular basis.

So there was still a lot to be done, but it sort of felt like, wow, and interestingly Marilyn Rae Smith who was two years ahead of me at Smith was the other person that worked very hard on that. She was the child support commissioner in Massachusetts and so I ended up doing a lot of work with her.

ANDREANI: Great. Thank you very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.