

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Melanie Rosen, Class of 2000*

Interviewed by  
Maggie Kraus, Class of 2012

May 14, 2010

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Melanie Rosen discusses her decision to attend Smith, her experiences living in Wilson House, working as a Gold Key guide, participating on the crew team, her work as a French studies major and Afro-American studies minor, and her time abroad in Paris and West Africa. She also describes the overall campus atmosphere and her experiences as a Fulbright scholar after Smith.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

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

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Thomas Goodman at the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Rosen, Melanie. Interview by Maggie Kraus. Video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Melanie Rosen, interview by Maggie Kraus, video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Rosen, Melanie. Interview by Maggie Kraus. Transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Melanie Rosen, interview by Maggie Kraus, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2010 with:

MELANIE ROSEN

by: MAGGIE KRAUS  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

KRAUS: First of all, thank you so much for doing this. I really appreciate it. Excited to hear about your experiences at Smith, and everything you've been up to since you've been here. So, I kind of want to talk a little bit about how you got here.

ROSEN: OK.

KRAUS: To start. So, given your options, in terms of going to school, what were the benefits for you, to come to Smith?

ROSEN: Like, why did I choose Smith?

KRAUS: Yeah.

ROSEN: Or...OK. I mean, my—I did a bunch of college tours, starting in my junior year of high school, and I was looking at Amherst, and my mom kind of like threw Smith on the list. I had not heard of it, and was not interested in a woman's college, and I ended up looking at Smith and Wellesley, and I applied to both, and was accepted to both, and stayed overnight at both, to help make up my mind. My experience at Smith was just—I felt like, from the moment I toured the campus, the very first time I set foot on campus, I literally, I was almost crying at the end of my tour, and wanted to hug my tour guide because I just felt like this was it. When I stayed overnight, I had a really great experience. I stayed at Haven House, and I think one of the women I was staying with was a rower, which was not something I did in high school, but she told me that there were no try-outs for the team. Oh, a sport where you don't have to try out, you can just be on the team. I can do that. So, I just made up my mind. I'm like, I'm going to Smith, and I'm going to be a rower, and ultimately, that's what I did. And, I think that, I mean—there are a thousand things that I love about Smith, and I don't think that I could've been happier at another school. I don't know where you want me to, if that's a

sufficient answer for your question.

KRAUS: Of course, totally. So, you were kind of sold the second you got here, then.

ROSEN: Yeah, it was just one of those moments where you just felt like, OK, this was right. I mean, I still applied to other schools, and went through the process, and again, stayed overnight elsewhere, just to kind of confirm that that feeling was right, but it definitely was, and it's still, I was talking, I'm staying with a friend who did not go here, but lives in the area, and she was with me on campus yesterday, and she was just kind of remarking on how enthusiastic everyone is, and she's like, I haven't gone to a single reunion. I don't anyone who goes to reunions at my college. No one really gives money to this school, and we were talking, I've donated every year. Since I've graduated, I have come back to my fifth, and now my tenth reunions. I stay in touch with a lot of friends here, and Smith is just a really important place for me. I love my children, but I have two sons, so I can't send them here, but if I had daughters, I would absolutely start encouraging them now, to move their lives toward here.

KRAUS: Definitely. So, you were super-excited about Smith. Did you encounter anyone in your graduating high-school class? Was anybody kind of weirded out that you were going to an all-women's college? Was that ever an issue?

ROSEN: I definitely got a lot of, like, why an all-girls school, and I still remember one of the first letters that I got from Smith, stating the first-years, are called first-years, not freshmen. It's a women's college, it's not a girl's school, and just kind of starting to change the terminology in my mind, and as I spoke with others, using that terminology, instead of saying, I'm choosing a women's college because of X, Y and Z, and I also remember one thing that kind of stood out for me, coming here, was the honor systems. I went to Stuyvesant High School, which is a big, specialized math and science public high school in New York, but there's an admissions test to get in. So, any kid who scores high enough on the test, can go from New York City, and it's an incredibly competitive school. Kids have ulcers. I mean, and there's cheating left-and-right, because everyone wants the best grades, and after I had been accepted to Smith, and decided to go here, I mean, it really kind of changed my mind about, just, my approach to work. Like, there was no more, can I borrow your homework for, you know, I have French fifth period today, and I didn't get all the answers yet. It was starting to take ownership of my own academic work, and I

think it changed my approach to a lot of things, but that, in retrospect, was a really important change for me, and something that I really valued while I was here.

KRAUS: Were the older women in your family, or in your life, college graduates, Smith alums?

ROSEN: They were all, well, my mom certainly was a college graduate, and my aunts all graduated from college, and one of my grandmothers. None of them went to Smith though, and I don't know that I, don't know that I knew anyone who had gone to Smith. My mom had worked in higher education, but giving fellowships to African graduate students. So, she was very familiar with the American higher-education system, and so that was why she threw Smith on the list, but I don't know that she necessarily had known anyone who had gone here, I think. So...

KRAUS: OK. So, what house did you live on, when you got here?

ROSEN: I lived in Wilson House, all three years that I was on campus.

KRAUS: And then your fourth year, were you in Friedman?

ROSEN: No I went JYA to Paris, so.

KRAUS: Oh, wonderful. And you also said that you were a rower. Were there any other clubs, or sports, or organizations that you were involved in, when you're here?

ROSEN: I did Gold Key, and I'm trying to think. I'm sure that there was other stuff that I did, but rowing was by far, I mean, that kind of consumed all of my team, even when we were out of season. You know, continuing to work out, to stay in shape, for spring season, coming back to school, early, from breaks to practice. I did, now that I think of it, I did, I'm trying to think what it is. It's like, I don't know if it's still here, the leadership, some kind of leadership program that happens. It's like for one week, in two Januarys while you're here. So, it's like a special week of just seminars on becoming a better leader, and I ended up doing that for two years as well, so. I don't know, I'm kind of vague on some of my time here. I feel like it's been a thousand years even though it's only been 10.

KRAUS: I know, that's totally understandable. So, what appealed to you in terms of the lives that people seemed to be living, while they're here. You visited, and you saw, you know, I want to come to

Smith, and I want to be a rower, what did that mean for you? Was it a new sense of freedom, or independence, or kind of just coming into your own?

ROSEN: I think I had a lot of freedom and independence. I grew up in New York City, and my mom kind of let us do things, and learn for ourselves. I have a younger brother. But I think one thing that I really appreciated about seeing the women here was their sense of selves, and they had a really goods sense of who they were, and that they were just incredibly intelligent. I remember sitting in on a, probably like an introductory philosophy class, which in general is not a subject matter that held any particular appeal to me, but I remember just sitting in awe of the students in class, and just really being amazed by how insightful they were, and how thoughtful they were in their responses, and I definitely felt that way, throughout my time here, that the women I was surrounded by, were just very self-possessed, very self-aware, and very smart.

KRAUS: So, I mean, it seems to me that you had an incredible experience at Smith, and you hold your memories really close to your heart. Did Smith live up to every expectation that you had, before you got here? Were there any kind of last-minute fears that appeared out of nowhere, that you didn't see when you visited? I mean, what was that like for you, to kind of really become a Smith student on your own?

ROSEN: I think, there were definitely times. I mean, my first year, I certainly thought about transferring. I think, probably, I don't know that I would've thought about it anywhere, but in all honesty, I still had a boyfriend from high school, that I actually ended up staying with, all through college, but he was at school in Pennsylvania. So, I felt kind of torn. I was somewhat home sick. I missed him. It was just, you know, just a change living on your own, even though you're not on your own, you're surrounded by all these people. So, there were times where I felt like, oh I don't know if this is right, but ultimately, I'm tremendously glad that I stuck it out, and moved past that. Yeah, it really was a phenomenal experience, and really formative for me in terms of who I am now, and I think also, even just the connections that I've continued to make through Smith, jobs that I've had, and kind of mentors in my life, who have gone here, and that I've been connected with through the alumni association, or through the career development office, that has continued to have a huge impact on me.

KRAUS: What were your support systems here? Was it your house

community? Was it your advisor? It was your friends? I mean, who did you kind of look to for support and guidance?

ROSEN:

Well, my first year, when I lived in Wilson, before we got our roommate letters, I was really excited to find out who I was going to be living with, and write her a letter. I had never used e-mail, or the internet, before I came to college, so e-mail was not an option, but when I got the letter, it said I was living in a single, which I was really disappointed by, because I thought, well this is going to be my first friend here. But, I lived in the Mora Maids quarters in Wilson House, and so there were six of us in these teeny, tiny little rooms. But, five of us became very close, and the sixth ended up transferring I think after a semester, or something like that. Of those five, I'm still in touch with four of them, and see them regularly, and we do a lot of things together. One of them is my older son's godmother, and I think that they were tremendously important, in terms of my starting to feel at home here, and just, I mean I knew their doors were all, literally and figuratively, always open. Then, crew was also just a tremendous presence and strength in my life. My teammates were really important. We obviously spend a tremendous amount of time together, and I think my first year, practices were maybe at four in the afternoon, which doesn't really have that much impact on Wednesday, but starting my sophomore year, they were at 5:30 in the morning. And so, if you're not committed to it, then you're just not going to do that. So, I think that kind of schedule, and the drive that it took to be a part of that, and to push myself physically, and see all these other women doing the same, and you know, that would encourage me. And I felt times where I was doubting myself, feeling like, well, I'm not that strong, and I can't do this to have that group of women say, oh no you can, and you're a part of this team, and we all need each other. So, that was, I think, crew, and those three other women in the Mora Maids quarters, were just tremendously, tremendously important for me.

KRAUS:

So, you said that you were a Gold Key, so I mean at least for me, all of the people that I know, who are in Gold Key, do it because they want to give back, and they want to recreate that experience that they had on their tours. Was that memory of being a prospective student, or being a first-year, did that fuel you to kind of go forward in a lot of different aspects of your life at Smith? Is that why you stuck with crew, or is that why you became a tour guide?

ROSEN:

I felt like, I mean, in terms of becoming a tour guide, I think just that memory of, I mean I held back, I did not hug this woman

who—I mean I was part of a small group. I don't know that she even remembered my name at the end of the hour, but I wanted to give others that feeling, absolutely, and I felt like I was a good representative of Smith, because I loved it so much, and I just remember, just feeling really proud of this school, proud of knowing so much about it, proud of knowing so many people on campus, as I was giving a tour, to be able to show people, there's this lovely community here. In terms of crew, I'm not really sure. I mean, I don't really know what made me decide to go for it, or even stick with it. I mean, sometimes, I think, maybe life would've been a lot easier if I hadn't done it, but just so much lesser too. I mean, crew was—I actually ran into my coach this morning at Sylvester's, so it has continued to—I think it really changed the way I thought about myself, and my body.

KRAUS: So, can you, I know it might be a difficult question, but can you kind of explain or describe the atmosphere of campus? I know it changes from here to here, and I know it's totally different, as you get older, but you can pick like a couple adjectives. What was the Smith community like for you?

ROSEN: Well, I would say, definitely supportive, really festive at times. Like, a lot of the traditions that we have here, Mountain Day, and certainly all of the events of commencement weekend. I don't know, sometimes really studious, like during finals period. I mean, I feel like I spent, well I did spend a lot of time in the Y, various here. I did a senior thesis. So, in addition to crew, that was kind of, I was either on the water, in the gym, or in the library, and that was it. I think that there is, I mean I feel like this is always a question for liberal arts colleges, but I do feel like there is some sense of diversity, maybe not as much as the college was striving for at the time, but certainly in terms of the diversity of backgrounds, socio-economic, geographic, racial, sexual, so on. I felt like I knew a wide breadth of people, with a wide breadth of experiences.

KRAUS: Was that different for you, from your experience back home, or in high school? Were you exposed to such an eclectic group of people you found?

ROSEN: Well I came from New York City, so I think I was used to probably much more diversity than we had at Smith. So, in some ways, on the other hand it felt very insular, but I think I definitely knew probably more international, people from international backgrounds here, well than certainly I went to high school with. So, that was kind of neat. Just to have them as part of campus, and



kind of sharing who they were, and where they came from, all that.

KRAUS: So, wait, what was your major, what did you study?

ROSEN: I was a French studies major.

KRAUS: OK.

ROSEN: And Afro-American studies, minor.

KRAUS: So, what was your abroad like, for you then?

ROSEN: Back to the homesickness. That was hard. I was living in a, it's called a "champs cadu bine," it's another maid's quarters, but it was like an eighth floor walk up, just like this tiny, little dark room, and the only window that I had looked onto the elevator shaft. Just like a random pigeon would fly in every now and then, but I couldn't really see the sky, and it was a tough year. But, and I also, when I was away from my team, I was away from my closest friends, I mean, most of them went abroad, or at least to another school within the states for at least the semester, if not the year. But I made other friends, you know, at Smith, people I hadn't known before. I didn't really know that many other French majors when I left. So, that part was great, coming to have new friends, and one of them that I studied abroad with, is one of my closest friends now, so I think it was a really good experience. I mean, I'd been to France before, but to really live there. I certainly see it differently now, than I saw it when I was 20. It just seemed kind of bleak and dreary at the time. It was a hard year, but it was also a really good experience, and I spent my spring break in West Africa. I had a Beninese professor, and he took a bunch of us to Benin, Togo, and Ghana. So, experiences like that were really invaluable. I think wouldn't have just kind of happened anywhere else.

KRAUS: Good. So, do you remember your commencement speaker? Do you remember?

ROSEN: Because I was rowing, our commencement that year fell on the same weekend as our last championship race. It wasn't nationals, but it was, I don't know, ECACs, maybe, something like that, and so I didn't go to my commencement. I remember, I don't know why I'm getting all teary all of a sudden. Our coach talked about it with us, at the beginning of the year. I think there were six seniors maybe, maybe seven at the time, and she said, it's up to

you guys, but I need to know if you're going to make a commitment to this team. I absolutely understand if you don't want to give up going to your graduation, but if you do commit to us, I'm going to— (laughter) sorry. There's something for you. Then we had a really, our commencement speaker that year was Judy Chicago, and I heard some rather mixed reviews of her speech, so ultimately in retrospect, I was doing what was way more important to me, and we had a really cool, like little mini-ceremony. (laughter) Sorry.

KRAUS: That's OK, it's totally fine.

ROSEN: She got President Simmons to come and speak, and Lynn Oberbillig, the director of athletics, and Karen, our coach spoke, and we all got to get up and say something, which I wouldn't have had the chance to do, at the regular commencement. So, that was really awesome, and I have no regrets about that.

KRAUS: Great.

ROSEN: Sorry.

KRAUS: No, it's totally fine. Well, that's an incredibly experience to have, I think, are really intimate. I mean, in terms, I mean I'm living in the quad right now, and every morning I wake up and see what looks like a million chairs, and it just seems very overwhelming, so that's really, I think that's really special.

ROSEN: Yeah.

KRAUS: So, what did you do the summer after you graduated?

ROSEN: Well, I totaled my car, right away. I went to Nova Scotia with that same boyfriend, and on the last day of our trip, I totaled my car, and then I went back, and I had a Fulbright grant to West Africa, after I graduated, which was also something, I should say, that I never would've applied for, if it wasn't for being here. I think I got a letter, at some point in my junior year, saying like, you know, your grades are good, we're looking for more Fulbright scholars, and more Rhodes Scholars, whatever it was, would you consider applying? So, the fact that there were people kind of in the background saying, you could do this, and this is something you should go for, push yourself was really important, and really special about being here. I feel like I'm definitely someone who was maybe on the shyer side, and would have very easily gotten lost in a larger school, or just a school where people, you know,

maybe the administration or faculty just didn't care as much about pushing people forward. So, anyway, I was kind of -- I forget what, I was probably like temping, or something like that, in preparation for leaving. So, it was very exciting.

KRAUS: That's OK. So, I mean, I don't know if you ever had a plan to say, you know, coming into Smith, I know a lot of people now, maybe not so much then, but probably then, knowing Smithies, who have a set plan, and have a, this is what I'm going to do, this is the amount of time I have to do it, I'm going to get everything done. It just seemed very focused, and very goal oriented. Was that, is that something you can relate to? Did you kind of get here, and decide you were going to wing it? Or was there a little sense of...

ROSEN: I knew that I was, I don't know if there's still the Latin Honors system. So, I did that, I knew that I wanted to at least have a little bit of variety in my coursework, and it was also something that was really important to my mom, who definitely pushed me toward being at Smith, toward doing a lot of things. She was also the one who suggested that I major in French, because she knew that I wanted to go abroad, and be a rower, and having a large chunk of my time taken up my practice, and stuff. She's like, you're going to have to take these French classes anyway, and you can knock out the rest of them while you're in France, so why not do it. So, I think, she was not at all like a pushy mom, but she definitely kind of helped to guide some of those choices. In retrospect, being a French major didn't help me so much in life, but my other choice would've been an English major, and I got my Masters in English after, also hasn't really done that much for me. So, I don't know that I would've changed anything, so...

KRAUS: So, I mean, it seems like, beyond the academics, your experiences socially, and you know, doing crew, and realizing that Smith helped you to find your potential, and to kind of give you that extra support that you need to go forward. I mean, what has meant to you? What is going into the world as a Smith grad meant for you, and your life, and your goals?

ROSEN: Well, I think, certainly a lot more confidence than I might have had at another school where I didn't feel so supported, and where I didn't feel like people were there to help me achieve my goals. I think, right now, I am at home with my two sons. I have a three year old, and an almost one year old, and I'm a part-time freelance writer, but I think, I'm definitely at this point in my life, with having kids, and also being a women's college graduate, a Smith college graduate in particular, I do feel this kind of perpetual

struggle, like what am I doing with my life? Is this enough? Is this important to me? All of that. I don't know that being at Smith made that any easier or not, but I do feel like the community of women here, the ties in the alumni network, are really important, like when I am ready to go back to a full time job, I know that Smith is going to be the first place I turn to. I think, the internships I had, while at Smith, were really important. I had practice funding, which helped to, I was making like a dollar a day, or something, as a theatre intern. I thought I wanted to be in theatre, and that internship that I had was really helpful in knowing that I did not want to be in theatre. So, yeah, a lot of, I mean I don't know, I feel like my experience here really shaped me, kind of in every possible way.

KRAUS: So, I think we're going to wrap up. This has been unbelievably enjoyable, and I really can't thank you enough for sharing everything with me. Do you have any advice for current Smithies, future Smithies, anyone considering coming here? What could you say to them, that might either make their decision easier, or if they're already here, how to make the most of their time?

ROSEN: I would say that this is a really safe place to try new things, and that don't feel like, if you've been doing something for a long time, that you need to stay on that track. Again, going back to crew for me, that was not something that I—I don't know that I would've tried that at any other school, and I was not an athletic person when I arrived here. But I had the opportunity to try it, and it was so, it had such a tremendous impact on my life here, and my life beyond here, in so many ways that I think about myself, and think about other women, and my body, and all of this stuff. So, I would say, if you're interested, just try it, and I don't know, yeah, don't be afraid of repercussions in doing so. College is a really good time to experiment with a lot of things, and I think sometimes you kind of forget that, and you feel like, well I should be doing X, Y and Z, and really B, F, and G would be great things to test out and see if you like them.

KRAUS: Awesome, well thank you so much.

ROSEN: Thank you.

GEIS: Can I ask one question, because you did a beautiful job.

KRAUS: Thanks.

GEIS: Because you had a moment when you were emotional before, can

you just explain to us, what it was about that memory that was, you know, without—I don't want to pull it out of you, it's just interesting for a person watching this, of understanding how poignant this place is for you, and that memory. That says it all right there, and how deep it is.

ROSEN: I mean, obviously, graduating from college is a really momentous time. But to feel like you matter enough to people that they would create this whole special ceremony. I mean, that the President of the College would take her time to come speak for, I don't know, five, I think it was five of us, that they would set up stage hall for us, that all of our other graduating friends would come. It just meant a tremendous amount, and also, just felt incredibly special to be a part of this small group that—none of us were going on to row in the Olympics, so it was kind of like our last hurrah, and it was the photos this week, in preparation for coming here, and there are a bunch of us, you know, the seniors in our graduation caps, in the boat, and that was just such a tremendous day. I know we didn't win a race, I don't even remember how we placed, but it was like for me, crew was about giving it my all, even knowing I was never going to be the best at it, but I could be the best that I could be. I could push myself to that point, and beyond sometimes. Think that lesson was so important, and the fact that I got to go out, doing that, something that was—it was so central to my time here, and I think I've gone back for alumni rows maybe twice, or something. I have not rowed since then, but it was just such a critical experience for me, and the fact that we had so much support, from so many other people, to allow us to do that—

ROSEN: --that we meant that much to our coach, to our teammates, to the college as a whole. I don't know that a lot of other schools would've had a special ceremony that involved the president of the college, and the director of athletics. I mean, it could've just been like, our coach in the gym, or something like that, but it wasn't. I mean, it was a big thing for us, so.

KRAUS: Great, thank you so much.

GEIS: Thank you.

ROSEN: Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Thomas Goodman, May, 2011*