

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Betsy Robbins Rosenthal, Class of 1963

Interviewed by
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 25, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history Betsy Robins Rosenthal recalls the divisions she encountered among students along lines of race, religion and class, and the way she's observed diversity increasing on campus over the years. Asked about a "typical Smithie," she reflects on how different Smith students are from one another, but that they are also universally serious students who continually impress her.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 30-minute tape.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Rosenthal, Betsy Robins. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Betsy Robins Rosenthal, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Rosenthal, Betsy Robins. Interview by Anne Ames. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Betsy Robins Rosenthal, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

BETSY ROBBINS ROSENTHAL

by: ANNIE AMES

AMES: Well, my name is Ann Ames and I'm conducting an interview with Betsy Robbins Rosenthal on May 25th, 2013 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So we'd like to thank you again for participating with us today.

ROSENTHAL: You're quite welcome.

AMES: So, first of all, why are you attending reunion this year?

ROSENTHAL: I'm attending reunion this year because I enjoyed my – my three years at Smith. I was junior abroad and I appreciated the education I got there. I made a lot of friends when I was there. And the whole experience was very positive, so I like to come back and connect with all those people and be nostalgic and see the old stamping grounds, you know.

And Northampton is so different than it was when I was here. It was a nothing town. Believe me, there was nothing there, and now, you know, it's a destination place eve for people who never went to Smith, you know.

AMES: How did you choose to attend Smith?

ROSENTHAL: Okay. I knew about Smith because my mother went to Smith. But I didn't – that wasn't my only reason for coming there. I wanted to get a first class education. I was fortunate enough that my parents could afford to send me to Smith. I liked the idea that it was sort of in a different place from where I lived and in a beautiful setting and it had a, you know, really good faculty and good program and good reputation.

And, also when I went to – in those years, in 1959 when I went to Smith, it really – I think a woman's college – women I think were treated differently at a woman's college than they were at a coed school. I think in some coed schools women were sort of like second class citizens. Whereas at Smith, that was their object, was to educate women, and they took you very seriously. And that was obvious when you went there, you know, and you spoke to other people who had gone there. So for all those reasons.

I think if my mother hadn't gone to Smith, I might have picked maybe one of the other Seven Sisters, or maybe Smith. I don't know. But since she went there and she liked it so much, you know, that would be another reason for going.

AMES: So what were your expectations of your Smith experience?

ROSENTHAL: Well, I thought that I would get a good education, that the courses would be difficult and interesting and a lot of choices. And I also knew that I would meet girls from all over the country, which is one of the best aspects of a Smith education. And I did. And there were some international students too, but mostly it was, you know – people were really from all over the country.

I came from the outer boroughs of New York City, and, you know, I never met a farm girl from Iowa or a – I never even knew a debutante. You know, I didn't even know they existed. So I met, you know, diverse group of young women, and that was great. And I also was interested even before I was at Smith in the junior year abroad program too.

AMES: So during your first few days of when you were at Smith as a freshman, what was that like for you? What were you thinking?

ROSENTHAL: It was kind of – a little bit overwhelming. First of all, I wasn't terribly sheltered, but I hadn't really – I was very aware of the fact that when my parents dropped me off there and they left – not that I couldn't be separated from them. I had gone away to camp and lots of other times. But I really was cognizant of the fact that there was nobody there at Smith that really cared what happened to me; I mean, in a personal way.

But that wasn't the overwhelming part. The overwhelming part was the caliber of the students. I mean, they were smart. A lot of them – some of them came from famous, you know, famous people. In my house there was a Wendy Marcus whose parents own Neiman Marcus, and there was Barbara Newberry whose parents own Newberry's. That was a chain. And then there was a woman who was on the Olympic swimming team. So, you know, they were really high-powered group of women. That was kind of, you know, impressive.

AMES: It still is today to this day even. We're surrounded by, you know --

ROSENTHAL: But I also like that – I mean, I like the being on the campus. It was really, really pretty. Like I said, the town was not an attraction then.

AMES: So returning to Smith, for your reunion, you know, as an alumnae, what have you or how have you found Smith changed?

ROSENTHAL: I found – it's a little bit hard to tell. I mean, the campus obviously – the physical changes are obvious. It's sort of bigger. There's more buildings. There's more modern buildings. There's just more facilities in general. Like we had the parade and the indoor tennis – indoor track. I mean, that wasn't here. And the science building wasn't here. The art museum was improved. I mean, everything is sort of bigger and better. It still has I think the same feel. You know, the central campus and the brick buildings and everything and the gorgeous pond and everything has the same feel. So a lot of it has the same feel, but it's sort of more, bigger, better.

The biggest difference is the diversity of the student body. I mean, I can't really see that because the students aren't here. You know, we didn't come for graduation. But from what I, you know, learned and what they told us about the, you know, the student body, that's a very big change. I mean, we had like, you know, almost no black students and hardly any brown students. You know, it was very white.

AMES: So shifting gears to talk about academics a little bit, what was the process of deciding upon your major at Smith?

ROSENTHAL: Well, that's a good question. I'm trying to remember back how I decided. Well, I think I was always interested in science and I was thinking about being a nurse – becoming a nurse or a doctor, something like that. My father was a doctor and I had loads of doctors in my family; all my boy cousins and my grandfather and tons of people. But I really wanted to go to France my junior year, and you can't major in science. You couldn't then anyway. It wouldn't make sense to major in science and go abroad. So I really wanted to go abroad. So I decided to major in French. And I was thinking, well, maybe I could be a French teacher. But I think it was the junior year abroad that made me pick that major. And I liked languages and I liked literature, so –

AMES: So what was your abroad experience like and how did it influence –

ROSENTHAL: I think it was great. I think it was incredibly educational. And I still use it to this day. I learned French. I have a twin sister. She was in my class. Believe or not, we lived in different families in France. When we were together, we spoke French to each other. We did. I was very – your know, our instructor Mademoiselle Ott (phonetic) said – in French she said every word of English is a step backwards. So we listened to her, and I spoke French the whole year. It's 50 years later. I can still speak French fluently. I can read a book in French for pleasure.

I live in a community where there's a big influx of bankers and business people from France who don't stay there permanently, but they live there and there's a French-American school in Larchmont. They came into my office –

I was a physician – and I could speak to them in French. If they got nervous because they're at a doctor, I could say, "Voulez vous continuer en francais?" I mean, I really learned that.

But even more important than that, what I learned in France and I think what anybody learns when they go abroad is there's other ways of doing things. There's other ways of thinking about things. Our way isn't the only way. Our way is not necessarily the best way. And, number three, my grandparents were immigrants to this country and I know now what it feels like to live someplace and be a foreigner.

And when they left home, there was no internet. They couldn't make a phone call. They could maybe write a letter. They were leaving, coming to – and they were foreigners for the rest of their lives. And they made that sacrifice, and I am the beneficiary of it.

AMES: Absolutely.

ROSENTHAL: So all of those things I learned.

AMES: Okay.

ROSENTHAL: It was eye opening and it was confidence building and it was interesting. I made friends there. I have a French family that we visited back and forth in the last 50 years. They have four sons, same age as our three sons. They have 14 grandchildren. We have none. But anyway. And we visited back and forth. And that's what's been very enriching.

Just two years ago we made a trip there. We saw this family. I mean, all of these things. It was great. It was a wonderful year. And I am, you know, grateful to Smith for giving me that opportunity. Because it's very different to live abroad than to just be a tourist. It's very different.

AMES: Absolutely, yeah. Were there any professors or mentors that inspired you either at Smith or at school when you were abroad?

ROSENTHAL: Yes. At Smith I mostly can think of the – well, I – the woman who led our junior abroad group, obviously she inspired me because I did what she said. And, you know, it was very good advice.

And in the sciences there was a teacher – I can't remember her name – who taught zoology that was very inspirational. And there was a teacher, Ms. Horner, who taught comparative anatomy, and she was very, very involved with the students and very, very supportive and kind.

Those are the ones that stand out. Some of the – I think some of the French teachers, and I don't remember all the names. But they were also inspirational.

And, you know, I think it's a small school and the classes aren't that big, and I think you interact with it – you know, the professors a lot more than you might, you know, with a bigger student body and bigger classes. And that was good too.

AMES: Were you involved with any extracurricular club sports or organizations during your time?

ROSENTHAL: Oh, yes. Yes. I was on the Crew.

AMES: Yes.

ROSENTHAL: I came from, as I said, New York City Attleboro Public High School. We didn't know from Crew. I didn't know there was such a thing, especially for girls. That was a lot of fun. I enjoyed that a lot. That was my main curricular activity I guess.

Oh, I was in the Outing Club too. And in those days – it's hard to believe. I mean, it's very different now. But people didn't do that so much now. I mean, everybody wasn't going tramping around in the woods. That was sort of beyond of the fringe kind of thing to do. On weekends people used to get actually dressed up, if you can believe that – that women – the girls would get dressed up to look like their mothers and go places and stuff, and we would get dressed down and go camping and stuff.

And that was a lot of fun because we didn't have cars. You couldn't have cars, so we had to get driven by people who had cars, which were mostly guys who had the cars. And then we would go in groups to Outing Club trips, and sometimes there would be a lot of colleges involved, and that was a lot of fun too.

AMES: That's fun. Yeah, I'm actually in the Outing Club --here, so it's interesting to see

ROSENTHAL: Are there a lot of people? I mean, is it big now?

AMES: Yeah.

ROSENTHAL: Then it was a real small group.

AMES: Yeah. No. It's nice. You get to go out on camping trips and just kind of – we just go mess around in the woods. It's a fun time for people that like to get off campus.

ROSENTHAL: Yeah. That was good.

AMES: So let's talk a little bit about your house community. What was your house community like?

ROSENTHAL: Well, I was in Cutter House. And one thing that I – I guess the house community was like the college community. I mean, it wasn't diverse as far as different, you know, races and stuff, but it was diverse as far as geographical, you know, distribution. So there were people from, like I said – I remember there were these debutantes and they came back from Christmas vacation saying, "Oh, if I have to stand in another receiving line, I don't know what I'm going to do."

But it was nice. I mean, I think we were close. You were – you know, like now I'm still friendly – like now I'm hanging out with mostly the people from my house because you did make close friendships. I enjoyed it. I think it's nice. You know, I never went to a college where they had big dorms and everything, so I don't really know what that would be like. But I think I really like the house system.

Although when I tell people now about the house mother and all the rules, they just can't believe it.

AMES: So what was your relationship like with your house mother, speaking of house mothers?

ROSENTHAL: Our house mother was this very gentle lady who was very kind and – I mean, it was – you know, now looking back on it – and when you talk to people, they just can't believe, you know – but I thought she was a very benign, you know, positive person. I didn't see anything bad about it. I mean, she wasn't that important in the – you know, the whole big picture.

I remember her because she was a – she had never been married. And after we – I think one year we came back and she wasn't there anymore, and she had gotten married.

AMES: Oh, wow.

ROSENTHAL: It was a big deal. She must have been really ancient like 50 or something like that. And I remember in my reunion seeing – at my graduation there was a group of 25-year reunion people sitting around. And they were laughing and giggling. And I said – I remember this so strongly: What the hell do

they have to laugh about? They're so old. And they were only coming for their 25th reunion.

AMES: How did the curfew system affect your life?

ROSENTHAL: Well, they had a curfew system that was pretty strict. And it was something new to me because growing up my parents really didn't give me a curfew. I didn't go to one of these prep schools where they had curfews.

Most of the time it didn't bother me. Some of the time I actually liked it because if you were on a blind date and you really didn't like it, you could say, "Well, I have to go now. It's my curfew." And that gave you an out and you didn't have to insult anybody.

But a couple of times it was annoying. And I think one time I – not purposely, but I accidentally came in a little late and then I had to go through the students' – I don't know – some kind of student council or something and explain myself, and I thought that was a little silly, but it didn't – it wasn't that bad. I mean I think people who would think about it now would think it was so terrible, but I didn't think it was –

And also the other thing is I'm morning person, so staying up late isn't one of my big priorities. So it didn't really interfere much.

AMES: What were your experiences with traditions and stuff?

ROSENTHAL: They were quaint and they were cute. I mean the, you know, like at reunion, you know, the parading, the – some of it looks a little silly to me, but, you know, I get it. Like at the graduation with the white – well, the white, like the Vestal Virgins, you know, it's kind of a little quaint and kind of silly, but –

I like the Mountain Day. I mean, I think that's really nice. And I, you know, it may be very corny and everything. I actually did go out and walk in the country or bike in the country on that day. I know a lot of people use it to get caught up on work. But I did it.

And the Rally Day was – you know, that was nice. I didn't take them too seriously. But, you know, it's nice.

AMES: Yes.

ROSENTHAL: Cute, quaint.

AMES: How would you describe a typical Smithie during your career?

ROSENTHAL: I would say I was very impressed with the caliber of the students. I think the typical Smithie was very smart. Some of them were – the year that I went they told us at the first assembly that this was the first year in the history of Smith that more than 50 percent of the class came from public rather than private schools. So there was – you know, it was sort of about half and half then.

And so some of the people were girls who went to prep school and had a little bit of a sense of entitlement and sort of complained about that they had to go to Smith because it was sort of continuation of like being in a convent, you know, where you had rules, and they had that already at their prep school. And they're like, "Oh, why do I have to go here?"

But I, on the other hand, had a lot of friends who wanted to go to a place like Smith. They couldn't afford it. I went to a public high school. And I thought it was, you know a privilege. And there were a lot of people like me who felt that way too.

So it wasn't one typical Smithie. But I think as a group, they were very smart and I think they wanted to do stuff. You know, they weren't – they didn't want to just, you know, after they got out of school just sit around and eat chocolates and, you know, be wives and mothers. They wanted to do stuff. And they took you very seriously as a student, and I think most of the girls were, you know, were serious students. Not all of them, but the typical one I would say.

AMES: So continuing with the theme of your social life at Smith College, what was the dating culture like for you?

ROSENTHAL: That wasn't so great. The dating culture was – I mean, there wasn't any place to go. There was Rohar's, which was a bar. I was very happy that they didn't have sororities here, but my experience with fraternity parties were I hated them. I didn't particularly like to drink. I never developed a taste for beer. And my memory of fraternity parties is a lot of people either being actually drunk or acting like they were drunk so they could show how cool they were, and the whole thing was not nice. I didn't – you know, I mean, I guess I had a few nice dates, but a lot of them were just horrible.

And I had a much better experience like with Outing Club trips. You know, you could meet somebody where you're actually doing something that you both enjoy rather than sitting there and looking in each other's eyes, and you know the guy's just waiting to jump you and – I mean, the whole thing was just – it wasn't so great.

AMES: Yeah, absolutely.

ROSENTHAL: And we didn't have as much inter-school stuff as you do now. So you didn't have that much opportunity to meet guys except on, you know, dates.

AMES: Absolutely, yeah. Did Smith foster an environment where discussions about sexuality could be had?

ROSENTHAL: Oh, of course. I mean, the first year we – you know, I think a lot of the talk was about religion and sex, stuff like that. The one thing I have to say is it wasn't – I didn't remember any talking about homosexuality whatsoever. If people were homosexual, I didn't – you know, they weren't out. It was totally, totally different; totally different.

But girls would talk, you know, about, you know, their experiences with boys. I never heard anybody talk about their experiences with girls. I'm sure they had it, but I didn't hear about it.

AMES: Let's see. Did you face any challenges while you were here?

ROSENTHAL: Well, the challenge was I think to have the student body with people from different cultures from mine and, you know, different backgrounds from mine and find friends and get along with them. That was a little bit of a challenge. And the courses were challenging.

You know, I was always a good student and school was sort of easy for me, and so I had a lot of self-confidence about – you know, about myself as a student. But it was challenging. I mean, you had to work. You couldn't just, you know, do nothing and get by.

AMES: Absolutely.

ROSENTHAL: And the junior year abroad was very challenging. I mean, you know, there I was in France. I came to Smith. I was 16, so I went to France – I was only 18, and, you know, that was challenging. But it was good.

AMES: Because we have so many interviews today, we have to cut them at 30 minutes each unfortunately, while I'd love to talk with you much longer. But I do have a few closing questions for the remaining five minutes that we have.

ROSENTHAL: Okay. I'll keep it brief.

AMES: When you think about your time at Smith, what comes to mind first?

ROSENTHAL: Oh, I don't know. I guess – I think I didn't appreciate it as much then, but what comes to mind now is, you know, being in this very privileged sheltered environment, being able to do nothing but study and not have to do anything

else. You don't have to go shopping for groceries. You don't have to take care of anybody. You don't have to pay any bills. You don't have to do – I mean, it's incredibly sheltered.

I had a little inkling of it then. I did. And I don't – I think some people didn't have any inkling of it. But just being in this lovely place with all these smart people and being able to, you know – I liked school. You know, school was fun for me. So this was a – you know, it was mostly a lot of fun.

AMES: Absolutely, yeah. What keeps you coming back to reunion?

ROSENTHAL: What keeps me coming back is the good feelings I have about Smith. Obviously I've said that over and over again. And it's a very pleasant experience to connect with my friends. And, you know, even though I don't see them very often, it's very nice when I do get to see them. And it's fun.

AMES: Do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

ROSENTHAL: I think they should try to take advantage of everything that Smith has to offer. Whatever, you know, interest they have, they should pursue it. This is a time when they don't have anything else they have to do. They should just go for it. And I think a lot of them are.

I mean, one of the students who talked to us today, I mean, I couldn't believe it. She's Chinese and she was in Denmark and she did an internship in Nigeria, and now she's going to someplace else. You should just go for it. Do everything that they offer. Take advantage.

AMES: All right. Well, that concludes our interview today. I really appreciate you taking time out of your day to come talk with us.

ROSENTHAL: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.