Abstract

In this oral history, Alexandra Rossi talks about the unique nature and the importance of Smith's house communities. She discusses her perspective as a woman of color and how navigating racial differences and looking at issues from a variety of perspectives during her Smith years prepared her for the world after graduation.

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


Transcript

KLINGER: So this is Rachel Klinger and I am conducting an interview with Alexandra Ross-Reid on May 18, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So thanks so much for agreeing to be here.

ROSS-REID: Thank you for asking me.

KLINGER: Yeah, so why did you choose to attend reunion this year?

ROSS-REID: Well, it’s my five year reunion and really for me it was an opportunity for me to see my classmates that I haven’t seen in so long. I’ve made friends that live really everywhere and it’s hard to keep up with people. So I knew that by coming back I would be able to, you know, rekindle old connections. I live locally, so I have the advantage of coming back to campus but it’s really special during reunion when your classmates are there, so it’s nice. It’s almost like you never graduated. It’s like things are just the way they were before all of commencement began.

KLINGER: Where do you live in the area?

ROSS-REID: I live in Florence, which is a part of Northampton. It’s like ten minutes up the street, so I’m really spoiled.

KLINGER: Did you grow up in the area?

ROSS-REID: I did. I did. And it’s kind of a funny story how I came to Smith.

KLINGER: Okay, I’d love to hear it.

ROSS-REID: I was born in Northampton initially and part of my life I was living in Goshen, which is in the hill towns like 30 minutes west of here, and then I moved back to Northampton when I was about ten, and at my mother’s urging I applied to Smith and I was like, no, I don’t really want to do that. It was – for me it was too close to home. I was looking for a larger city. I thought I wanted a co-ed environment. Basically everything that Smith wasn’t. And when the time came, I didn’t really know what else to do, so I chose Smith. And I still wasn’t set on Smith. I thought that I was going to transfer after my first semester, but I wasn’t really up to it. It was kind of a laziness, I have to admit but each semester and each year Smith
grew on me, and I became more grateful for my experience, and today, looking back I’m so glad I made the choice that I did, and it sounds so cliché in so many ways. I remember looking at the View books and alumnae wanting to reach out to me, and I was just not really into it, but it actually is true, all the things that people say Smith is, I look back at my experience and it was like, yeah, it’s a really special place to be.

KLINGER: What was it like for you when you first arrived?

ROSS-REID: For my first like arriving on campus, I enrolled in a pre-orientation program and that was –

KLINGER: Which one?

ROSS-REID: That was – I participated in something called Cultural Connections. I don’t know if it still exists but it was a relatively small one, probably like 10 people and it was nice. Actually the person that I was hanging out with most during this weekend was my pre-O roommate, which I didn’t even remember but she – she pointed that out and I was like – oh, it’s so crazy. But you know it’s those connections that you make just remain over time. So when I first got to Smith it was kind of, you know, it was like here I am. I am in college. Here we go. I wasn’t incredibly enthusiastic about it, but it was still special for me it was the beginning of the process of realizing that Smith was not in my hometown. You know, I – or – sorry – that’s not how I remember saying it. That my hometown was not where Smith was, but Smith was in my hometown. And I realized that Smith was its own separate place which is nice, because they really are different and it was nice to be able to be in my hometown but have that different experience.

KLINGER: What you major in and how did you decide?

ROSS-REID: That’s another really good question. I became a psychology major. That again wasn’t my intent. I wanted to be a communications major and I was planning to make my own major. But what I have learned is that the college didn’t accept what they considered professional degrees and that’s what communications would have fallen under. So I just decided to take a psychology course because I knew I was interested in people and I knew I liked culture and I knew that understanding people would be important in anything I pursued after college. And I just enjoyed it. It was actually really difficult for me to figure out what track I wanted to focus in, because I enjoyed all of it. And so with psychology I chose to focus in culture and development and I also focused in social psychology. I chose not to minor in anything, because again I wanted to focus on people and communities and so I took a lot of courses across African-American studies. I took Latin American studies. I also took courses in American studies. So I really wanted to create as much of a communications experience, even though it wasn’t something that Smith was, you know, formally providing.
KLINGER: Did you have faculty members that may have inspired or helped you through that?

ROSS-REID: My first class I took in psychology was the psychology of adolescence with Byron Zamboanga. And I just really enjoyed that class, and he ended up being my advisor and it wasn’t really a question for me figuring out who I was going to work with, I just knew that that’s what felt right to me and so that’s why I asked him to be my advisor. But then along the way and psychology I met Fletcher Blanchard, I believe is his last name, and he is also a really cool guy and that’s when I got really into social psychology and saw how cool it can be and how you can use it outside of the classroom.

KLINGER: Cool. Were you involved in any extracurriculars or clubs?

ROSS-REID: Yes, yes absolutely. So again coming back to what my interests were, again, and being determined to create this experience that I wanted, I participated in the Recreation Council. I think the name has changed since I graduated but it’s an organization that catered to the entire student body and we were a group of twenty people responsible for putting on the fall and spring concerts, the winter weekend and spring weekend parties and – and we really drove a lot of that. So that was really the core of my extracurricular activity and it’s because it really took a lot of involvement, you know. It’s not easy putting on a 2000 guest event.

KLINGER: Are there any stories that you want to share from your time here?

ROSS-REID: There’s probably stories that I could tell you, but I’m not going to share them with you because I don’t think that they need to be on tape. They are better kept in my mind.

KLINGER: What was your house community like and did that affect your experience on campus?

ROSS-REID: I would say absolutely. I lived in Lamont House, which is considered center campus. I lived there for three years and I didn’t live there in my senior year because I went abroad for a semester senior year, which is a little unusual. I guess everything I did in college was a little different than the traditional path, but I went abroad my first semester of senior year, to London, and that was after spending a summer living in New York City and I was doing communications work in New York City. And when I came back, I chose to live in King House in the quad, because I wanted to have a different experience, and it was a good experience and the person who I had mentioned earlier who I had roomed with in my pre-O, I had known she lived there and that’s how I made that transition. But that contrast is what made me realize the significance of the house community in Lamont, and I think it’s a really special and unique and indescribable thing that you have. And I imagine it is different in each person’s house. Whether it is a smaller house or a larger house or where it is located geographically on campus, but yeah, house community is something that is very unique to Smith.
KLINGER: Do you feel like campus shifted at all during your – or changed during those four years that you were here?

ROSS-REID: Oh yeah. There was some new stuff. Like the engineering building, that didn’t exist when I was here. I just came from the reception and what is called I think the International Studies office. That wasn’t here. It was just Wright Hall and that’s where I took a bunch of courses, and it’s just a whole new beautiful room and conference center. It’s a resource for students here and it’s nice, because I think it really promotes that global perspective that Smith soften speaks of.

KLINGER: Why did you decide to go abroad the first semester of your senior year?

ROSS-REID: Well, it wasn’t necessarily by choice. I started off studying languages. I had come in having a background in Spanish but with my interests in my major and making it a very broad study, I could in person that further. And so I thought that the opportunity for me to study abroad in the more traditional sense, going away your junior year was not going to be possible and I did actually do in independent study during a spring break in the Dominican Republic. So that was nice. I did get to go to a Spanish-speaking country, but I didn’t expect that I would be able to study abroad and around the time that I had made the decision to do my internship in New York City, I also got this itch of like, all right, I grew up in Northampton and although Smith is a separate place, I need to kind of get away. I need to see something different. And I spoke to some people, I said, “Is it possible for me to actually study during my senior year instead of my junior year?” And I found out that it was possible, so I was like, all right, it’s a deal. I’m going to go away for a summer and then I’m going off to London and it was a really important experience. I think it is okay for people to not study abroad, but I think it is really promoting that global perspective and ability to understand and exist in different communities even if they do share the same language.

KLINGER: Were there any sort of like hot topics or controversial issues while you were here?

ROSS-REID: While I was on campus?

KLINGER: Mm-hmm.

ROSS-REID: I can’t – I’m sure there were. I can’t recall specific ones. But for me I would say being a person of color was a topic that was prevalent for me, but also coming from such a cultured town and one that is very open-minded and open to differences, what I found interesting is while I was participating in cultural groups, other people’s perception of what that culture was so different and it was like we are supposedly sharing the same culture but we all have a different notion of that culture and sometimes there was supposedly a right or wrong way and I am actually biracial, so in many ways I feel like I have been the bridge too many communities. I have had a foot in both polls and so I could understand one side and also the other. But also it becomes incredibly frustrating, because you’re like
I see it but I can’t articulate this to anyone. So you know, I would say that that’s something that’s challenging but it comes from people’s personal experiences and I think that’s something that Smith actually kind of brings to the forefront, not necessarily by choice, you are forced to co-exist with people whether it’s race, gender, class. You are all here together and those are the challenges that you are not left to your own devices, but you are – you are faced with those challenges and without those challenges I don’t think we would leave as the alumni we are and come back to Smith has. You know, those are experiences that I recognize daily in my life that have equipped me to perform in my business world or even meeting new people.

KLINGER: Did you face any new challenges during your experience here or –

ROSS-REID: I can’t recall any others. I feel like that’s the largest piece. I mean, it’s kind of broad and huge but I think the race, class, gender piece and I think that’s, you know, very well ingrained in the educational process here. You can’t escape it and that comes back to, you know, having – having that awareness and experience is what brings further understanding and the ability to problem solve and – I feel like I’m repeating the same words, but you know, the – not necessarily accepting of differences, but also being able to look at a situation from another perspective. Does that make sense?

KLINGER: Definitely. Would you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

ROSS-REID: Yes. As someone who is a very serious person and really wants to go ahead and do things, like I’m doing this and that’s how it’s going to be. Don’t take your education so seriously, because you are going to graduate and as long as you do well, you know, that’s just one piece. Getting the good marks is one piece of the education. It is so much more than that, and I think that a lot of times when people go to college, that’s what they are focused on, the academic aspect and when you leave, it’s not really what people are focusing on, it’s the interpersonal skills, it’s the global understanding, it’s being able to relate people and understand and hear people, and if you have those abilities, then you can do pretty much anything.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2013.