

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Monica Ricci Sargentini, AMS Diploma Program 1987*

Interviewed by  
Kirby Vasquez, Class of 2014

May 24, 2012

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Monica Ricci Sargentini contrasts her education experience in Italy with Smith, specifically in regard to classes and social expectations. She talks about her academic interest in language and American literature, interests that drew her to the AMS Diploma Program. She ends her interview with a discussion about the value of women's colleges in general and the American approach to life.

## **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:** Sargentini, Monica Ricci. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Video recording, May 24, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Monica Ricci Sargentini, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 24, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Sargentini, Monica Ricci. Interview by Kirby Vasquez. Transcript of video recording, May 24, 2012. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Monica Ricci Sargentini, interview by Kirby Vasquez, transcript of video recording, May 24, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project  
Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2012, with:

MONICA RICCI SARGENTINI

by: KIRBY VASQUEZ  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

VASQUEZ: My name is Kirby. I am here with Monica on May 24th, 2012 for the Alumnae Project. So Monica, would you like to start off by introducing yourself and what house you lived in and what year you were here?

SARGENTINI: Okay, my name is Monica Ricci. When I came here, my name was Monica Ricci, now it's Monica Ricci Sargentini because I added my mother's last name. It's a bit complicated. Which house I was living in, I don't remember because I stayed there only for 15 days or less, because then I moved out of the college and I went to live with other -- two AMS girls in an apartment, which didn't work out very well. Then I moved again. I moved four times one year. Anyway, yeah, I was -- I think -- I was up -- I don't remember the name. I was -- if I look at all the lists, I will recognize it, but now I -- first two I lived in (inaudible) in the college. We Italians have dinner around 8:30, 9.

VASQUEZ: So you were here for the AMS program?

SARGENTINI: Yeah.

VASQUEZ: All right, and why did you decide to apply and come for the AMS program?

SARGENTINI: Well, I didn't decide to apply and come. I was studying language and foreign literature at the University of Rome and I was almost finishing my graduation program, and my teacher asked me if I wanted to go to Smith College for one year, they have this scholarship and so I said, yes, why not, because I like to travel. But -- so she proposed it and I accepted it.

VASQUEZ: And what was your college experience like prior to coming here?

SARGENTINI: None, because in Italy we don't have colleges. We go to University, but we don't have a campus.

VASQUEZ: Oh.

SARGENTINI: Yeah, it doesn't exist more or less. But if you -- usually you go home, you live at home and you go to the university in the same city where you

study. Otherwise, if you go in another city, you have to rent an apartment. There are no campuses in the universities.

VASQUEZ: And what did you study at your university?

SARGENTINI: My university?

VASQUEZ: Yes.

SARGENTINI: In Italy.

VASQUEZ: At Rome?

SARGENTINI: I graduated in languages and foreign literatures, and when I came here I wanted to become a scholar and English and American literature, and so that's why I came here, yeah.

VASQUEZ: So, what was the experience like moving to the US and coming to an all women's college and living on campus?

SARGENTINI: Well, the beginning was really shocking because first of all I didn't know it was -- I didn't realize it was a women's college. So this is actually the first article -- because I'm a journalist, I wrote in my life, it was about Smith College, because I was sitting on a bench and then they started single -- these women going up and down and I was like, it's so strange, all women, all women. And then I realized I was in a women's college. And for the rest I mean it was -- it's very different from Italy, so it was really a great experience. I didn't like so much to live in the dorm, because probably the girls were younger than I was, and because I had already graduated and they were undergraduates, so probably that --

VASQUEZ: And what was the academic -- like situation like, what classes did you take or --

SARGENTINI: Well, I took many classes. Like I took -- here at Smith, for sure, comparative literature and then I took one or two courses at UMass of American Literature, I think, and I remember only these ones. Then I was taking the one in American History by Peter Rose that was compulsory -- mainly I was taking anyway literature, because I wanted to become a scholar in American Literature.

VASQUEZ: And what about friends and stuff, was that difficult to make because you are an AMS scholar or did you --

SARGENTINI: No. I remember they gave us this booklet that was very funny, that was saying if you speak with somebody like another student for the whole night and you drank and the day after don't think he is a friend of yours, because he's not. And that was really funny. So I found -- no, it was not

difficult to make friends. We had AMS -- we were pretty close, and then I had those other friends on campus, but yeah, it was still this thing that it was difficult to go probably deeper in friendship, but it's I think -- it's an American thing. Anyway, I moved -- in one of my many move ins I moved in a house with a girl, an American girl, who was not studying at Smith, but she was from Northampton and we are still in touch.

VASQUEZ: So do you mind actually talking about like the moving situations and like where did you live and why did you decide to move --

SARGENTINI: Okay, first I was in the dorm, and I remember I couldn't -- I don't know -- I didn't -- because there were always girls screaming up and down and then when the phone was ringing and then there was this dinner very early and they were deciding where you were going to sit. I mean I'm a bit more independent than that, so I felt that I had to move.

And I moved in with two girls from AMS, Lexie was from Great Britain, I just met her now, and DeNada was from Germany. So we moved in this big apartment, but it had only two bedrooms, and so I was living in the living room and they were living in the bedrooms and this was the problem that -- why then I had to move again, because I -- because they were pretty private people, but then they didn't give me enough privacy, like if I had a boyfriend coming over. I mean it was a bit of a mess. So in the end, I moved again. I moved in the house inside this college -- it was the house where another Italian girl was living, and there were some Chinese people but just for a few months, two months probably, and then I went to live down on Main Street after the bridge with this American girl, Heather -- that was pretty good.

VASQUEZ: And was it -- did you find yourself making friends off campus? Did you meet -- how did you meet Heather, for example?

SARGENTINI: Heather, I met her here. There was like a performance that she was -- I don't know why she was doing the lights. And I met her here. I told her I was looking for an apartment and she said I'm looking too, and so we started looking together. So other people out of college, yes, a few other than I met other people out of college and then when I went to UMass, I met people from UMass and -- yeah.

VASQUEZ: So why -- why were you going off to the other colleges? Like, were you taking classes there or --

SARGENTINI: Taking classes because some -- I mean some classes were very good and some classes were too spontaneous. Like if you study literature in Italy, you go really into the like -- the deep part, like really making the analysis - - political analysis of texts and the study here was like more what you feel about the novel that you read and more spontaneous like feeling probably than -- to go somewhere, for me was a bit too low like -- I mean it was not

so interesting, so I mean -- the comparative class, literature, I took was very good, but then the other ones, I felt it was too for undergraduate and I was looking for something more graduate courses, because I was a graduate, no? Because you can -- graduate from AMS and then you go to undergraduate classes and then at UMass they had grad courses. So I also took, I think, African American literature that I liked very much.

VASQUEZ: And what were your relationships like with the professors? Did you develop any relationships with them or --

SARGENTINI: Yes, yes. I remember -- I don't remember her name, but I remember when I applied to NYU, there was this comparative literature professor who was very good and she wrote the recommendation letter for me and then there was Peter Rose and other professor -- yeah it was pretty easy to speak with the professors.

VASQUEZ: And did you enjoy taking classes here with the other women that were around?

SARGENTINI: Yes. Yeah. I -- I always say you know, when I am in Italy, I always quote the experience in American colleges, because for example, it's incredible -- in Italy everybody copies when they're at exams, tests, it's like incredible and it's like -- I mean teachers don't know what to do anymore. And the fact is that you can't say if somebody close to you is copying, you can't say that -- because it's like kind of you become a spy and it's very despicable, and I said, but I remember Smith Colleges was no -- to say that one is copying. I mean it was like you're -- you have to say it, because it was not something you were doing, and I mean it's so different, the culture, so I think it's really good experience to go abroad, because it gives you a different point of view on things.

VASQUEZ: And what did you do right after leaving Smith?

SARGENTINI: I went to NYU for a fellowship in Italian and I did a masters degree in comparative literatures.

VASQUEZ: And you are back here for the reunion?

SARGENTINI: Now, yes, I am, but this is the first reunion I come back. I came back here because a friend Jovana Belazio which is Italian and also Christian (inaudible) was with me in AMS and so I came here with my son -- now I have three kids. But I -- just one son, and my husband we came here to visit once and then I came also when I was in New York, at NYU I came more than one time, but the reunion is the first time I come. And I don't know why this time I got like this idea.

VASQUEZ: What has the experience been like coming back all these different times? Have you noticed changes on the campus or the atmosphere?

SARGENTINI: Yeah, the campus has changed. I think the atmosphere, no. It's so quiet here. It makes you feel like you are relaxing. Really quiet, and I forgot about the squirrels that there are all the squirrels going --

VASQUEZ: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, definitely. And so you're doing research now about -- can you talk --

SARGENTINI: No, I'm not doing research. I'm writing a reportage on women's colleges, because in Italy we don't have women's colleges. Like everything is quiet now. There was -- like when I was -- not even -- before I was born probably, the schools were separated men -- girls and boys. But then this changed and now single-sex education is looked at as something -- they did like something from the past and so I got this idea since there was this reunion, I said, well, probably one should write about this colleges because many important women like Hilary Clinton and Sylvia Plath and many went to these colleges, no?

And so if there is a difference, if there is still you know -- if there is a still a meaning in having a women's college now that we are into the 21st Century and women have almost, you know, broken the ceiling glass and okay, and so I interviewed the president today -- your president and then I went also to Mount Holyoke. I am doing a reportage on both colleges. I want also to interview some alum -- somebody who can tell me about the college -- women's college and -- it's pretty interesting this thing that women's college you learned more to have self-esteem and go out of your comfort zone and speak out for yourself, than in a co-ed institution.

VASQUEZ: And looking back on like that year of being here, like would you describe it as a good time? Did you have difficulty fitting in like -- or was it a pleasant experience?

SARGENTINI: Well, a little bit, yeah, of course, some difficulties because you are far away from home and you're young, you know, so yes, some difficulties, yes. But in the end, I mean I think it was really great time and also that it changed -- I think it was like a turning point in my life. I mean if I hadn't come here, probably my life would be different now. I think it's very important to go abroad, and so my kids will do it for sure, because I -- it like opens your head, no? And those -- you learn how to be independent and -- no, it's not very good. And then -- I mean the thing is that you know, you Americans have this difference in approaching life that I think is really important. We don't have it in Italy because we are a bit -- how do you say? We think everything -- you know, you must have -- you can do whatever you want. I mean you can't really go for it because everything is so difficult that I always (indiscernible) other people and -- hearing -- you think you can go forever and so I think Smith and also NYU gave me these thing that you have to follow your dreams really, and so I'm very stubborn, no, and so I mean if I decide something, I really go for it, but I think I can go -- why many people think, no, you -- it's

impossible -- you know -- my mother told me once, only seven percent of the population does a job that she likes. Okay? And I -- so like why should you be in that seven percent. It is just the opposite of what I was saying, no? That you think you can -- you want to follow something, go for it and really believe in it, you'll get it. Hmm? Probably it's not always like that, but if you don't believe it in the first place, it's difficult that you'll get it, no?

VASQUEZ: Do you have any questions?

GEIS: Tell us, after you left Smith what was your work path? What did you do?

SARGENTINI: Yes, when I left Smith, as I told you, I went to NYU and I did this Master in comparative literature and then I went back to Italy and I tried to do some -- to get into the university because I wanted to become a scholar in American literature, but it was really difficult because there you're -- it's really you must get all these people who recommend you and that are the teacher -- every professor -- some of these was difficult, so I thought of starting writing some articles for a magazine on women -- very famous magazine called *Us Women*, and so I wrote my first article on Smith and then I started my career as a journalist. Then I changed to a daily paper and now I work in the leading paper in Italy, *Corriere della Sera*.

GEIS: And what does -- do you have a niche, an area that you focus on?

SARGENTINI: Yeah, I cover foreign affairs, so mostly -- well, Turkey, United States and Great Britain and also I have a blog on human rights with Amnesty International and so I cover also human rights.

SMITH: How was balancing and family and your work?

SARGENTINI: That's hard. I mean I feel a bit like in the movie with Sarah Jessica Parker, *I Don't Know How She Does It*, you know? Because I mean -- of course, you are always running, but -- I mean my husband supports me and so in fact when I go abroad, I have -- anyway I have a nanny for the kids and they are pretty independent. We manage, of course, it's a lot of work, but you can manage.

GEIS: Thank you.

SARGENTINI: You're welcome.

VASQUEZ: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2012.*