

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives

Northampton, MA

Maria Christina Sclafani, Class of 2008

Interviewed by

Carolyn Rees, Class of 2014

May 17, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, Maria Sclafani discusses the central role her house played in her Smith experience. She speaks of professors who played an important role in her Smith education, and recalls a charged political environment that was the backdrop to her college years. She also reflects on how being at Smith gave her an understanding of gender bias and the way that operates in the world, which has informed her post-graduate life.

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: Sclafani, Maria. Interview by Carolyn Rees. Video recording, May 17, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Maria Sclafani, interview by Carolyn Rees, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Sclafani, Maria. Interview by Carolyn Rees. Transcript of video recording, May 17, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Maria Sclafani, interview by Carolyn Rees, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2013, with:

MARIA CHRISTINA SCLAFANI

by: CAROLYN REES

REES: So this is Carolyn Rees and I am conducting an interview with Maria Christina on May 18th, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So would you mind just stating your name so that it's recorded?

SCLAFANI: Yeah, so my name is Maria. Should I look at the camera?

REES: You can look at me, you can look wherever, I know it's --

SCLAFANI: So my name is Maria Christina Sclafani, I'm Class of 2008 and I lived in Duckett House.

REES: Awesome. So thank you for agreeing to be a part of this.

SCLAFANI: Sure.

REES: So why did you choose to attend the reunion this year.

SCLAFANI: That's a good question. There are a lot of reasons. I live in Colorado now, and I really miss the East coast. I love coming out here. I love Smith. So I came also to see all the other people from my class. There's a lot of people that I wanted to see I hadn't seen in a long time because there aren't very many of us in Colorado. And I think also wanted an opportunity to -- there's something really nice about reunion, is like coming back to Smith like as if -- because I visited once after I graduated and it was really nice. But this time because reunion, you know, you're like living in the dorm and you have like a schedule and you get together with people. It feels almost like coming back to college for like three days.

REES: Right.

SCLAFANI: And I teach C. Boulder so I still get like summer break. So it was pretty

easy for me like classes finished and I was able to come. So figured if I could take the time then I should come.

REES: Yeah, are a lot of your friends here as well?

SCLAFANI: Yeah, I mean at Ivy Day they just said that our class we got the award for like having the most -- the highest percentage of our class come. So there is a huge number of us. So it's been really nice seeing everyone.

REES: Yeah, that's awesome. So how did you come to be at Smith, what was your journey?

SCLAFANI: That's a good question. So my journey was that I really wanted to go to school on the east coast and my -- I forget even what the term I want is. My top choice was Columbia because my dad went there and I really wanted to go there specifically. And then I applied to Amherst and we visited.

And my mom suggested that I look at Smith, and I was like I don't want to go to a girls' school so like what's the point. So I like didn't visit Smith even though I saw this area because I did like an overnight at Amherst.

And then I did all my applications and then afterwards, I did -- after I did my application, my high school English teacher kind of talked to me after class and said that she knew a professor at Smith because they grade APE tests together.

And that professor had extended an offer to my English teacher that if she printed out this email then and the student included that in the application that it would count as a fee waiver to any students that she thought were really promising.

So she spoke to me about it she said "Oh, you know I think you would just love it, this professor is wonderful and blah, blah, blah, blah." And so I thought okay my -- someone's like recommending that I apply to Smith, I'm going to do it.

And since Smith had the February deadline instead of December or whatever I was able to do the application, and I think this was like -- I feel like it was January, so it was after. So it was like a last minute plan, so I did the application. I got a few waivers so I didn't have to worry about anything.

And then since this was actually first school that I heard back from that I

got into, and I was excited and I started look at -- like because I didn't actually do any research. I did also research -- I applied to ten schools and I did a lot of research into all the other schools, and I didn't do any into Smith. So then after I got in, I started doing all this research and the fact that it didn't core requirements sounded really good, and it sounded beautiful, and everyone lived in small houses and so then it started -- and it started to appeal to me more.

So then I didn't get into anywhere on the East coast that I applied, and I got into Occidental, and so it was Smith, or Occidental or stay in Colorado, which I did not want to do. And so it was pretty easy after that because I didn't -- like didn't feel that strongly about Occidental and I definitely didn't feel that strongly about like L.A. So I came here I decided to go to Smith and I committed and I came here without having actually visited before. So I came to the one school that I did not visit or do research for or pay to apply to. But it's kind of funny because I met -- now, that I look back it was a pretty brave move. But something about once I started actually looking at the school it just seemed right; and so then I, like, I didn't question myself once.

When we like pulled on to campus -- my family brought me out here and we like drove up to campus and it was just like this is it for me. Like don't feel bad I didn't get into Columbia or Barnard, like I don't regret it at all. So it was kind of a strange journey.

REES: Meant to be.

SCLAFANI: Uh-huh.

REES: So you said that you lived in Duckett House?

SCLAFANI: Yes.

REES: Did you live there all four years?

SCLAFANI: I did.

REES: Awesome. And what was the house community like, how did it --

SCLAFANI: So I mean I loved it, it was very -- I'm not sure of the word I -- so it was really nice, and familiar and comfortable and even though, you know, we drank and some people smoked and kind of whatever, we didn't party a

whole lot. So it felt much more like a home than a dorm.

We would get together in the living room and watch Project Runway, and for Friday tea sometimes we would all get together and watch Queer as Folk and we could do that because there were not that many people in the house, I think there were like 35 -- 36 people so 15 of us could all get together in the living room no problem.

I'm trying to think. You know our house parties that we had weren't open public, they weren't like the Quad parties. So we would just have like nice little holiday parties for Halloween, and winter break, and then I feel like we had one -- had a summer one, and we had like the senior dinner, now I'm forgetting what that was called.

But it felt very home like and we bonded a lot and I became friends with a lot of people that were not in my year, you know, that were above me or below my years. So it felt like really tight knit community.

REES: Were you involved with any extracurriculars?

SCLAFANI: I think the answer is no.

REES: Never?

SCLAFANI: I'm trying to remember and I pretty much -- I came here and I was so happy to be somewhere that was actually intellectually challenging to me that I just threw -- I took, you know, so many classes, took dances classes and yeah, I took like Latin and all these different things I really had wanted to take for a long time and so it kind of occupied all my time. I think technically I was the Treasurer for Duckett House like once upon a time, and then maybe I was like something else, but other than that, no.

REES: And so how did you decide on your major or field of study?

SCLAFANI: Yeah, so I told myself that I wasn't going to like make my mind up too soon and I would take -- you have a year or two years to declare. So I told myself I would give myself all that time. But my first semester here because my first semester here I was sure that I was going to major in English, that had always been my strongest subject.

And so when I came I kind of was like, oh, I'm going to wait and see, but I kind of just knew that that was what I wanted to do, I wanted to study books all day everyday.

Think I took -- like took more English classes than was required for my major, and I took so many that when I was graduating my advisor was like, you know, I don't know if you have enough credits outside of your major. Because you have to have 64 and I like just barely had exactly 64 because I had taken dances classes on top of my regular.

Like if I hadn't taken those classes then wouldn't have had the required because that's just all I wanted to do was take two English classes every semester. And, yeah, so it was --

REES: Who were your favorite professors or inspiring professors?

SCLAFANI: Well, it's kind of a funny story. So my advisor was Pat Scarda (phonetic) in the English Department, and she was the woman that had given the fee waiver to my English teacher in high school. So my English teacher was like "Oh, this woman Pat Scarda is so wonderful, blah, blah, blah, you have to -- I hope you meet her and like take a class with her."

I mean she basically was how I got into Smith because she had, you know, set up this opportunity with the fee waiver. And then I got to Smith and I met her, and the first time I met her I was so excited I was like, "Oh, my English teacher loves you, and she's blah, blah, blah, blah and she told me to come talk to you."

And I gave her like this whole story about how excited I was to meet her, and she kind of like looked at me and she was like, "Do you want a gold sticker?" And, like, walked away. And so at first I like didn't really know what to think about her, but then I took a class with her, I think I took the freshman English class whatever it is. And then she decided she really liked me and then I was all right. And so then she became my advisor after that and I worked pretty closely with her.

And also Floyd Cheung was really wonderful too, he wasn't my official advisor, but I went and talked with him about lots of different stuff and (indiscernible) 0:09:39.0 as well, they were both really supportive.

And then my -- I minored in Latin, so my minor advisor was Maurine Ryan and I loved her too, she was a bit -- she's a bit -- she has a different style maybe. I had a couple friends, we all took Latin together and we would translate together, like do our homework together as a group and we would all kind of talk about how she -- she wasn't mean, but

she set these really high standards because she has very high expectations.

And like you really wanted to do well, not like for yourself, but like to like make her happy, you know, like really wanted to do well so that she would like think highly of you.

And even though in all my other classes I wanted to do well for me to get an A, like that was enough. For her we like wanted to do well so that we didn't like let her down. There was something about her in particular.

So I think she -- I mean she was a really challenging instructor, but I ended up taking three years of Latin and I don't know if I would have done that if she hadn't been my advisor. And I took two classes with her, I think of my, you know, this -- I think maybe I time for like four Latin professors and so she was one of them.

REES: That's cool.

SCLAFANI: Yeah.

REES: So how would you describe the campus atmosphere during your time at Smith?

SCLAFANI: How can I describe the campus atmosphere? So there were definitely a lot of parties going on and we all wanted to go out a lot and go to the Quad parties. I was also very competitive, and I don't think of that as a negative thing.

I thought of it as more like stimulating maybe, it was sort -- I felt very supported or encouraged to kind of like strive and try harder because everyone else was doing it. So I felt like we were all like the sort of same type of student or something like that in that we all, you know, were happy to study until 3:00 a.m., and work on stuff together, and stay during finals in the library and do all that stuff. I felt like there was a lot of activism going on. And I wish I -- and one of my regrets is that I didn't participate much, like I said I didn't really have any extracurriculars. But I felt like there was a giant -- I forget what it's called, Smith Democrats Group, it was huge.

And I also feel like there was a lot of -- there was so much activism going on for all sorts of different causes, you know, divesting from different places and getting rid of Coca-Cola because we had a contract with them. That I think that happened, if I remember right that happened while I was at Smith that they changed, they got rid of that, they ended the contract

and they didn't renew it with them. And there was a lot about just lots of different social causes that I had not been aware of previously. And on top of that, I think there was a sit-in and some protests.

A particular student who was Muslim had been harassed by these women, I want to say Northrup Gillette, and I didn't know the girl who had been harassed. But there was a lot of stuff going on around that in particular, sort of fighting for awareness and for better treatment and so that that situation could be remedied. And then there was an incident later on maybe my senior year, maybe my -- maybe not. Sometime there was an incident where there was a Halloween party and a girl went in blackface and everybody just freaked out and so, but I mean then it became very interesting because the college had like -- I forget what it was called, but they had a talk or something like that where people could go and talk about it. And I felt like the -- you know the campus -- I felt like the college dealt with it really well.

But I guess what I would say is I feel like there was a lot of people who were either activists or who were very outspoken. And so there were a lot different -- I don't want to say argument. There were a lot of different things going on, a lot of different controversy and a lot of different debates about different things. So that's what I would say, that's how I would describe the environment.

REES: How would you describe the typical Smithie at that time?

SCLAFANI: Typical Smithie. That's a good question. I do feel like there's a large number of Smithies that I -- this may not apply to and that I didn't know very well. But I feel like a typical Smithie kind of wants to have her -- it sounds silly, but to have her feet in kind of like two worlds.

One is like being social and dressing up, and going out and partying, and being a part of pop culture like being, you know, connected, included. And the other part really wants to just hide away in the library and study all day, and, you know, hangout in her dorm room and talk to her friends and stay like in a little insulated bubble.

So I feel like it was really interesting because I definitely feel like I was in both of those camps. And I feel like a lot of other -- my fellow alums were as well. And I guess what I find interesting is that a lot of them have gone on, a lot of them stayed, they went to graduate school. But a lot of them have also gone onto be really successful creating nonprofits and working for all these other organizations outside of academia. And so I think that we are -- and I say this probably about all Smithies and not my class per se.

But what's really impressive about Smith women is that we can really go and multiple directions because you have these different skills that you develop and different interests. And it's okay to be an intellectual and still dress up and want to go dance to Rihanna, and like, you know, want to do a pub-crawl, or Hampshire a keg hunt and, you know, stuff like that. It's okay to do both. Because I found in graduate school that a lot of people were surprised that I wanted to dress fashionably and watch reality TV shows that were like no good for my brain and, you know, was into pop culture stuff. Because a lot of them just like lived in this bubble all the time and I didn't understand how I could both, or that why I would want to do both.

REES: Right. So who have you become since Smith?

SCLAFANI: Who have I become. That's a good question. I think that I have become -- more outspoken, I've become a little bit more of an activist, definitely more than I was at Smith, which is not saying much. But I definitely feel like I've become more of an activist. I've become much more socially aware of things that are going on in the country and in like the world. I think I was having such a good time just being a student that I wasn't really paying attention to what was going on in the world. And now I feel like I'm much better about that, I am much more clued in to what's going on. And I also think that I learned. I learned how to balance a little more my school and personal life. Because when I was at Smith I never like went -- I mean I would go to parties, but I never like went to concerts in town, or like took weekend trips to Boston or like did any of that stuff because I just didn't want to leave my work really, and you can only do that for so long.

So I feel like finally after Smith I kind of learned to let myself like step away from the work and go enjoy myself and do fun things. And I think the most important thing that has changed is I feel like I've become much more of an outspoken feminist because while I was here I was really inspired by everything that was going on and I agreed with my peers. But I wasn't seeing sexism happen on campus, which is what is so wonderful about Smith. I'm sure that's sort of blatant generalization. But I guess what I'm trying to say is I wasn't seeing sort of like this sort of, yeah, institutionalized sexism as much. I kind of felt like -- I don't know I won't say -- I won't finish that sentence.

So then I left and I went to graduate school and I -- I mean I taught undergraduate, and I was in graduate classes myself, and I feel like I was completely caught off guard by the differences between the genders. Men

talk a lot more in classes, they think a lot less about what they say; they are less self-conscious. It was so strange to me to be in graduate classes with women who didn't talk and these are like two and a half hour classes. So I felt like I was one of the only women in my program out of a lot of women that were in the program I was one of the only women who would speak in every class, and at Smith as you probably know, that's not a problem; right, like everybody talks. And so it was so strange to me when I went to graduate school. And then I also found that the men in my graduate program seemed to get more funding, they got more classes, they got more opportunities, they got more support and they got into the PhD program, and the female masters degree students in my program didn't and it just seem -- I mean at this point it's overfilling -- that PhD program is overfilling with men.

And I think that's just one example, I mean I see it happening obviously outside of academia in the real world as well. But I think I became more clued in to the gender inequality that exists in our society still that I became -- I think because I was at Smith. I now feel okay being angry about it and being outspoken about it because I know I'm not the first one or the only one and I'm not -- you know, I'm not, you know, pointing something out that nobody else sees. And so I think -- yeah, that's I think the most important to me as well. And I -- I'm not sure exactly how I want to phrase this. But I was actually -- I was on a walk to my car with this guy who was in my graduate program and he was younger than me, and he was asking me for some like advise on teaching, and I now had -- I finished my graduate program and I am adjunct to I'm still teaching.

And I said something about how I dress fairly professional when I teach because I am five feet tall, and I look like an undergraduate and I'm a woman and so I really have to dress a certain way. Because the other thing I learned when I started teaching is that students don't respect female instructors nearly as much as respect male instructors, they are much more -- and I don't exactly know what this is, but I feel like they're much more willing to fight with female instructors about stuff and challenge them, they don't respect their authority as much. So anyway, I was saying that I take these steps to become more professional and sort of have more authority in my classroom. And he actually said like, Oh, I -- you know, it like never occurred to me that, you know, people would -- students would respond differently to a woman than to me, like that never occurred to me that, you know, you would have to like try harder to establish your authority." I just -- I mean there's so many things that could have been said, but I just said, "Yes, that's male privilege, like you don't have to think about it, and the fact that it's never occurred to you until now is shocking because I think about it everyday and I've been thinking about it everyday since I came to graduate school." So I mean that's just a particular

example. But I think yeah, another thing that I really noticed was the way that women are treated in the workplace so.

REES: What graduate program did you --

SCLAFANI: So I went to the University of Colorado Boulder for a Masters in Literature after Smith.

REES: Right. So last question, do you have any advice for current and future Smithies?

SCLAFANI: Oh, my goodness, advice. Good question. So if there are any Smithies who are planning on going onto graduate school my recommendation is to take time off before you go. I was told that explicitly by Smith alums who were in graduate school in my field and I didn't listen to them. But now I am saying the exact same thing and hopefully someone will listen to me, they probably won't. But I think it's incredibly important to adjust to -- because you're coming right from the dorms, so to learn how to live an apartment, and pay your bills, and balance your budget, and figure out how much money you need to live on because I think it's easy to agree to a graduate stipend because it seems like a lot of money before you actually know how much it costs to live somewhere. And to just deal with regular stuff that you don't have to deal with in the dorms. And also to see what kind of work environments you like to be in because graduate school is not the solution to a lot of -- it's not the answer is a better way to say that.

It's not the answer to a lot of people's sort of question of like what should I do with my life, where should I go. I'm smart so I should go to graduate school, that's like it doesn't solve anything. You still have to find a job afterwards. And if you can find a job you like and get some experience before you go to graduate school and you can keep doing it while you're in graduate school and have a source of income and stability and something to fall back on when you graduate. And, you know, you have a like a Masters in Library Science and Archives, and no one is going to hire you, you know. So I think that would be my advice, in particular to those who are considering graduate school. And then as far as general stuff, I think the main thing I would say is to really seek out other Smithies after graduation. I mean you may -- I guess some students may not feel the need to do that. But when I left I felt like I was really -- I was very lost. I felt very lost. I felt very disconnected because I was going really far away; I went back to Colorado where I was from. And so I think seeking out Smith clubs, and even just I mean other Smithies is a really good idea. And it's really wonderful if you get to join a club to go to

events because it's like being just -- it's like just -- it's like being back at Smith. I'll rephrase that.

It's like being back at Smith for just an hour, or two hours and you meet all these wonderful interesting alums even though they're like 20 years older than you, or 15 years older than you or whatever it's still the same. So it's kind of like having a little bit of Smith, getting a little bit of Smith wherever you are. And those women will also, I think really help too. I mean it's nice socially, but professionally a lot of people that I know, a lot of my fellow alums from 2008 have found success in the workplace in part because of Smith connections. And so I think for personal life, but also for networking it can be really beneficial. So that wherever you are you have like -- you have a community to kind of support you.

REES: I think that that's it. Is there anything else that you want to share or say?

SCLAFANI: Well, I guess I have one story, I figure -- I thought you might ask, you know, what are your favorite memories or what's something -- something like that, I mean and there's a million, but I have one story in particular that is -- hopefully won't get me in trouble. I feel like now enough time has passed that it's okay. So my senior year I wrote a thesis and I really just like -- I didn't really know what I was doing, but I really hunkered down and I got myself a carrel in the library and I just was there all the time and it really made a big difference to me to be able to do that instead of being in my room. I got a TV, which was like the worst idea ever and I would just get so distracted. So I would go to the library all the time, lived in the library and there were a couple other girls in my year who also were in the library and we would all kind of socialize and support each other. But I also was -- I got this job as an assistant to the visiting writer resident Hilton Als and he is kind of an odd bird, and I don't really know what he envisioned for me as an assistant, I assumed it would have more to do with his actual writing.

He is -- I mean he's a great writer, he's staff on the New Yorker, and he's very established. But he wanted me to like check library books out for him, and paint his office and kind of do all this strange stuff that I wasn't sure was -- like that Smith should be paying me to do, I was a little bit -- so I didn't do a whole lot for him basically. And at some point the university -- the university -- College wanted -- we were doing like paper, you know, paper hourly sheets and they wanted him to switch to electronic and he couldn't figure it out, and so basically that meant I couldn't get paid. And so at some point I just was like I'm not going to work for you anymore if you can't even log on to whatever the website is and approve my hours and get me paid. So basically I didn't really do much for him. But he had them make a copy of his office key for me so that I could access his office. And that office key was in Wright Hall and Wright Hall

connects to the library and there was a key for that too. So basically I got this key and that was -- ended up being really useful to me even though didn't actually do a lot as his assistant, the job was kind of nonexistent. So I would basically go into the library, like I would go into the library when it was closed because I could get in through Wright. And I didn't do that too often because I was a little afraid of like getting murdered by a homeless man or anything happening like that. But I would get someone to go with me; I would convince them to go with me. So a couple times when I was writing my thesis, especially on Fridays because I don't know about now, but the library used to close at like 9:00 on Fridays, which seemed crazy to me, and they would leave the lights on in most of the library, not all of it, but good section of the lights would be on. So basically I would go into the library with a friend and we would go and like at the carrels until 3:00 a.m., or 5:00 a.m. or 6:00 a.m. And so that's my kind of -- I sort of tell that story sometimes when people -- like to give them an idea of the type of person I am. So I was like we'll I'd just break into the library, but I broke into the library to do work.

REES: Yeah, that's sums up what I would do.

SCLAFANI: Yeah, I was that serious about my work that I was willing to break the rules, but only --

REES: So you could do your work.

SCLAFANI: Yeah.

REES: That's great. Well, thank you for talking to me.

SCLAFANI: Sure. Sure.

REES: It's been fun.

SCLAFANI: It was fun.

REES: Good.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.