

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Topsy Siderowf, Class of 1961*

Interviewed by  
Bethy Williams, Class of 2013

May 21, 2011

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Topsy Siderowf discusses the overall campus atmosphere, her work as a history major, the dating scene, the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, her interactions with Sylvia Plath, and her work at *Golf Digest*.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

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

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Linda Sariahmed 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:** Siderowf, Topsy. Interview by Bethy Williams. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Topsy Siderowf, interview by Bethy Williams, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Siderowf, Topsy. Interview by Bethy Williams. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Topsy Siderowf, interview by Bethy Williams, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted on May 21, 2011, with:

TOPSY SIDEROWF

by: BETHY WILLIAMS  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

SIDEROWF: Chair whatever I have and you'll inspire me for more.

GEIS: OK. Tell me where is home.

SIDEROWF: Westport, Connecticut.

GEIS: Great. And you're ready.

WILLIAMS: I'm Bethy Williams, here with Topsy, Class of 1961.

SIDEROWF: Correct.

WILLIAMS: So, how did you choose Smith initially?

SIDEROWF: Oh, I knew I wanted to go to one of the Seven Sister Schools. That would have been a place that I — the kind of school that I wanted to go to, I always valued education, and wanted to have that same kind of education, and I knew people who had one that I admired, and so I applied, and was lucky enough to be admitted.

WILLIAMS: And given the options, why did you choose a women's college?

SIDEROWF: Actually, when I was applying, which was 1957, '56, there weren't that many options for — other than state universities or places like that, and at that point in time, going to a women's college, there — you know, it never occurred to me that there would be anything other than something wonderful by going to a women's college. So Yale, I was — lived in New Haven and had lots of family that went to Yale — wasn't available to me.

WILLIAMS: And how was the transition from New Haven to Smith? Was it pretty natural?

SIDEROWF: Yeah. It wasn't — I — it wasn't that far away. About an hour and a half away from home. We didn't have 91 in those days, we came on Route 10, it was a little longer and more bucolic ride coming into Northampton. But it was — you know, I knew people who had gone to

Smith, I knew people who were ahead of me here, and they seemed to survive. Nothing terrible happened to them, so I thought, you know, this is going to be good. But, I must say that it was — you know, it was a transition to leave home, because I'd gone to school, public high school, in New Haven. I had gone away to summer camp, and I remember thinking the first night of the summer camp that if — I think I was nine, and I was going to be there for eight weeks, and I thought, If I make it through this night alive, I will call my mother the first thing in the morning and she will come and pick me up, and I will leave this place. But somehow in the morning I was fine. And it's interesting, because there was a woman in my camp bunk who was a classmate of mine at Smith who's unfortunately passed away, but Judy Winters. And she was lovely.

WILLIAMS: So how would you describe the typical Smithie during your time here?

SIDEROWF: The Smith?

WILLIAMS: The typical Smithie, the typical student here, during your time.

SIDEROWF: I think that we were serious students, but we were social. We were — I think that there were a lot of wonderful traits that these women had, and I renewed, in thinking about them, when I come back to a reunion, that they are so special, that they are so smart and so talented and funny and kind, and think about things other than themselves, bigger issues, and I think that was probably always the case. You know, the women were just terrific. I was very studious. I always wanted to study hard and do well, and I don't know the preparation that I had wasn't fantastic, I'd come from a public high school. Good enough, but I felt the need to really study, so I did.

WILLIAMS: What did you major in when you were here?

SIDEROWF: History. And I had all of — I had some wonder — I had — Nelly Hoyt was my advisor, and I had Mr. [Salvadore] for one of my classes, I had Mrs. Kafka for a class. I was torn between English and history, and I — I was always interested in people, and what makes people tick, and why did something — why did they act in a certain way, and what repercussions did that happen, and I was talking to Mrs. Hoyt about that — is that what we called her? I don't know. And she said, well, that's what history is. So that was a defining moment, that she would say that to me, and I made that choice. And I was a serious student. I did well. I didn't honor, but I was, you know, very conscientious about my studies, and—

WILLIAMS: So did you have a lot of time for a social life, even though you were very studious?

SIDEROWF: I — enough. Enough. I had some — enough — I had some friends here and there. But I wasn't running off, and I — I don't think I ever went out during the week. I think we had to be in by 10 anyway, right?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIDEROWF: The dorms were locked up. We had the six-inch rule, too, off the — you know, if you had — the one time we could have gentlemen in our rooms, our — we had to have our feet — no more than six inches off the floor.

WILLIAMS: Oh, my goodness (laughs).

SIDEROWF: So it was very strict.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIDEROWF: It was a whole different thing. We had — there were lovely things, though! We had to wear skirts to dinner every night, which we did. We had tablecloths. And our house mother, Mrs. Hale, who was lovely, sat at her table, and two of us or three of us would sit with her — probably three. There was — table for four. And I enjoyed sitting with her, actually, I didn't — I enjoyed her. And I — you know, people served, we learned lower at the left, raise at the right, things that have stood us in good stead. She promised us the reason we needed to learn about serving was that we could train a maid who would be serving us, but I have to say, she disappointed — I — there was no maid that was serving dinner in my house, but I have taught that to my husband, knows lower left, my children know it, so I can thank Mrs. [Hale], and also we were — had sorbet for dessert, and it was very, very frozen, and we were digging into it, and probably making terrible noises with the dessert spoon, a large spoon, and digging into the table, and making these noises against our china dish, and she clicked on her glass, "Girls, girls, go gently." So we knew that we weren't supposed to be making that clacking sound.

WILLIAMS: So you liked learning about etiquette and manners (inaudible)?

SIDEROWF: Oh, yeah, I still do. I like the whole thing. I like all the domestic arts.

WILLIAMS: Yeah?

SIDEROWF: I do. I enjoy that.

WILLIAMS: Can you tell us a little bit more about your house mother and that relationship?

SIDEROWF: I liked her a lot. She was a very fine lady. She came from Springfield, Longmeadow. Widowed. Her — somehow her family was involved with Friendly's — I think her son was in Friendly's as — he worked in Friendly's in an administrative capacity, and we had great respect for her, and she would — and she taught us to be ladies, and we would have coffee, demitasse, in the living room after dinner. She was very well-groomed, and — you know, she had — she had big responsibility to make sure that all of us were behaving. And actually I had a very nice relationship with her. She did come to our wedding, along with Miss [Samon?], who lived in our house, in [Laura Scales?]. Miss [Samon?] was then the head of admissions. Jane [Samon?]? And she was terrific. And [Iva D. Hyatt?] also lived in [Laura Scales?] House. They were faculty. She was head of the choir. [In the current time?]-

WILLIAMS: When did you get married?

SIDEROWF: I got married — well, if you weren't engaged by the time you were graduated, there was really — you were in the white elephant category, but I was — I had met my husband soon after I graduated, and in those days, we moved fast. I was engaged in November and married the next March, which is 1962, so in 19— in 2012, I will have been married 50 years.

WILLIAMS: Congratulations!

SIDEROWF: Thank you. It's quite an accomplishment, I must say. My husband says it's a big one. But it hasn't been too hard. It's just gone too fast.

WILLIAMS: Right. What were your experiences with relationships and dating and all of that when you were here?

SIDEROWF: The normal stuff. I guess I had, you know, beaux, and a lot of fun. You know, going off to Yale, or — I remember going to Amherst once. I didn't go to Amherst a lot, but I do remember, when I came as a freshman, that I knew some people who were at Amherst, and they had already had that little book? 1961, class of 1961?

WILLIAMS: The Who's Who book.

SIDEROWF: The Who's Who. And they had — they had made the Xes, who was — who was a real dog, and who was good looking, and who they were going to try to get dates with, and they are — you know, they had already been through it, so I don't know.

WILLIAMS: Did you see how they marked you in the book?

SIDEROWF: No, I don't know. I can't — I don't know. I wasn't really concerned about that, I guess. I don't know.

WILLIAMS: Right.

SIDEROWF: But—

WILLIAMS: How were issues of race and class and sexuality? Were they divisive at your time here, would you say, or—?

SIDEROWF: Not really. No, I think that we were kind of mellow. Although people in my class, not I, but people in my class, there were some — it was just the beginning of the civil rights sit-ins and Selma, Alabama, marches on Selma, things like that. But I think that the women very much in my — at my time, and I don't — I can only speak for myself, but this seems to be what I observed — were interested in doing a good job while they were here. But their ultimate goal was really getting a husband, having a family, raising a family. That was — I would say that was primary goal. Many women I know who went to Smith didn't finish here. They stayed two years, got married, some then matriculated other places, but a lot of — I think that was the — that was pretty much — and the — and also, the opportunities for employment for women in my — when I was in — that's 50 years ago — people — I mean, I ultimately did become a teacher, and had got a Master's degree, but I don't know what I really was going to do. You know, I didn't have a clear-cut idea. I didn't — wasn't going to become a doctor or a lawyer. Not that I couldn't have. You know, the motivation, if it had come from within me, that would have been fine, and it certainly would have been supported by my family. But it just — it wasn't delineated as such, you know? It was fine to sort of let the man be the breadwinner.

WILLIAMS: So you were OK—

SIDEROWF: But I did have a change as I went through.

WILLIAMS: All right.

SIDEROWF: You know, these past 50 years, I did work for many years.

WILLIAMS: Right. But the original plan, that sort of have a family, be married, that sounded satisfying and good to you.

SIDEROWF: Absolutely.

WILLIAMS: Right.

SIDEROWF: Absolutely.

WILLIAMS: And it's meaningful work, yeah.

SIDEROWF: There's no question. And my husband has always said that raising children was the most important thing I could have done.

WILLIAMS: And you mentioned to me outside that you had Sylvia Plath as a professor when you were here?

SIDEROWF: Yes, wasn't I lucky?

WILLIAMS: Yes, definitely.

SIDEROWF: You just don't know that, those things, and it's interesting, because I was in the 11 o'clock section—11, that meant it met at 11 o'clock on Tuesday, 11 o'clock on Thursday, and 11 — this was a — and 11 o'clock on Saturday. How many Saturday 11 o'clock mandatory, because we couldn't — we couldn't cut the class, we had to be here on Saturday.

WILLIAMS: I'm so glad we don't have class on Saturday now (laughs).

SIDEROWF: I know, but we did. We did. We also had a lot of snow in those days, but that — that's not pertinent to this. Anyway, Sylvia Plath, in my mind, at that time, was just delightful. It was kind of a formal time, and lots — I remember Mrs. Kafka called me Miss Resnick, which was my maiden name. My official name is Martha, not that people called me that, but I've always been called Topsy, since birth, and Sylvia Plath called me Topsy. She knew I was Topsy, and she seemed very comfortable within herself, and she was gracious, and I think so attractive, and interesting, and supportive of us. It was — she was very — she was just lovely. And it was startling to learn, after her life was over, and read her journals, how uncertain she was of herself, and how distraught, and how she felt that she — what she was doing was so worthless, or — you know, her self-doubt was just — it was not apparent at all, to me. That was really a revelation.

WILLIAMS: Wow. So how was she supportive of you as a student?

SIDEROWF: In the one paper that I saved — I wish I had saved more — you know, I was just — just starting out, and just learning how to analyze things, I had never been asked to do any of that in high school, but I'm sure I was very conscientious in the class, and I took the notes, and I listened and I tried to do what I — you know, to use my best intelligence to make an interesting or a viable argument for a point, and she would say on the paper, it would say, good point, or maybe you should further examine thus and such, but it was all very positive. It wasn't, you know, this is a terrible paper, and you're pathetic. It was nothing — that was not the tone. The tone was you know, good work, good start.

WILLIAMS: So it sounds like even though she was only here a year—



SIDEROWF: One year.

WILLIAMS: —she made a lot of difference in students' lives.

SIDEROWF: Well, in mine, and especially in retrospect. One of — I think one of the nicest things that's happened as I've gone through life is at one of the reunions, one of my classmates said to me, "Topsy, you and I are both in Sylvia Plath's journal." And I said, "Oh, I didn't know that." And she said, "She liked you. She didn't like me." But she did like my friend. She was being very modest, and she spent a lot more time talking about my friend than she did with — about me, but I am in a line with three other women who were in my section, the 11 o'clock section—

WILLIAMS: Wow.

SIDEROWF: —which she liked, she liked us a lot, and she — there's something, she used the word joyous, plus some other words that were very nice, and to have — I mean, I have no possible inclination that I was making that kind of an impression on her, I was just doing what I thought I was supposed to be doing, and to think — and I certainly was enjoying her, but did I know that she was also enjoying me and my other classmates?

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIDEROWF: It was a revelation.

WILLIAMS: And it's nice to know she was so, you know, depressed so much of her life, that her students, and you in particular, brought her joy. That's a huge compliment.

SIDEROWF: Oh, well, yeah. Yeah. You know, you wonder in life if circumstances had gone a different way, if she had come in contact with a support group, a different kind of support group, if she had been medicated. I don't — I — see, that's something I would not know. But are there medications that might have been — helped her to get through her tough times? Because she had so much going for her. So much going for her. And so — such a tragedy.

WILLIAMS: Right. And how were her and Hughes perceived as a couple on campus, do you remember anything about Ted Hughes?

SIDEROWF: Yes, because I don't — I don't remember him as well, but Thursday night we could have our teachers to dinner, and I had Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes to dinner, and I thought to myself, that, you know, this — they came because they wanted to be there. I don't remember him as well, but I do remember she came with him, definitely. But she was my

teacher, so I was really concentrating on her. And anyway, I think that it is mentioned in her journals that they came, because it was — that she — it was a dinner she didn't have to cook, so there was — not that she wasn't glad to see us. I was sure she was coming because she really wanted to see us, but perhaps. Have you heard that—

WILLIAMS: No.

SIDEROWF: —comment? Oh, I think that I mentioned that to Karen. Those were some of the details that I wanted to be sure of. But she told us at that point about her experience as a Fulbright scholar, and that it was so cold in the classroom in England that she had to wear mittens and take notes with mittens. She told us, also, that she made cakes, and the cakes were so dreadful that they would just be this — like bricks. That they were — but anyway, so my experience with her was just — you know, it was just so pleasant. It was lovely. And to learn of her — her inner turmoil, which I was totally unaware of, was very — it was upsetting to know that she had — she was struggling like that.

WILLIAMS: Right.

SIDEROWF: What a lost talent.

WILLIAMS: Right. And another thing that happened with Professor — I think it was shortly after your commencement — was Newton Arvin, Edward Spofford, and Joel Dorius were fired. Do you remember that controversy?

SIDEROWF: No.

WILLIAMS: OK. We don't have to—

SIDEROWF: I wasn't there. I don't even—

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIDEROWF: —I don't want to talk about that anyway.

WILLIAMS: OK. That's fine.

SIDEROWF: I — I don't know. There was a woman in my class who was called Susan Allen Toth. Have you had—

WILLIAMS: No, I haven't heard of her.

SIDEROWF: Oh, she's a wonderful writer. She's a wonder — she had — I think it was Mr. Aaron, who was another iconic teacher, then American Studies, and then went on to — but she tells some — in her books, she tells some

wonderful stories. So that's the kind of people who were in my class, and they were just outstanding. They were very outstanding, and every time you come back to the campus, and you are reunited with your friends that you were already friendly with, you're delighted to see them, but then — you — there's someone else you didn't know about, and you find out about that person.

WILLIAMS: Right.

SIDEROWF: You know, you make a new friend.

WILLIAMS: Right.

SIDEROWF: And so. Anyway.

WILLIAMS: So who have you become since Smith?

SIDEROWF: Who have I become since Smith?

WILLIAMS: Big question.

SIDEROWF: It definitely was a very important factor in the shaping of my life, I think. I have — I am a wife, a mother, a grandmother, grateful for that. I worked for a magazine for 30 — 27 years, as starting out part time, and then I worked up to becoming a — some kind of an editor there. And so, does that define my life? I don't know. I don't know.

WILLIAMS: Hard to say.

SIDEROWF: Hard to say, yeah.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

SIDEROWF: I'm still, I think, the girl who went off to Smith. Maybe I should have developed more. I don't know. No. I'm not unhappy. You can see.

WILLIAMS: Right. Looking back, would you encourage your daughter to come to Smith?

SIDEROWF: Well, I've been through that. My daughter did not choose to go to Smith. She — after today, I was so impressed with Smith, and listening to the young woman who spoke was so exceptional and moving. And hearing what all these women do, and the education at Smith is fabulous, I think it's a certain kind of woman. I think it depends on what you're looking for, I think it depends on what your goals are, and — I think that the co-ed experience is very appealing. Very appealing. And I— So if a girl would want that? I don't know. That's — that's hard to fight.

WILLIAMS: Right.

SIDEROWF: But you do have the — you know the 7, [what it is?] 5, schools that you can interact with, but it's not the same.

WILLIAMS: Were you happy you had a women's college experience?

SIDEROWF: It's all I knew. So I was very happy with it. I loved it. I got up every morning and I got on my bicycle and I would look over it, because I lived in Laura Scales House. Pass Paradise Pond, and I'd think, you know, I am so lucky to be here. I loved Smith. I absolutely loved it. I worked hard, and I felt — you know, I felt it was challenging for me, but it was a great experience for me, in my life, at that time. Would I choose it again? I don't know. I don't know.

WILLIAMS: Right. So as sort of a—

SIDEROWF: Hard to know.

WILLIAMS: —we're wrapping up, so as sort of a final question, what would be your advice to current and future Smithies?

SIDEROWF: Oh, to take advantage of every day. Don't be afraid of the challenge. Do the thing that you think is going to take you in a direction that's harder than you — don't do the easy thing. Don't just take the course where you know you're not going to have to really make an effort. I think — I think that's just for life. You can always do the easy thing. It's the hard things that you're really going to get the rewards from.

WILLIAMS: Thank you.

GEIS: Thank you very much. But you—

SIDEROWF: You're welcome.

GEIS: —you worked at *Golf Digest*, is that—

SIDEROWF: Yeah.

GEIS: Yeah? How did you — I was just — maybe we should just have a quick bit of how you came there, and the work that you did there.

SIDEROWF: Oh. OK. I got the job there because my husband is a very good golfer. So I knew about golf through him. And I was at a dinner one night where he was getting an award and some gentleman said to me, "If you ever want a job, call me." And our children went away to boarding school, and the second one was about to go, and I thought, Ooo, that man who offered me that job, let me — let me see who he was, and I

called him up. I had been a schoolteacher, I taught junior high — I don't think I discussed this. I did get a Master's degree after I went to Smith, and I taught seventh and eighth grade English and social studies in Westport, Connecticut, where I lived, which I loved, too. But I thought — I knew I wanted to do something . You see, I wasn't just going to stay home and be a volunteer or do whatever once my children were out of the house, and I thought the — if I go into the — back into the school system, it's going to be too confining, I won't be able to travel if I want to, or have the freedom in my life. I thought, well, if I go and work in this magazine, if I get the job, maybe I'll have — it'll be — it'll give me something that I would like to do. Anyway, it turned out to be a real job. I worked — I think I worked quite hard there, and I think — it was a wonderful experience, but it didn't afford me all that free time I was looking for, or the — any of that. So that's how I got to go to *Golf Digest*. I was lucky to get a part-time job, and then I liked it. I liked being busy. I've always liked being busy.

GEIS: OK. Thank you so much.

WILLIAMS: Thank you.

SIDEROWF: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Linda Sariahmed, July 2011.*