

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Miranda Simpson-Sawyer, Class of 2008

Interviewed by
Anne Ames, Class of 2015

May 18, 2013

Abstract

In this oral history, Miranda Simpson-Sawyer recalls the culture shock she experienced on arriving at Smith as a first-year, her favorite Smith traditions, like Convocation, and some of the professors who served as important mentors, and how that influenced her choice of a major.

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: Simpson-Sawyer, Miranda. Interview by Anne Ames. Video recording, May 18, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Miranda Simpson-Sawyer, interview by Anne Ames, transcript of video recording, May 18, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 18, 2013, with:

MIRANDA SIMPSON-SAWYER

by: ANNE AMES

AMES: So this is Annie Ames and I'm conducting an interview with Miranda Simpson-Sawyer on May 18th, 2013, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project.

Thank you in advance for participating in this project with us. Appreciate it.

All right. So why did you attend reunion this year?

SAWYER: Because I wanted to be back and see everybody, and it had been three years since the last time I was in town, so I wasn't going to miss it for the world.

AMES: How did you choose Smith as an undergrad?

SAWYER: Well, I was looking at a lot of different like liberal arts colleges, mostly on the East Coast, and then I had my heart set on Bard for whatever reason. I was obsessed with Bard. And I was going to go there. Like I had already gotten into Smith. I was still waiting for my acceptance from Bard. My ex-girlfriend from high school attended Smith, and she was a year – so she was a first year when I was a senior in high school. And we weren't together, we were just friends at that point, but I had decided to spend my spring break my senior year of high school at Smith for a week, just because I could. I wasn't even like in an official prosy. I just was here to mess around. And I found out while I was here, my mom called me and she was like, you got a letter from Bard, and I was like, open it, just tell me what's going on. And she was like, you got it, and so I was like, hey, Smithies, it's been great meeting you but I'm not coming here so, you know, have a good day. And then I got on the plane and I started crying to go home, and I was like, no, there's actually where I need to be. So that's how that happened.

AMES: So was the fact that it was an all-women's college something that pulled you to it or –

SAWYER: Definitely. I mean I don't – Bard wasn't a women's college. I wasn't, you know, discriminatory about it. I just – it certainly was appealing. Became more appealing once I actually got on campus and realized how awesome that is. But it wasn't like a thing, like I mean I wasn't like, I want to go to a women's college, because I applied to like Emerson and Bard and Sarah Lawrence and Vassar, most

of which aren't – I mean they weren't even women's colleges at that point anyway. I think Smith – oh, Smith was the only women's college I actually applied to. I looked at Mills and Chatham and things too, but yeah.

AMES: All right. What was it like when you first arrived?

SAWYER: It was crazy. I am from a redneck town in the middle of the woods, and the first day on campus I was like pulled aside by an upperclassman, and they just looked at me and said, you're going to be a BDOC, and I was like, excuse me? What? What is that there? And then they told me and I was just like, oh, thank you. I don't know. So it was just like I went from being like a not popular kid in a very rural conservative town to like having the social life of the century. I don't even know. It was crazy.

AMES: What were your expectations?

SAWYER: I don't even – I think, well, my expectations for myself is I was going to be a really awesome student. That did not happen. But I just wanted to experience it. I just wanted to make friends. I wanted to, like, have a social life. I literally just did stuff with my mom my entire life until I came here pretty much, so yeah.

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

SAWYER: I mean, I think just the amazing women that I met and that I'm friends with and that I just had the pleasure of even being in the same space with. I mean this is, like, the most incredible people in the world come here, and that's, you know, once again, small town, nothing cool like that, and I was, like, meeting people from all over and from very different backgrounds, and that was probably the best thing about it. The saddest thing that it's over too, because then everybody disbursts again and you're like, all right, well, I'm not going to see you again.

AMES: Where are you from originally?

SAWYER: I am from Tahuya, Washington.

AMES: Washington, all right.

SAWYER: It is in the middle of the woods.

AMES: That is in the middle of the woods.

SAWYER: Hood Canal. Yep.

AMES: All-righty, all-righty. What are your favorite Smith traditions?

SAWYER: Probably the debaucherous ones like Convocation certainly. You know, there's

like all those – I didn't even do some of the things, like I don't remember doing like the sophomore push and like – I don't even know. I wasn't a junior usher. I never did any of that stuff. But yeah, convocation, just because it was ridiculous, and just the everyday – like every week, like tea. Like it's just cute and, like, Mountain Day; and I mean they all have their charms.

AMES: Were you involved in extracurriculars?

SAWYER: Not really. The only thing I think I actually officially did was – does the Leading Lady still exist?

AMES: Yes.

SAWYER: All right. Well, I did the Leading Ladies one semester, and we put on "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," and I was the male lead, but it was miserable experience, so I did not do that again. I mean I loved theater, but they just ruined it for me. So yeah, but that was about it. I worked. I worked off-campus for most of the time I was here, so I didn't really have time for a lot of extra stuff.

AMES: Yeah, okay. How did you decide on your major?

SAWYER: I fell in love with Albert Mosley and just decided that that's what I was going to do. I was a philosophy major, and he was one of my first professors my first semester here, and I was just like, you are just too cool. And so I wound up just take – kept taking his classes, and then eventually had to like make the decision. I literally turned in my paperwork like the day it was due. Yeah, I thought I was going to do like American studies, or I don't even know what I thought I was going to do, but it wound up being philosophy.

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

SAWYER: You know, I feel like that's like a really easy stereotype, but at the same time it's not because it is so wildly diverse. I mean in general, like the most basic, you know, strong, independent, intelligent, beautiful women, I mean on average, but, you know, then you get into your other stereotypes, but that's usually the baseline. It's where we start.

AMES: All right. Let's see. Did you go abroad?

SAWYER: I did not.

AMES: Okay. How did you decide not to go abroad?

SAWYER: I didn't do a language enough to manage to go abroad somewhere with a foreign language. And then I just felt really dumb about going someplace that was

English-speaking. Like I was like, well, that's not exactly a cultural experience.

AMES: Yeah.

SAWYER: Not that I wouldn't have loved it. And then it's money. I mean they're like, oh, it's the same amount of money. No, it's not. You're living in another country. I'm obviously going to be spending a lot more money. Plus, plane tickets, are you kidding? No. And I was like, I only get four years here, I don't want to be gone, I want to be here.

AMES: Were there any professors or mentors that inspired you during your time at Smith?

SAWYER: Albert Mosley for sure, and John Connolly to a degree, because Albert Mosley was, like, on sabbatical for a minute and so Connolly was my major advisor for a while. And he's just a strange, strange man, but in the most wonderful way possible. And I felt like most people didn't get him and he liked scared most students, but I was like the one that was like yeah, I like what you're dishing out here, and I think we bonded because he appreciated that I wasn't just like an ivory tower type of philosophy student.

AMES: Yeah. Are there any stories that you are willing or feel inclined to share about your time at Smith?

SAWYER: I mean I don't even know. There's like so many. I mean if there is something more specific.

AMES: Perhaps your favorite story, the one that you tell at cocktail parties.

SAWYER: Oh. That is probably not safe for work. No, I'm just kidding. They're all kind of blurred together. They were all just like – I lived in Chapin but a portion of my friends lived in the Quad, so I spent a lot of time in the Quad on weekends, and it was always just a ridiculous time. And this is going to be totally inappropriate, but I intentionally did not live in the Quad because I didn't want to eat where I shit. That sounds really vulgar, but it's kind of true. It's like I don't want to live where I party. That's too much. So then I loved center campus instead.

AMES: All right. This is a great segue into house community. What was your house community like?

SAWYER: I mean it was good. Chapin's very mellow. It was definitely one of the like louder people there. But we were close. There was a group of us that were pretty close. I moved in my sophomore year. I was in Ziskind my first year, and that was miserable. So I got out, moved into Chapin, and then I was there for the next three years. And yeah, it was great. I miss – I mean the only thing that's really unfortunate about the Chapin thing is that I actually wasn't close with any people

in my year in that house. I was close with older people and I was close with the younger people, not particularly people in my own year. So that's why like something like reunion right now, I'm like, I don't even get to see the people that I like lived with because those – the ones that I loved are not in my '08. It's very sad.

AMES: Let's see. How did the house community affect your overall college experience?

SAWYER: I think to a degree. I mean it was amazing, and then, like I said, I was really close with some like the younger years and the older years, and I was always a little jealous of my friends that like had like intense house communities, that I didn't really have that, but I mean it was – but I liked that, I liked that I could – that it was kind of like a – what's the word I'm looking for – it was like the oasis, like it was like my hiding place, not my like social place. So I kind of did that myself.

AMES: Okay. Cool. Let's see. How would you describe the campus atmosphere during your undergrad years?

SAWYER: Depends on what time of year we're talking. It clearly changes with the seasons and finals. But in general, I mean that's the thing that I hate about the real world now. Being an adult sucks, because you can't just like walk around and be like, hey, you look familiar, we're friends now, didn't you get the memo, no. You do that at college. Like everybody is automatically your friend because you already have this amazing, wonderful microcosm of a thing happening, so you're just like – it's like no big deal to like be like, oh, hey, did I see you in my class? Like now we're BFFs. That doesn't happen in the real world. You like are strangers. And I don't know how you stop doing that.

AMES: Totally. Let's see. How did the campus change during your four years?

SAWYER: So my first year, and I don't know if anybody else has already said this, but people used to stampede across Chapin lawn, and it was a mud pit through the middle. And then like, I don't know if it was sophomore year or just like partway through first year, they like redid the whole grass and they put up the fence and the signs, and at first because the grass is now I thought that they – what it stood for was actually – but it is, "Please do not walk on the grass if you are going across." Just like the longest – like who's supposed to know what that means? And in my naïve dumb-girl-ness that I occasionally have, I thought it was, "Please do not walk on the grass. It is young and growing again." Yup. That's what I thought I was, for a really long time. I'm not going to admit how long I thought that that was the case. But it was because it was brand new grass, like they had just like set up. And then the poles went up, and I was, what does that mean? And that's what I came up with.

AMES: Young and growing again.

SAWYER: Young and growing again. Which makes no – like who would ever write that about a lawn? I was like, Smith is weird, it's possible. So that. And then I mean I don't think there was any other major – I mean the new engineering building was like a pit partway through but it wasn't up yet. I don't think there were any other major changes when I was here.

AMES: Did you see like regulations and traditions changing during your four years?

SAWYER: You know, kind of, but I was not really involved in – I mean like there was – I feel like – I mean as it today, to this day, but it's like the opposite side of the coin, the sort of trans-student issue. But at that time – like right now the issue is like, you know, male-to-female and back then it was like female-to-male and, you know, professors, you know, changing names in classes and like – and then people graduating and having to like deal with all that paperwork, and I think I was just like was like, well, whatever, like it doesn't affect me and it doesn't seem to be really negatively affecting anybody that I care about so I'm not too worried about it, but I definitely can imagine that there was some awkwardness around that at times. Still is I'm sure.

AMES: Yeah, absolutely, always – administration. Were you involved in student activism at all during your four years?

SAWYER: Not really. I mean I did a little bit of like sex ed stuff, but that's because I had volunteered for Plant Parenthood in high school. But other than that, I didn't – I don't know. I felt like you were preaching to the choir if you were like – I know, like I was friends with all the Smith Dems, I was friends with Smith Republicans. I was, like, I'm staying out of this.

AMES: What were your experiences with dating and/or relationships within the context of Smith?

SAWYER: It was certainly productive. I don't know. I wanted to have a girlfriend but I didn't get to have a girlfriend. I just knew a lot of people, had a lot of times, fun times. The only really substantial relationship was my senior year, and I dated my best friend from sophomore year who was straight, and apparently had a crush on me, but I was like, you're my straight best friend, like no thing. And then we wound up dating our senior year. And I saw just saw her last night for the first time in five years. Yep. She mouthed that I love you from two rows behind me at graduation and I never saw or heard from her again. Yeah, so, that was an interesting conversation that occurred last night, so anyway.

AMES: I'm sure. That's what reunion's for.

SAWYER: Yeah. But in general, it was fun. I wish that it was less – I think like it gets incestuous, like it gets incestuous, and that's weird.

AMES: Yes.

SAWYER: But yeah, I don't know.

AMES: That's the reason it's only four years, you know, and then you exit.

SAWYER: Yeah. I mean I think it's funny because it's like – I mean it's like paradise. I mean as a lesbian going to a women's college like this. I mean once again, I hate the real world because it is not like that. But I mean I had so many straight friends, and I mean, let's be honest, they dabbled, but they also, you know, were at Amherst or UMS every weekend, and I was like, ew, gross, stop that. Anyway.

AMES: Do you remember any campus-wide issues regarding like race, class and sexuality while you were here?

SAWYER: Yeah. There was the big "Black Face" issue when I was here. Has anybody talked about it yet already?

AMES: We went through some archival documents about it, but I'd be curious to hear more about what you're --

SAWYER: No, because it's going to make me look like such a jerk. I think the whole thing was blown out of proportion, like it was ridiculous. It was just something to get like rah, rah, about. I felt terrible for the poor girl. I think it was a bad decision. Like I'm not sitting here like being like what she did was totally fine, but I don't think she – she had no ill will about it, like it wasn't – you know, yeah, she wasn't being a terrible person, she just was dumb. Like it was a dumb thing to do, but the way that she got just chastised and like I mean people were just awful, awful. And like once again, like to me, like whether she was being a very accurate representation of Whitney Houston or not, there's a difference between trying to dress like a costume or like a role or whatever convincingly, and doing Black Face. Like black face is a minstrel show as far as I'm concerned. Trying to represent, poorly though it may have been, it may have been inappropriate to a degree given the audience, given where we're at, given how PC everything is, but it was not like – I mean they just – they just – I mean that poor girl. I felt so bad about it. But I mean I got where everybody was coming from, but I was like, can we all just calm down a little bit.

AMES: Yeah, yeah. Did you see a change in the way that conversations were had about difficult topics during your time here?

SAWYER: Well, I mean, like, classes, like, talked about it, like, they were definitely, there are things happening. Classes like brought it up. It was discussed. It was like – I mean they even had like practically like sensitivity training.

AMES: Like consciousness raising type things.

SAWYER: Yeah. Like there was even like a big like assembly, and I don't think that we called them assemblies here, but there was like an assembly, and President Christ like addressed it all and it was like – and then we had, you know, other speakers come in to address the diversity, and I don't know, it was such an uproar. But that's the only like major issue that I remember happening, and that was huge.

AMES: I mean, looking at the archival documents, it was clearly something that everyone had something to say about.

SAWYER: Yeah.

AMES: You know, everyone. So we're wrapping up about, you know, five minutes from now, so I want to just kind of ask you a few post-Smith life closing questions.

SAWYER: Why?

AMES: What are you doing nowadays?

SAWYER: I work for Planned Parenthood. Not what I actually want to be doing for them, which is why it's not fun to talk about. But I want a career, I've got a job, but I've had the job for almost three years now, and it's not a career so I may need to be moving on, but, you know, I'm fighting the food fight, Planned Parenthood.

AMES: Yeah, absolutely. What difference has your Smith education made?

SAWYER: Unfortunately, it hasn't made a lick of difference since I graduated, but I was not the best student and I was also not super proactive about like figuring my after-college life out while I was here because I was very wrapped up in being here. So yeah, I mean I wouldn't give it up for the world. I know what good it has done me and what I will be able to bring to the table. But I've been a nanny, I've been a bartender, I've been a waitress, and now I work at Planned Parenthood, and my job at Planned Parenthood I could have done out of high school. So I'm still waiting, I'm still waiting for this to pay off, but I trust that it will; and it was worth it even if it doesn't.

AMES: Okay. All right. So one last question: Do you have any advice for current and future Smithies as a graduate?

SAWYER: Oh. I mean just soak it in. I mean I probably sound incredibly hypocritical based on the statement I just said, but it's like – I mean I wouldn't say, oh, be responsible, like prepare for the working world, and like get all your ducks in a row and be a good student and go to the CDO, which I never did, and I don't know why I would ever tell anybody to do that because I did not do that. If you had me do this over again I probably still wouldn't do that. So just soak it in. I mean use all the resources that are at your fingertips in whatever way that that works for you, because everybody has a very different path and interests and

things. But I mean for me it was just the best thing that could have ever happened to me was being here.

AMES: Excellent. All right. Well, that's a great place to stop.

SAWYER: All right.

AMES: We appreciate your coming in.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janet Harris, August 2013.