

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Gail Stempien, Class of 1964

Interviewed by
Grace Ramsay, Class of 2016

May 17, 2014

Abstract

In this interview, Gail Stempien talks about some of her favorite house and college traditions. She recalls the strictness of her house mother, the weekend curfews, and dating culture at Smith. She remembers meeting Ted Kennedy with one of her classes, and her professor's reaction to him.

Stempien concludes the interview by discussing her time at Smith as a moment of opportunity and privilege.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Grace Ramsay.

Transcript

Transcribed by Kelly Hourihan, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Stempien, Gail. Interview by Grace Ramsay. Video recording, May 17, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Gail Stempien, interview by Grace Ramsay, transcript of video recording, May 17, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 17, 2014, with:

GAIL STEMPIEN
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: GRACE RAMSAY

RAMSAY: This is Grace Ramsay, and I'm conducting an interview with Gail Stempien—

STEMPIEN: Stempien.

RAMSAY: Stempien, Class of 1964, on May 17th, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for making your way through the crowd to come here.

STEMPIEN: You're welcome.

RAMSAY: I appreciate it. So I guess I'll start with what made you choose Smith.

STEMPIEN: What made me choose Smith was — well, I applied to three schools: Radcliffe, Simmons, and Smith. Didn't get into Radcliffe, got into Simmons and Smith. My dad, who'd never been to college, who got out of high school in the Depression, was very anxious that his children go to college. And he said, "You go to whichever one is the best college around." And that's why I came here.

RAMSAY: Great. What house did you live in, and —?

STEMPIEN: I lived in Morrow House, in the Quad.

RAMSAY: Mm-hmm. So what was it like there?

STEMPIEN: Oh, we had a house mother. (laughter) A Englishwoman, Mrs. King, who was very strict, (laughter) and really kept watch on all of us. It was — we had hours that you had to come down for meals, and you always went back at noontime to your house for meals. You almost always ate — very seldom ate in somebody else's house. You had to wear skirts for dinner, and several of my friends who specialized in coming in at the last minute kept skirts in the coatroom right next to the dining room, (laughter) so that they could go throw their skirts on and appear in time for dinner.

RAMSAY: (laughter) Was — it sounds really strict. Were there ever times you broke the rules?

STEMPIEN: Um — yeah. We all did. (laughter)

RAMSAY: Yup.

STEMPIEN: If we could get away with it, we all did, yes.

RAMSAY: Yeah. So what were some of your favorite experien— or traditions?

STEMPIEN: My favorite traditions. (pause) Hmm. I'm trying to think what — Tea, on Friday? We all loved going to have tea on Friday afternoons. Tradition-wise, we liked having coffee after dinner, and just being able to spend some time sitting and talking. And of course I was bad and I played bridge all the time, but — (laughter) That's beside the point. I can't really think of any other traditions that—

RAMSAY: Yeah. So what were weekends like for you, or what did you do when you had free time for your social life?

STEMPIEN: We had strict parietals. There were no male visitors allowed above the first floor. We had to be in by — you had to sign out if you were going to be out later than 10:30 on Friday, Saturday, Sunday. And Friday and Sunday you had to be in by 12:00, and on Saturday you could stay up till 1:00. We usually — we went out a lot. We'd go down to — there were a couple local bars, and even though we were underage, nobody ever questioned you except once or twice when you went in and they said, Oh, there's going to be a raid tonight. Unless you have a positive ID, (laughter) you'd better go home. There was college mixers with Amherst and [Railey?], because there were male schools and female schools. Men would appear in the dorm looking for dates on weekends. I wound up with — I had a boyfriend who was in and out of my life, especially my freshman year, because I had two other boyfriends. One was at Wesleyan, one was at the Coast Guard Academy. I actually ended up marrying my boyfriend that I'd had in and out. He was a senior at Boston University in my freshman year. And we wound up getting married two weeks after graduation.

RAMSAY: Wow.

STEMPIEN: And we're still married.

RAMSAY: That's incredible. So you had a lot to do with the dating culture.

STEMPIEN: Yes.

RAMSAY: And you went on a lot of — so can you tell me a little bit about that?

STEMPIEN: Well, it's like it is now. You just wanted to get to know each other, you know?

RAMSAY: Yeah.

STEMPIEN: See if it was somebody that you thought was — somebody you thought was compatible and that you could have a good time with.

RAMSAY: Yeah. Do you remember any controversies on campus when you were there?

STEMPIEN: Oh, there were lots of controversies. (laughter) It was a very — it was a time that, of course, civil rights was just up and coming. Several of my classmates were really involved, and traveled to the sit-ins and marches that were happening down South. I came from a family who was — a blue-collar family that was very conservative, and would never have tolerated my doing any such thing. And therefore, I listened a lot and learned a lot from what other people were saying, but was never a part of anything kind of thing.

RAMSAY: I also read that George Wallace came to speak when you were there—

STEMPIEN: Right.

RAMSAY: —Governor George Wallace.

STEMPIEN: Right.

RAMSAY: So do you remember what that was like at all?

STEMPIEN: Not really. I have a better memory for you. I have a memory of Ted Kennedy being here. OK? And I happened to be taking a government course at the time, that a — my professor took us to a breakfast down at the Hotel Northampton, where Ted Kennedy had come to raise some funds. And he took about twelve of us down. And this was his first race — the first time he was running for office. And we all met him. And then we came back for a discussion afterwards, and my professor said, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." And he's like, "I didn't know the Kennedys had a stupid one like this."

RAMSAY: Wow.

STEMPIEN: Yeah. (laughter)

RAMSAY: (laughter)

- STEMPIEN: And so it was very obvious that — to us how scripted all the Kennedy speeches were.
- RAMSAY: Yeah. That's amazing. It's like, quite an opportunity to experience that. Wow. So what was one of your favorite memories from your time here?
- STEMPIEN: My favorite memories were spending time with my — getting my friends. And oh, one of our — we tried one time (laughter), one of our friends was away for the weekend, and we tried to fill her room with crumpled-up newspaper, just so she would have a hard time getting in it. And we never got farther than about two feet deep, (laughter) because we crumpled up every newspaper from every house in the quad on Sunday, (laughter) and probably beyond the quad. And that was about as much as we could get crumpled up; it was about two feet deep in her room.
- RAMSAY: Oh, my goodness. Were pranks like that common, would you say?
- STEMPIEN: Yeah, yeah, there were — friends of mine, the owl that was outside Wright Hall, they snuck out at night and they tied a babushka on it one time. (laughter) You know, just little — you know, it was the — it was a time where — today, I think, students are punished for doing the types of things that we would do as pranks when we were students, because, I think, people are more afraid — there's a lot more people today. And so I think we were tolerated more for doing things.
- RAMSAY: Yeah. Did you ever have any challenges while you were here?
- STEMPIEN: Challenges in — I had an academic challenge. I came from a small Catholic high school, girls only, and I — my freshman year was a big wakeup, and I was on academic probation at that time. And so it did become a big academic challenge for me. But I got myself beyond that, and I did graduate.
- RAMSAY: Yeah. And when you graduated, what did you feel was expected of you?
- STEMPIEN: I felt that I was being torn. On one hand, you were expected to get married and have children, and on the other hand, you were expected to have a career and do something for the world. So it was a time where you felt very torn between what was your — what you were going to do. And as I said, I did get married two weeks after, because the man I love had — was waiting for me, shall we say, had gone to graduate school. And he was told by his cousin that he was eligible for the next draft unless he got married. And we basically stayed one baby ahead of the draft.
- RAMSAY: Wow.

STEMPIEN: Yeah. (laughter)

RAMSAY: That's incredible. Tell me who you've become since Smith.

STEMPIEN: Who have I become since Smith? I've become a mother, a grandmother, a career woman. I feel very proud of the fact that I have three daughters, and my daughters are not only educated but are also achieving in their own careers. My oldest daughter is a cardiologist, basically does research, has a clinical practice. My middle daughter and her husband run a specialty catering business in San Francisco. And she manages the business and he does the cooking. And my youngest daughter is senior vice president of Duke Energy.

RAMSAY: Wow.

STEMPIEN: So I feel — that's been my big accomplishment in life.

RAMSAY: Yeah.

STEMPIEN: And they're training — they're teaching their children to, you know, be educated and go out and make something of themselves.

RAMSAY: It sounds really fulfilling. So when you think about your time at Smith, what comes to mind first?

STEMPIEN: I think it's — I envision it as being probably the best time of my life. It opened my eyes to a world that I never saw before I came here, and it really sent me off thinking in ways I had never thought before. Set me seeing a world that I didn't see coming out of a blue-collar town.

RAMSAY: So how does it feel being back for your fiftieth?

STEMPIEN: Love it. Enjoy it. I'm with a couple of the — two of the women who were bridesmaids at my wedding. (laughter) And we have come back for — ever since, I think, our tenth or fifteenth, all together. And we just enjoy our time with each other and enjoy the women around us.

RAMSAY: Yeah. Do you have any advice for the graduating Smithies?

STEMPIEN: If you do what you love and follow your passion, you will be successful in life.

RAMSAY: Perfect mantra. Let's see, one more question that I'm going to ask you, if there's anything else you wanted to wrap up. But I was wondering what a Smithie looked like when you were here. What a typical Smithie was.

STEMPIEN: Well, actually, my class at Smith was the first class that was 50/50 — fifty private school versus fifty percent public school. Before that, it had been private school. More than fifty percent was private school. Obviously, it was very white. A few — it was a time where everybody was very preppy. So there was no, you know, typical look other than a very preppy-type look on campus.

RAMSAY: Yeah. What do you think a Smithie is like today?

STEMPIEN: I think Smithies today remember what America looks like today. The America that I see when I visit my daughters — that it's multicultural. We did have foreign students in our class, but not to the extent that there are foreign students today, and of course, we just had a — we were just talking, and we had two black women in our class, one of whom was from Nigeria. So that's just definitely changed, and it does look much more like the culture that you see in any American city today.

RAMSAY: Yeah. So is there anything else you want to add before we wrap up?

STEMPIEN: Yes. I would like to say that I'm grateful for having been here, and I feel that — I and many of my friends feel that we were born at a time in our lives where we had been very blessed. And we're thankful for that.

RAMSAY: Great. Thank you so much.

STEMPIEN: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Kelly Hourihan, June 2014.