

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Meghan Tierney, Class of 2000

Interviewed by
Rachel Dean, Class of 2013

May 14, 2010

Abstract

In this oral history, Meghan Tierney discusses her experiences living in Lamont House, playing on the volleyball and softball teams, acting as the Vice President of her class, and working in the Alumnae House. She also describes her time at the Smithsonian program, her work as an art history and archaeology minor, and her life after Smith.

Restrictions

None

Format

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

Transcript

Transcribed by Matthew Skelton 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: Tierney, Meghan. Interview by Rachel Dean. Video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Meghan Tierney, interview by Rachel Dean, video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Tierney, Meghan. Interview by Rachel Dean. Transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Meghan Tierney, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2010, with:

MEGHAN TIERNEY

by: RACHEL DEAN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

TIERNEY: — part of your class? Are you an intern at the Archives or something?

DEAN: Well, we're just doing this as an internship. It's just this week thing, so Maggie's an archives concentrationist. I haven't declared that, or I don't know if I'm going to do that. I'm an American Studies major, so — yeah.

TIERNEY: OK. I did the Smithsonian program.

DEAN: Oh, I want to do that. Yeah, I'll ask you about that, then.

TIERNEY: OK. (laughter) OK, cool.

DEAN: Yeah, yeah, I was planning on doing that for a semester and then going to Costa Rica a second semester.

TIERNEY: Oh, good for you. I'm going to Peru in two months.

DEAN: Oh, really?

TIERNEY: Yeah, in the middle of June.

DEAN: That's exciting. Yeah, so I'm hoping to do Smithsonian.

TIERNEY: It was fun. It was a lot of fun. I actually roomed with Sarah, who also did it.

DEAN: Oh, OK.

TIERNEY: Yeah.

DEAN: Well, I'll have to ask you about that! I'm excited!

TIERNEY: So you're asking alumnae of all different kind of stages, or—?

DEAN: Yeah, we're doing '85, '90, '95, 2000, and 2005, just for this weekend, and we're not doing next weekend since it's just too much right now, but hopefully the next couple years —

TIERNEY: Maybe down the line. Yeah, cool.

DEAN: Yeah, so —

TIERNEY: Cool. Oh, all right, we'll get started.

DEAN: Good. OK, you good? OK, this is Rachel Dean, and I'm conducting an interview with Meghan Tierney on May 14th, 2010 for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this.

TIERNEY: You're very welcome.

DEAN: So what were the benefits in choosing Smith over other schools?

TIERNEY: Well, I chose Smith — I applied early, and I got in, so I actually didn't apply to any other colleges, which I was glad not to have to do, but basically for me I grew up hearing about Smith. My mom had applied to Smith, and but at that time she — they would only accept one person from every high school, so a friend of hers had applied and gotten in but then didn't actually go. She went to Wellesley and my mom was really mad. And so I always heard these stories about it. I knew my mom wanted to go, and one of her sisters, my aunt, went, and graduated from Smith actually the year that I was born, so I'd just been hearing about it forever. And we came to visit, and I fell in love with the campus, and decided that I was going to apply early and if I got in that would be it. So it was — I don't know, I think it was, for me it was kind of a romantic vision of what college was. It wasn't necessarily that it was all women. I think I kind of liked the idea, again, kind of like a romantic idea of what it was, but coming to this campus, it was a beautiful place that I just, I wanted to be, so —

DEAN: So what were the reactions of your family and your peers in your decision to attend Smith?

TIERNEY: Well, my family was very proud, you know, and wondered how they were going to pay for it (laughter) was the first reaction. But that ended up working out. And then my peers, peers in high school certainly were confused by the all-women's college kind of thing, but I don't really know how I deflected that kind of questioning other than to say that I would find out and let them know, and I loved it, so — No, but everyone was proud. They knew, they knew the tradition, they knew the Seven Sisters, and so they knew that it was a good school, so — But yeah, it was the question, Really, all women? That's strange. So —

DEAN: How did Smith live up to your expectations or your hopes or fears about attending college?

TIERNEY: Well, it exceeded them, I think. I don't know now, looking back, that I had very specific expectations. You know, coming from high school I was like an over-achiever, and coming here I did very poorly my first year, and so was disappointed in myself, and yet my older peers — you know, one of the great things about Smith, you live with, you live with all different classes and different age, you know, different aged students and stuff, and one of my classmates, I'll never forget, pulled me aside and said, "Meghan, it's OK that you got a B, because no one's ever going to remember that except you, and you need to have fun." And I did. I had a great time. I did sports and student government, and I did the Smithsonian program my junior year, and I loved it. And I loved being with all women. It absolutely exceeded my expectations in every way, and it's helped me so much since I graduated that I'm — and I'm just so happy that that's how it worked out, so —

DEAN: And what clubs and organizations and teams were you involved in, and how did that shape your experience?

TIERNEY: Well, I — my freshman — my first-year, my sophomore year, and my senior year I was on the volleyball team. My junior year I wasn't because it was, fell during the fall when I was in DC, and then my sophomore year I was also on the softball team, and that sophomore year I was also the Vice President of my class, so it was a very busy year, my sophomore year, but one of my best years, actually. I found that when I was really active and involved and, you know, kind of kept me on track, and I did really well, so — What else was I involved in? Anything else? I worked at the Alumnae House, which was, which was really important, you know. Actually, my friend Sarah and I were talking on the way up about that experience kind of instilling in us the value of alumnae and kind of helping us to envision how we would be alumnae someday, and that it geared us up towards, towards just looking forward to giving back and saying, "Well, we've had this great experience, and I, hopefully someday I'm going to be the one to make that \$10,000 gift or, you know, something, and, you know, come back for my, gosh, ten year reunion and just feel great about it, so—"

DEAN: What house did you live in, and what role did your house community play into your overall college experience?

TIERNEY: I lived in Lamont House, and all, all four, all four years, aside from the semester I was away, and I would say, given that I drove up here with two of my Lamont friends, that I still keep in touch with several of them, and Lamont — Lamont was a really great house. I feel like Lamont had — it was a very diverse house, which, although it was kind

of one of the bigger houses not in the quad, you know, and so there were a lot of people, a lot of Adas, a lot of African-American students, a lot of international students, you know, for various reasons, and — I don't know, I just — I had a great time. Lamont, we had — we had rivalries, and I participated in them, you know, legal or illegal. (laughter) And we — I was the social chair of that house for a year, again with my friend Sarah, and we started up the tradition of having an Academy Awards party, and I don't know if they still do it, but we did it for a few years, and so it really was a good home base. And I was kind of a homebody, you know, because I was so busy doing sports and stuff. The house was really important, and, you know, to this day my best friends from college lived in my house, lived in Lamont, so —

DEAN: So what kind of rivalries did you participate in? (laughter)

TIERNEY: Well, we — oh — we were kind of rivals — I don't know if that's the right word — with Talbot House, which is right next door, and Talbot had a moose. Do you live in Talbot? (laughter)

DEAN: No, but I know it still has the moose, yeah!

TIERNEY: It does! And so a couple of times over the course of the four years we broke into Talbot at night and toilet papered the moose, and I now have pictures to document, and, you know, just silly things like that. And they broke in and stole all of our shower curtains and wrote on Davis lawn, wrote "labia" out across the lawn, (laughter) so when we looked out our windows in the morning our shower curtains were out there. So, you know, I mean silly stuff like that, but, you know, and nothing really ill-will based, but fun nonetheless, so —

DEAN: So can you tell me more about Smithsonian? And did you go abroad also, or—?

TIERNEY: No, that was kind of my abroad. I had decided my sophomore year — Well, I came to Smith thinking I was going to do premed, but then didn't do so well in chemistry so I decided not to do that, and I ultimately switched my major to Art History, and so the Smithsonian was perfect for me to get going working in museums. And I actually started getting interested in museum conservation kind of later in my career at Smith, so museums were really attractive, and that was the reason why I had decided to go. And I ended up working with the Curator of Paintings at the Hirshhorn Museum on a kind of a photography cataloguing project for the summer, for the semester, and, again, had a great time, and she has been wonderful. I'm still in touch with her, and she's written me letters of recommendation that have gotten me jobs in museums since I've graduated, so a great experience all around. And I went back to DC after I graduated for another internship, so it started opening a lot of doors for me, just to have that

program and the Smithsonian on my résumé, et cetera. So it's great, a great program.

DEAN: So how did that, like leaving Smith and living on your own, right? Did you live in an apartment and —

TIERNEY: Yeah.

DEAN: — just being like a real adult, like how did that—?

TIERNEY: Well, it wasn't the greatest situation. I'm from New York originally, so, you know, my parents kind of packed us up and we went down to look for an apartment, so we ended up living, four of us — there were four of us, four Smithies on the program, and we ended up living out kind of outside the city in — what is it even called? Not Arlington. Anyway, out in one of the suburbs, like kind of all the way at the end of the blue line, which meant a really long commute, and we were kind of in an apartment complex that — So the commuting wasn't ideal. We didn't have that great kind of city experience, which I kind of regret, but we wouldn't have known otherwise. But we were working really hard. I mean, it was — between class you take, you know, the American biography class and all the work and the extra research and stuff — a lot of us had kind of research based projects — we — It was nice to be with all Smithees, though, because we were kind of all in the same boat, just getting, getting stuff done, and communicating with college and credits and all that kind of stuff. So yeah, we had a really good time. Had I to do it all over again I would say find a nice apartment in the city and tell your parents to splurge! (laughter) But no, it was great. It was — I think it, you know, it was good to be away from Smith for a little bit, but — and just feel like, yeah, you were somehow getting prepared for the real world, like in that way. You know, it was — I could picture myself being in museums, and that started that ball rolling for me, so, yeah.

DEAN: So who were your most — you're an Art History major, and who were your most influential professors and/or mentors, maybe your coaches?

TIERNEY: Mm-hmm. Well, my advisor was Barbara Kellum, but I would have to say kind of my minor advisor or like — I think she actually was my minor advisor — I minored in Archaeology, so that's kind of a nebulous build your own minor — but also Dana Liebson, and Dana Liebson actually now, I would say, is most influential, in the sense that I've continued on and gotten my Master's Degree and I'm currently getting my PhD in non-Western art, and that those are all the classes I took with Dana Liebson. So she was always kind of my role model in that sense that I wanted to be like her, and took all the classes I could with her, and she's still, again, you know, writing me letters of recommendation and talking to me, and I'm keeping her posted on everything I'm doing, so — And then, of course, Bonnie Mae, who I played volleyball and

softball with, she was just kind of a constant, you know. She was like therapist and coach and mother away from home all rolled into one, so hopefully I'll get to see her soon. (laughter)

DEAN: Yeah, definitely. How would you describe the campus atmosphere while you were here, and did you see any issues in diversity, in religion, in class or race or gender?

TIERNEY: While I was here — Well, like I said, living in Lamont, which I considered to be a pretty diverse house, you know, my big sister was African-American, you know, from Connecticut, and so we had some really good conversations about issues of diversity and things like that, and I don't know, you know — While I was a student here — it's so hard; you kind of create your own niche and like — and sometimes it's hard to see beyond that, although, you know, Smith is all about kind of being aware and, you know, and thinking about the larger world around you. Yeah, I — It's hard to speak to. I've always been very proud of Smith, however, you know. I think it becomes clear when you leave Smith how diverse and open and open to communication and conversation Smith is, but I was also very aware that I was in this very kind of liberal bubble at the same time, and, you know, kind of at the extreme end. So I don't know, I mean, I loved being here, and I loved the conversations with my parents, you know, who had different views or, you know, had lived through things that I was just starting to discover about, you know, about differences in religion and race and all of those things, so — And my time here — I still kind of hold Smith up to be an ideal, you know, to be a place where conversations, intelligent conversations about the tough problems that our country and world faces like can happen, and that students are brought up to be aware of it, so — Yeah. That's it.

DEAN: So what have you become since Smith?

TIERNEY: What have I become? Wow. Well, right after Smith I was an intern again, and then I was a museum registrar for five years in Connecticut, and then I decided to go back to school, so I really — I'm still a student, (laughter) actually. I haven't become much! Yeah, I got my Master's degree at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, and now I am at Emory University getting my PhD in Art History, and what am I? I'm a girlfriend, I'm a sister, I'm a sister-in-law, I'm an older woman in my thirties. (laughter) Yeah, yeah, world traveler! (laughter)

DEAN: Would you encourage other young women or daughters to attend Smith, and why?

TIERNEY: Yes, I absolutely would, if they feel that it's right for them. I really do think that, you know, college especially, it's — you have to choose the place that's right for you, you know, where you're comfortable and yet

you're going to be challenged. But I, like I said, I loved the all women atmosphere. You know, I had this funny — I mean, considering what's going on outside, I had a conversation with my mom my first year. You know, my mom and I are pretty close, and we talk frequently, and I had been here for a few months, and I think what I was discovering — I was discovering how to be a woman with women, and not — and I don't mean in like a sexual way, I mean in just being a grown woman, and, again, that, you know, living with seniors and juniors and sophomores and like seeing how people grow and change and learn, and — And so I was having this conversation with my mom, and saying, "Just, I just, you know, it's just amazing, and I really — I'm learning I love women, I just, I just love women. They're just so wonderful." And my mom was kind of silent for a while. And I was like, "Oh, Mom, I'm not coming out to you, I'm just—!" But in a way, I mean, but in a way you by just like saying that I've, I've just learned so much, and not — and I'm not — and to not compare, not be a woman in comparison to a man, just to be a woman as a woman. And so I think that everyone, every woman should have that experience, and wherever you can find that you should be, and Smith was that place for me. So — So yeah, I would absolutely say that this should be on everyone, every young woman's list to look at for college and stay and see if you want to be here, so —

DEAN: So that has made a difference in your life. What other differences has Smith education meant to you, and would you make the same choice if you had it again?

TIERNEY: Well, yes, obviously I would. At my first job I was hired by a Smithie, so I think that had a lot to do with it, the fact that she knew kind of — She knew where I was coming from and the education that I got, and she wanted that type of person working for her. So — And that job that I held then for five years, and I was promoted in and — really propelled me. I mean, I would not have, probably not have gone back to school to do what I'm doing and, and I plan, I hope, to return to museum work, and so that was really the springboard for all of that. And, you know, it's so nice to go through changes, you know, thinking about anything, from moving to a new city, from going on vacation, whatever it is, planning something, to think about, well, I have a network of people I could call on, you know. Well, let me call Alumni House. Let me call the Career Development and, you know, see who I can get in touch with. You know, the Smith Club back in Albuquerque, I still get notices. They offer to send me green chilies, and I — which is great, because you can't get them really good anywhere (laughter) — but then, you know, (inaudible) at the Smith Club in Atlanta, and I've done things in New York City, and so it's a network and, you know — although, yeah, you don't have everything in common with every Smithie you meet, but you just have a sense of who you're meeting when you, you know, you go somewhere and you meet someone from Smith. You, you know — it's just, it's a cool thing.

DEAN: We only have a few minutes left. Do you have any advice for current and future Smithies, and would you do anything differently?

TIERNEY: Do anything differently about like my time here?

DEAN: Yeah.

TIERNEY: I don't know. I think I might've tried to enjoy Northampton more, (laughter) because as we were driving through I kind of was thinking, you know, I really should've gotten out more! (laughter) And I think I would give every Smithie the advice that my friend gave to me is that, you know what? You're supposed to have fun. And yeah, you're supposed to learn a lot, but, you know, you're supposed to make friends and just have, and have fun, because there is a lot of fun to be had in meeting people and everything. And yeah, I guess that's my advice for current people, so — current Smithies, so —

DEAN: Is there anything else you'd like to add that I haven't asked you about?

TIERNEY: I don't think so. I think I've been pretty gushing. (laughter) No, I'm just — I'm glad that it's part of my life, and I'm happy to see it's growing and successes, and I hope that I can be a part of it for a long time, so that's it.

DEAN: Well, thank you very much!

TIERNEY: You're welcome. Thank you. Thanks. We're all set?

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Matthew Skelton, May 27, 2011