

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Ana Tolentino*

Interviewed by  
Maggie Kraus, Class of 2012

May 14, 2010

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Ana Tolentino discusses how she decided to attend Smith, her departure from Smith to attend the University of Wisconsin in Madison for a semester, and her return to Smith. Tolentino also describes her time at Smith, including her experiences as an art history major and archaeology minor, and the atmosphere of the early 1980s.

## **Restrictions**

No online access.

## **Format**

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

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Laura O'Regan 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:** Tolentino, Ana. Interview by Maggie Kraus. Video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ana Tolentino, interview by Maggie Kraus, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Tolentino, Ana. Interview by Maggie Kraus. Transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ana Tolentino, interview by Maggie Kraus, 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:

ANA TOLENTINO

by: MAGGIE KRAUS  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

TOLENTINO: What's your name?

KRAUS: I'm Maggie. Sorry, I should have said that a long, long time ago.

TOLENTINO: That's okay. I'm telling my story to people I don't even know.

KRAUS: This is Kate, and I'm Maggie. I'm a sophomore here. I'll be a junior in the fall, which is so scary to me.

TOLENTINO: You've got to really get the most out of it. You'll be in the final stretch

KRAUS: I feel like I moved in first year two weeks ago, so it's crazy.

TOLENTINO: I know, it goes so fast. In fact, I'm actually staying in the house that I lived in, which is amazing.

KRAUS: Oh, really? Is it Emerson?

TOLENTINO: Cushing.

KRAUS: Oh, Cushing. Oh, great.

TOLENTINO: What's so cool is I have a room — it's on a different floor, but it's exactly where I was over the quad. So I'm laying in bed last night, and I'm like, wow, 25 years ago, I was exactly in this spot. I never would have thought I'd ever be able to stay there again.

KRAUS: That's so special.

TOLENTINO: Of course, at the time, you don't realize that you're leaving and that's it, forever.

KRAUS: Just to say for the record, this is Maggie Kraus, and I'm conducting an interview with Ana Tolentino, on May 14, 2010, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for coming and agreeing to do this and share. I just want to talk a little bit about how

you got here and kind of what influenced you to end up at Smith College.

TOLENTINO: Well, I am from Wisconsin, in the Midwest, and I had not heard of Smith. Most of my friends — I went to a Catholic school for 12 years — they went to Jesuit universities or the local school, and I wanted to do something different. So when I was a junior, I had done a paper — I had read “The Bell Jar” by Sylvia Plath and then I did a paper on her life. Just reading her biography, I learned more about Smith College. She had talked about it in the book. It just seemed like a wonderful place. So that, among other things — because I wanted to leave town, do something different — I asked my parents if I could go take a look. They said yes. Junior year, spring break, my mom brought me out here and we looked at Smith and Wellesley and Holy Cross and Boston College. We did the whole tour. Of all the schools, I just was so impressed with Smith. I think the Gold Key guide I had was just bubbly and wonderful. I don’t know. It just seemed like this wonderful, beautiful place. I applied to seven colleges and I got into all of them, but Smith was my first choice, so I came. And it was really different from where I came from.

KRAUS: What was the reaction when you told people that you were going to Smith? Had they heard of it?

TOLENTINO: Not a lot of people had heard of it. I did get hooked into the alumnae group in Milwaukee and had been invited to some tea parties and stuff. I was very impressed with the Smith women I had met. I think my friends were all positive, but they didn’t understand it, why I wanted to leave. That’s a big step, to leave your happy community and go to a school where you didn’t know anybody. When I got here, it was an adjustment, because it was very different. I had kind of grown up in a very homogenous environment, with people who had very similar backgrounds and very similar attitudes. If anything, I really faced a big disruption when I came. It was a good thing. It was part of growing up. But learning to talk to people who had different attitudes, and to accept that and not be judgmental, and have people tell me what they thought, or that they disagreed. When I first got here, I put a Human Life Amendment poster on my door. What was I thinking? Well, I guess I was converted by — no, no. I don’t think that ever passed, obviously. Yeah, I realized — I just learned about talking to people who had different points of view. That’s something that served me well along the way. Just keep it to yourself.

KRAUS: Yeah. Were the older women in your family, like your mom, were they college graduates? Did they support you in choosing Smith?

TOLENTINO: Well, my mom did want me to go to college. She’s a nurse. So most of the women were nurses or teachers, and those were traditional careers a

lot of my friends went into. I just wanted to do something a little bit different. Although, now, later on, having a family, I realized the wisdom why those are good choices sometimes for women. My mother later got her degree. She was an RN, but then she went and got her BS later on, because I guess that's a different degree from what she did.

KRAUS: What were you kind of expecting when you first got to Smith? Were you surprised to see anything? I mean, other than the initial interactions with other people.

TOLENTINO: Well, I was expecting to get a good education. I was expecting to meet new people. I thought I would get to party a little bit. I was, in a way, looking as a way to escape my home. I had a very stable, happy family, but I had four siblings and I was the oldest, so it was kind of like — I don't know. Like a way to get away and have my own life and not be on top of a family all the time. Just have my own room here. That was amazing. I had never had that. I was just here to get a good education.

KRAUS: So you didn't have a roommate your first year or you did have a roommate?

TOLENTINO: I had a suitemate. I lived in Ziskind. We just had a door between us. Yeah, that was really nice to have my own room.

KRAUS: Yeah, definitely. So, I mean, your first year, you had a transition. It was a little different, maybe, than you'd expected, but I think everyone goes through that.

TOLENTINO: Yeah. I mean, I was homesick a little bit.

KRAUS: Did you at all think about maybe leaving, transferring?

TOLENTINO: Yeah. Well, my suitemate was very unhappy. Actually, I have this box of letters — and not just the love letters I told you about earlier—of all my correspondence from Smith. I was looking at, for the first time in 25 this years this weekend, there were some letters from my roommate. She was unhappy. It turns out she ended up with anorexia. She was applying to different schools, so I think I got the bug and did that a little bit because I was influenced by her. I wasn't really unhappy, but I guess I did it because I could. She ended up going to Brown. As it turns out, I did leave Smith for a semester. My dad had open-heart surgery in August, after my freshman year. I felt really bad having him pay the tuition and everything, so I went to University of Wisconsin in Madison for a semester. And you know what? Sometimes there's nothing like doing something different to realize how great you had it before. Madison was great, too, but I was in classes with 500 kids. It was a rat race. Smith was so nice. You could talk to your professors and just

really get into it more. So I ended up back at Smith. My parents were happy.

KRAUS: When you went to the large university, was the plan to just stay there indefinitely or were you thinking only a semester?

TOLENTINO: You know what? At that point in my life, it was just one semester at a time. I knew I wanted to get a degree. My parents were devastated that I left Smith. I basically did it when my dad was on a ventilator in the hospital. If he'd had anything to say about it, he would have absolutely been, no way. As it turns out, my suitemate, who was so unhappy, she actually came out to Madison for a semester and worked before she got into Brown. So we were just kind of blazing trails and I think just being independent and doing what we wanted. I lived in an apartment. But in the end, I came back to Smith.

KRAUS: So you said that you started in Ziskind, and then you ended up in Cushing? Is that right?

TOLENTINO: Well, my next — my second semester sophomore year, I went — I took what I could get and I ended up in Albright, which was fine, but I really wanted to be in a quad. So for junior year, I went to Cushing.

KRAUS: Great. And you stayed there through senior year or did you (break in audio)? Awesome.

TOLENTINO: Yeah, I was there for two years.

KRAUS: Were you involved in any kind of clubs or organizations on campus at all?

TOLENTINO: Yeah. I wish I had been more involved. I worked—I think it was SOS that did the Coffee [Clutch?]. I don't even know if it's still there. It was like a coffee shop in the basement of Seelye. I did this peer mediation. It was like a phone thing where people could call if they had problems, and you could help them with their issues. I was on the Art Resources Committee. We did a gallery show. I don't even remember exactly. I'd have to look at my resume from the time. I did some off-campus things. I worked at the Arts Extension Service at UMass-Amherst, a program in arts administration. I did the rowing — no, wait. Sailing. I did sailing. I know there are probably other things I can't remember. Lots of little stuff.

KRAUS: Did you study art, I'm getting?

TOLENTINO: Art history.

- KRAUS: Art history, OK. So was that something that you were interested in before you got to Smith?
- TOLENTINO: No.
- KRAUS: You kind of found it?
- TOLENTINO: And actually, that was one thing that was so great about the program here, because they didn't have distribution requirements. I had this great advisor. She was an astronomy professor. She just said, "Just try lots of different things and don't even worry about it." So I didn't realize that until I got here, so that first week freshman year, others of us were having that realization like, oh my gosh, we can do anything we want. I ended up taking astronomy, costume design, psychology. I don't know. Something else off the ball, like geology, and maybe an art class. It was so great. I had come in thinking I was going to major in biology. So I did take a lot of science, but the art history was something I would have never known about, except that I just had that chance to experiment.
- KRAUS: Right. Did you stick with that advisor that you had or did you get someone in the department?
- TOLENTINO: Yeah, eventually I had an advisor in the art department.
- KRAUS: What role did your advisor play in kind of your academic career?
- TOLENTINO: She really pushed me. I think, in retrospect, I wasn't ready to bloom in the way that I wish I had been. I was nervous around her and I was always — I was like a good girl. I was always trying to do the right thing. I wasn't as daring as I could have been in terms of expressing my opinion or trying to blaze my own trail. And I regret that, but what are you going to do? I mean, I was young. I was trying to do the right thing.
- KRAUS: Do you think that stemmed from maybe what you thought people expected of you? Or was that something on your own that you kind of just didn't feel like you totally had the outlet to do that?
- TOLENTINO: Well, I think perhaps I lacked a little confidence, but I also grew up in a very strict Catholic upbringing, where that's the message, is, be a good girl, do the right thing. That can be very confining. It can really keep you from expressing who you really are or taking the chances that you might not otherwise. So I think it was a combination of my upbringing and my own lack of self-confidence. Then I ended up getting engaged and getting married and just kind of — I hate to say it, but it seems like kind of a traditional route. But I absolutely wasn't going to quit school. But I followed that route. Then when I was about 26 or 27, I realized, wait a minute. No, no. This isn't — I'm not on the right path here.

- KRAUS: So did you maybe feel like that was the path that you wanted to take and it just kind of happened that way, or did it seem somewhat inevitable that you were just going to—
- TOLENTINO: No, I didn't. I actually never had a vision for my life beyond college graduation. That frustrates me now to look back at that. All my life, I had just been programmed to get your degree, go to school, and boom. So then I graduate and I'm like, well, what next? I had somebody I was involved with, who kind of put a proposal in front of me, and I just kind of went in that direction. That wasn't the right thing. I look back and I wish I'd had — I don't know — more confidence to just go out on my own and do it. I did try to break up with him, but somehow that didn't work out. We're divorced now, but that was at the time.
- KRAUS: Do you feel at all maybe like you missed out on some of the things that Smith offered to other people that were a little—
- TOLENTINO: Yes.
- KRAUS: Yeah?
- TOLENTINO: I do.
- KRAUS: Anything in particular? Or just—
- TOLENTINO: Well, I think my lack of self-confidence kept me from doing things. I would have loved — I love to write, so why didn't I do the newspaper? Why didn't I get on the yearbook? I always felt like a lot of the things that I did, I applied for, rather than just walking in the office and saying, you know what? I want to do this. Let me in the door. That's something I learned to do later on, but in college, it was always like, OK, what does the job description say? If I'm going to do this, what's the right way to do it? That's a lesson in life I guess I had to learn. And I was all wrapped up with my boyfriend. Dumb. But in retrospect, I would change a few things. But I did enjoy it here.
- KRAUS: In terms of maybe moving around houses a little bit, and besides your roommate, what did house community play into your experience at Smith? Was that a support system for you? Was that maybe somewhat of an acquaintance kind of thing? What was your relationship with people in the house?
- TOLENTINO: Well, I did make a lot of good friends, but not in the way some people — I came back to reunion and I don't — I haven't really kept in touch with people, so I'm not in kind of a clique, where you might see people together. I think I might have isolated myself a little bit because I was all wrapped up in my boyfriend or my studies or whatever. But I always felt happy and comfortable and like there was someone to talk to. So it



was positive. It was definitely positive, but I don't have the same kind of family feel that some people do.

KRAUS: Can you maybe talk a little bit about what you felt the atmosphere was like at Smith while you were here, in terms of people outside of your own house? Your interpretations of the community here.

TOLENTINO: Well, when I first came, I did feel like a little bit of a fish out of water. I did feel kind of a little bit of the Eastern thing going on. Like people being impressed with where their parents went to school, or maybe somebody talked about their debutante ball. I was like, what is that? Just kind of a different mentality about life, whereas, in the Midwest, it's perfectly acceptable to go to a land grant university institution. People aren't so worried about what their parents did or where they live. They're more, who are you? And you can be just as great if you go to a community college versus an Ivy League school. Here, I picked up on a little bit more status kind of stuff. Then there were some social upheavals going on. I think the whole lesbian thing was going on. People were really out there and kind of putting it in your face. That was — coming from where I came from, it was like, what? What is this all about? Now, we've come so far, like it's no big deal anymore, but it was a big deal back then to see two girls holding hands. Let's see. I think there was also — we were still — the women's movement and everything was going on in the seventies. I got here in the early eighties. There was this feeling that, as a woman, you had to do it all. You weren't making any accommodations in your mind about, if you were going to have a family, how you were going to do that. It was just about, I'm going to conquer the world, and I'll just hire a nanny. You know what? In real life experience, it doesn't always work that way. That's a lesson I had to learn after I graduated, that, gee, it's pretty tough to do it all. Wait a minute. Why do I want to work ninety hours a week and have children? This is crazy. Who am I trying to prove this to? But there was some of that attitude, and it may have been just a naïve attitude of college students not really knowing what real life is like. Why would you want to be exhausted, or why would you want to have children and just have somebody else take care of them? But of course, I signed on with that and tried to do that. I was really tired. Because I had kids early, when I was 24 and 26, and tried to work fulltime and do it all. I was pretty exhausted.

KRAUS: Do you think that there's an emphasis on that specifically at Smith because it's a women's college, that there needs to be some kind of message to students? Because I know at commencement — was it Beverly Sills that was your—

TOLENTINO: Yes.

KRAUS: She was kind of — there was another alum who was talking about the impression was that you — she was saying you couldn't do it all, really, and that you had to kind of pick and choose and figure out what you were going to — what were going to be your successes. Do you feel like there was an overwhelming message being sent in some way, from some people, about what you should do in terms of picking a career?

TOLENTINO: Well, I don't know if it was — I think I got that message from my cohorts and not necessarily professors. But we did have professors who were women, who were obviously doing fabulously things. We didn't really know if they had families or not, but I know the life of a professor, to be able to get tenure, is quite rigorous. I guess I didn't even think — I didn't think about all the other pieces of life. I think that would have been helpful. I'm not quite sure what structure you would put that into, that there would be some kind of dialogue about planning your life. We were here for an academic reason, but you also go onto life. It would have been helpful to have a conversation about how we're going to work out our life. Then I kind of had to figure that out later.

KRAUS: Right. I guess a little bit about your time after Smith. You talked about maybe regretting not having a certain path kind of laid out for you beforehand. What would you have done differently if you could, either from the time you got here or from the time afterwards? If you would have spent right after graduation a little bit differently.

TOLENTINO: Well, I definitely would have done the junior year abroad. But that's the kind of thing you really have to be — have that in your mind freshman year, because you've got to do your language, you've got to get your applications in. I think the fact that I left for a semester kind of got me off track on that, so I wasn't able to do that, and I regret that. I would have broken up with my boyfriend, but I don't know what tonic I could have taken to have just not dealt with the boy thing, because if it wasn't him, it would have been somebody else. That was just a particular problem of mine. I would have, instead of going off with him when I graduated, done a really great internship. I wanted to do — there was one in London and there was one in New York. Christie's or Sotheby's. That was something I really wanted to do, but then it was in conflict with that relationship. So I regret that. I have a daughter right now who's 22. She's living the life I wish I had. Somehow, she has the confidence that she doesn't let the boys get in the way of what her plans are. I just wish that I'd had that. I don't know if that was a traditional upbringing I had or what. She's like, I've got things to do. I don't want to get steady. So she'll date, but she'll tell them right off, "Don't plan on anything with me, because I've got things to do." Strangely — well, I guess, interestingly, she has guys lining up, because it seems to me they like that, that she's not really available.

KRAUS: Definitely. Wait, what was your major while you were here?

TOLENTINO: Art history.

KRAUS: Art history, right.

TOLENTINO: And archaeology was my minor.

KRAUS: Oh, nice.

TOLENTINO: They just started minors when I was a junior.

KRAUS: OK. So you had time to get that done?

TOLENTINO: Yeah. I went on an archaeological dig in Italy junior year — after junior year. That was really great.

KRAUS: Yeah, that's terrific. Do you have any advice for current or future Smithies about what to do and how to do it and what to expect and what to avoid?

TOLENTINO: Well, I really think that theme of planning your life outside of Smith is important. That's a conversation you should have. If it's not with your advisor, with someone else. Because you can get a degree in history, but what are you going to do with that? Either intern — I know they have a great internship program now and they really get you going on that, so I suppose those questions have been answered. But I think just more connection with the real world and what's happening next. There's so much you can do if you prepare and you plan ahead, rather than getting your degree and then starting what you're going to do. I did get an internship right out of school, but I don't know. I wish I had been thinking about what my future was sooner.

KRAUS: Great. OK, well, we are just about out of time, so I guess that's it. Thank you so much for sharing and being here and talking to me.

TOLENTINO: I hope that was interesting.

KRAUS: Yeah, that was great. That was wonderful.

TOLENTINO: I haven't told you how many kids I have, did I?

KRAUS: No, how many?

TOLENTINO: Six.

KRAUS: Wow! What's the ages?

TOLENTINO: 22, 20, 13, a little boy who would be 11, but he died of pneumonia. I'm hooked up here. I have an eight-year-old. It's a large family.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Laura O'Regan, May, 2011.*