

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Janet Walker, Class of 1961

Interviewed by
Olivia Mandica-Hart, Class of 2011

May 20, 2011

Abstract

In this oral history, Janet Walker discusses what a Smith education has meant to her, her work as a history major, her experiences living in Gardiner House, issues of diversity, and describes a typical Smith student during the late 1950s.

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: Walker, Janet. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Janet Walker, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Walker, Janet. Interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart. Transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Janet Walker, interview by Olivia Mandica-Hart, transcript of video recording, May 20, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project
Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 20, 2011, with:

JANET WALKER

by: OLIVIA MANDICA-HART
filmed by: KATE GEIS

GEIS: Whenever you're ready.

MANDICA-HART: This is Olivia Mandica-Hart and Janet Walker, Class of 1961, the date is May 20th, 2011, and we are in the Alumnae Gymnasium at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts. So to begin the interview, why did you choose to come to Smith?

WALKER: My family — first, my mother is a Smith graduate, and her sister, so it was always a college that was viewed very highly in my household, in the household I grew up in. And when I was in middle school, now it was junior high school, my family moved from the New York area to Florida, and the schools got easier and easier and easier. It was not challenging. So this then made the importance of getting a really good education even more important, because my family talked about, well, you're just not being challenged, you need something. So for those kinds of reasons, that's how I got to Smith.

MANDICA-HART: And what was your initial reaction when you arrived on campus for the first time?

WALKER: I had seen it once before, so I knew it was really pretty. I remember going in — I was in Gardiner House, I remember going in there — and suddenly being totally intimidated by the fact there were all these people, and they'd done so many different things than I had, and this was going to be quite something, and I spent a lot of time looking around, being fairly quiet.

MANDICA-HART: How would you describe the campus atmosphere during your time at Smith?

WALKER: Compared to the '60s, and what happened in our society, it was certainly in '57, fairly quiet. But the '60s couldn't have happened had the '50s not happened, and there were things that started to go on that, in terms of civil rights, I don't really think — I don't recall a lot of discussion about the role of women. I always felt my — when I graduated, I felt much more like my mother in terms of what I thought I would be doing. That quickly changed, because of what was happening

in the '60s in terms of the women's movement, and certainly, I think, what Smith did is develop an extraordinary curiosity just about the world in general, and all kinds of issues, and being open to learn, and that has helped me in good stead for the last, now, 50 years.

MANDICA-HART: In what ways would you say it's helped you?

WALKER: When I graduated, I started teaching in Charlottesville, Virginia, where my husband was in law school, and I took a course, because I didn't have much — I was an elementary school teacher, and I did it to support us, because he was in school. I ended up loving education, and loving working with children, and really getting excited about their learning, and felt as an elementary teacher, I was woefully under-schooled in science, and took a science course, and suddenly looked around the room, and as we had discussions, Smith had more than prepared me. I was a much stronger student, which I hadn't had that image of myself, perhaps, here, and that certainly has continued, because I've randomly taken courses in that at a later point. I went and got a Master's. And I was, for multiple reasons, I think, Smith laid a very strong foundation.

MANDICA-HART: And what did you study when you were here?

WALKER: I was a history major. And took a number of courses in American history and some American literature, and in retrospect, I think, oh, it would have been fun to be an American Studies major.

MANDICA-HART: Were there any professors or mentors that had an influence on you?

WALKER: I'm finding that probably the hardest question, the answer is probably, but I don't remember now, and sometimes, if I were to walk around and be here longer, memories come back, but right this minute, I don't have any.

MANDICA-HART: Were you a member of any clubs or organizations?

WALKER: I — no. I enjoyed going to classes, I was in Gardiner House, and I enjoyed the people there, and getting to know, you know, know people and about them, and what they were doing, and I found that to be very interesting.

MANDICA-HART: So you had a strong house community.

WALKER: Yes. Yes. And I think having four classes — in those days, you didn't move around, which I believe now it's much more common, so you really got to know people quite well from different classes.

MANDICA-HART: What expectations — you already spoke about this a little bit — but what expectations did you have for yourself when you graduated Smith?

WALKER: I married my husband 10 days after college. We are celebrating our 50th anniversary in about three weeks.

MANDICA-HART: Congratulations.

WALKER: So my expectations were, he was in law school, he was a year ahead of me, my expectation, I was going to be working, hoped to be teaching, and I was going to see where we ended up. My — I viewed myself at that point as being very supportive of his career, and that's very much what I did with young children, became very active in the community, and then got to the point where I had my own career as executive director of a regional school board's association. I had been on a school board. And so I actually have had a long career in public education, but it's been earlier as a teacher, then as an active volunteer, and then professionally.

MANDICA-HART: So what difference has a Smith education meant to you?

WALKER: I've — to answer that, on just a straight level, I think it's just prepared — I feel because of my experience here, I truly am really curious about a wide number of things, and I always — I would still want to travel around the world, I want to read the next book, I would love to meet more people who've done different things. Some of that I came with, but it was greatly strengthened by my experience here. On another level, I think it's really hard to tell, because my experience is not the one that you all would have. And to say, how does my experience compare, it would take a lot of doing, actually, the kind of work you're doing with oral histories, talking with both, and seeing where their commonalities and where their difference is. But that's a much deeper question that I really can't answer with a lot more research.

MANDICA-HART: When you were here, you were talking about having a desire for diverse experiences. When you were here, did you feel like you encountered a diverse group of women, or—

WALKER: The word diverse means something very, very different today than it did at that time. Diverse at that point, I knew people of different religions, but the major US religions, and got to know them well. That was not an experience I had particularly had growing up. Certainly racially, there were very few, at the time they were called Negroes, today, African-American. We had a number of foreign students. I don't think it's anywhere near as large a group as you have today. And certainly, the community that we live in outside of New York, where our children went to high school, to watch that graduation, it's like a rainbow. And so that's — I mean, that's racial, ethnic kind of diversity. There was some socio-economic diversity here, but not huge. So the definitions are so different. At the time, I felt it was widening the experience that I

came with. But not — it's not what I would define today as being diverse. Walking down a street in New York City, that's diversity (laughs). And that's so different than when I was at Smith. I think that's much truer today.

MANDICA-HART: So going off of that, how would you describe a typical Smith student? What a typical Smith student when you were there looked like. What was she like?

WALKER: We all wore Peter Pan collars and skirts. Wool. Wool sweaters, pullover sweaters. You know, hair neat, and had little page boys (laughs) and that's the visual. I think students took academics seriously, and there were lots and lots of conversations at breakfast, lunch, dinner, playing bridge, just chatting, that had to do with classes and ideas, and what was going on, and it was really interesting. It was not — occasionally, certainly, it was about your social life, but my memory is there was lots of conversation about the book you were reading, and what did you think, and you know, how are you doing this, and discussions of classes. And that was very much a part of that. So I would describe a Smith student as being very intellectually curious, and my experience certainly were women who were fairly open, and again, to compare with what you might experience today, I think there'd be some commonalities, but certainly you're in a — there's much more diversity in how everybody dresses, and background, and people, and it creates a climate in which you can learn to be even more tolerant than I'm sure many of you are when you come here, just because wherever you grow up, you have a certain set of experiences that are widened in this kind of a campus.

MANDICA-HART: So going off of that, do you feel as though you have a sense of what the current Smith student is like?

WALKER: I'm not sure I really do. I have a visual, but I'm not sure what a — I have not known a student who was here, probably for 20 years. My cousin and I who both went to Smith failed miserably in sending the third generation to Smith College. We have a number of daughters in the family, and nobody wanted to come. They all definitely wanted to go to co-ed schools, so I think that would have put me much more in touch with Smith today. I find one of the most exciting things that Smith has done is the new engineering program, which I'm hopeful that I'm going to get to see. I know the building is open and they're having tours, I just haven't made it, because I think that is fabulous, that women have an opportunity for a professional degree that has so traditionally been in the sphere of men, and we need many, many more women to go in sciences and engineering, and that's really good personally for women, but it's also extraordinarily good for our country. And I'm really proud of Smith to have — that they've gone in that direction.

MANDICA-HART: So you did try to send future generations (inaudible)?

WALKER: Well, we certainly took them on tours. Unfortunately, it was pouring rain, and we came in the spring, and it was about 35 degrees, it was colder than New York, and it did not take. And my cousin did the same, and it didn't take, and I have a niece who had two grandmothers who went to Smith. No (laughs). And I — because I think it gives women the opportunity to really grow and develop as an individual, and I think that's something that happened then, and happens even more so, and probably more intentionally today than it did. I think it happened before, but it's — it's really intentional, I feel, like, for the college to consciously create a climate, and continually question and ask, and how can we be better at doing that for women to exceed to their fullest possibility. And I think that's the strength of Smith today. But I don't know how it's reflected in students, because I don't know one.

MANDICA-HART: But obviously you still believe that single-sex education is—

WALKER: I think it has extraordinary value. What I think all too often happens in our country is everyone, OK, we went through the way everyone went co-ed, and so that's the answer, and you miss the substance of the experience, and I contend that there are still women who can profit tremendously by being in an all-female environment, and build strengths. It's still hard out there. There still are glass ceilings. And there's still — it's still — I can't tell you the number of times I've been in rooms, and this is when I've had an executive position and ran the non-for-profit (sic) that I ran, and I would say something. No, you'd say anything, and a man would say the same thing. Isn't it wonderful what John said? And this is — I mean this is not too far ago. It's within the last five years that's happened. And I think — that's just a — it's more symbolic of how it's challenging, and there are environments that are much more equal, and men and women are treated equally and professionally equally, but I think a Smith education prepares you, and hopefully you have a climate in which it happens.

MANDICA-HART: So you've — even until recently, experienced still, gender discrimination—

WALKER: Right.

MANDICA-HART: —in the workplace? So—

WALKER: And nobody blinked an eye (laughs). And it's much easier in those environments, I'm going to add, just to let it go, because the goal is — whatever you're there to talk about is much more important to move forward, and whatever the reason for the meeting, than to say

something, well I already said it. That sounds a little snippy, and it doesn't solve any of the issues in terms of solving the problem.

MANDICA-HART: But you feel as though Smith made you more conscious of things like that?

WALKER: I'm not sure, because times have changed so much, I think it's much more the culture, that all the literature that's come out since Smith, I don't think Smith particularly did that at the time. I certainly — when I graduated, I didn't think the way I do today. I've — this has been an evolution of learning. But it gave me the foundation to be able to question and think, and not take things for granted, or just assume that the way it is is the only way it can be.

MANDICA-HART: Do you have any advice for current and future Smith students?

WALKER: Take advantage of every interest that you have, and if you have a passion that you didn't know you had when you came to Smith, follow it and see where it goes, because you're going to be much happier pursuing something that's of great interest to you. And even if it's quirky, and your parents are saying, oh no, you — whatever the parent message is of the day, test it out. It may be quirky, and it may not work, but it also could be fabulous, and open up a door that, who knows? And careers and opportunities are changing just enormously as we speak, and so you have no idea where that could be, lead you 20 years from now.

GEIS: At this point in your life, what really interests you? What are the things that you spend most of your time doing, and how is that different from when you were a student in terms of what you focus on?

WALKER: As a student, I wanted to travel everywhere. I did go to Europe one summer, and enjoyed that experience. Since my husband and I have been married, we've had the good fortune of living in Switzerland for two years, and also being able to travel extensively, and he's traveled much more extensively than I have, because I had to raise three children. You don't just leave them, or you can't erase them for a couple weeks and have them safe in a bubble, so I didn't get to go to all of those, but a real — I have a long list. Probably I could fill all my fingers with places I still want to go before I can't move. So that's something I'm interested in now. I've retired, and one of the things I've never been able — never done in New York, because when we moved there we had children, and moved to a suburb, I did not grow up in New York City, and I really don't know it. Yes, I can get around, but I don't really know the city. So since I've retired, three years ago, I go into the — try to go to the theater once a week, go to the cheap ticket booth, listen to all the languages around me, it's wonderful, and you can hear all these intimate conversations, I wish I were a novelist, because I hear these great family stories that people share, and then I've seen

wonderful theater, and I'll go to almost anything, because if you go all the time, you always — and there's always, except for one play that I saw, I've seen — there's something of value in all of it, and it just — that's something I have found very interesting, and I've always thought I would like to do it, and now I'm able to.

MANDICA-HART: That's great.

GEIS: Is there anything we haven't asked you that you think is important to share?

WALKER: No. I truly think the key to life has to do if something interests you, find a way to really explore it. And when you're in college, it's a fabulous time that you never have again of being — you can be really open to taking this crazy course that I always wanted — even if you don't do well, you will have learned something. Or I've always — I've never drawn. Always thought it'd be fun, and you're in class with people who've been drawing, but you've always liked it. Try it. I mean, this — and it can, I know, in so many cases where in a variety of ways, or take a photography course, and the person then pursues — ends up being a photographer. Never thought they'd like it. To me, that is the most important thing, and hopefully I encouraged our children to do that, and now there's who — you know, I've talked to, because you never know. And things 10 years from now are going to be so different, you may as well go with something you love, and try to figure out how to use it.

MANDICA-HART: Thank you so much.

GEIS: Thank you.

WALKER: Well, you're welcome, that was fun! (laughter) So are you in history and —

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Linda Sariahmed, July 2011.