

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Berneta Walraven, Class of 1983*

Interviewed by  
Ellice Amanna, AC, Class of 2014J

May 25, 2013

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Berneta Walraven speaks about her the graduation commitment she made to attend Smith reunions and discusses the central role the crew team played in her Smith career. She speaks about her personal identity and political journey, and how that influenced her career as an activist. She discusses the central role the crew team played in her Smith career.

## **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:** Walraven, Berneta. Interview by Ellice Amanna. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Berneta Walraven, interview by Ellice Amanna, transcript of video recording, May24, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Walraven, Berneta. Interview by Ellice Amanna. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Berneta Walraven, interview by Ellice Amanna, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

BERNETA WALRAVEN

by: ELLICE AMANNA

AMANNA: So this is Ellice Amanna and I am conducting an interview with Berneta Walraven. Class of '83?

WALRAVEN: That's right.

AMANNA: Yeah. And it's March 25th, 2013. We're doing this as part of the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. So thank you for being here.

WALRAVEN: Sure.

AMANNA: Yeah.

WALRAVEN: You ended – you said March.

AMANNA: Oh.

WALRAVEN: It's May.

AMANNA: Sorry. Thank you.

WALRAVEN: You're welcome.

AMANNA: Smithie. Correcting, I can't help it.

WALRAVEN: It's my birthday, so I –

AMANNA: March. Thank you.

WALRAVEN: Uh-huh.

AMANNA: Not March, May.

WALRAVEN: May.

AMANNA: Okay. Now we're going to start. So you're here for a reunion.

WALRAVEN: Yes.

AMANNA: And is this something you do regularly? Do you come – have you come to other reunions?

WALRAVEN: I have, yeah.

AMANNA: Okay. And can you say something about why you do come?

WALRAVEN: Yeah. I made a commitment to my roommate our senior year. She said we should join the Alumnae Association, and I think at the time of graduation, it was \$100 or cheaper than that for a lifetime membership. I mean, some very affordable deal, but still somewhat expensive when you're graduating. And some went, like, "Really?" So we joined. And I committed to her that anytime she wanted to go to a reunion, I would go with her. So I've tried to honor that commitment, and we've come now to 15, 20, this is our fourth. So we started coming at 15, and then have come since then.

AMANNA: Great.

WALRAVEN: Yeah.

AMANNA: Great. And what is it about reunion that you most enjoy? I mean, are you a person who likes the ritual or the people or –

WALRAVEN: You know, it's sort of changing. I mean, I would say my first couple, I was more curious about certain members of my class, what were they doing, what do they look like and what had they done. And now, particularly this one, I'm really enjoying the interaction between the intergenerational classes. And I might recommend at the end maybe they do offer something where members from the reunioning classes, smaller groups could talk to each other. Because I'm finding the other classes just delightful and very fun to get to know. I didn't attend Smith for four years. I was a junior transfer. So I don't have as much relationship with my class particularly. I'm very connected to the class of '85, but I never get to reunion with them. So my thoughts are younger than I am. You know, again, my connection to my class is not so important really. I mean, it's coming with my good friend and just being back in Northampton is wonderful.

AMANNA: Yeah, yeah. So you transferred?

WALRAVEN: Uh-huh.

AMANNA: And what was that decision about? How did you choose that?

WALRAVEN: It was very rash and ill thought out. I was attending an all-women's college in

Missouri, and I had picked that college because they were one of the few colleges in the country that offered an equestrian science program, I mean, a degree. And I wanted to ride horses and so I applied there. But I wanted to go to law school. And I don't know why. There was no good reason except for my mother and I had often watched Perry Mason together, and I just thought he was brilliant. So I wanted to go to law school. But that was, I just had that idea. I didn't want to be a lawyer. I never thought that very far through.

So this college in Missouri offered a program with Duke Law School, where they said if you attended this school for three years, you could attend Duke for three and get both your undergraduate degree and your law degree in six. Sounded like a good deal, and I thought Duke is probably a pretty good institution. So I attended The Woods, and I was having to take all my classes in political science at the men's college close by. And I was taking a course in political theory, and I had a professor named Mittler, and I thought he was really arrogant, but I thought he knew what he was talking about. And I was realizing, as I was a sophomore, I thought, I don't know if I'm going to get into the law school I want to attend with Woods as my undergraduate degree. And Mittler mentioned during class that his granddaughter had attended Smith College. And I was, like, "Oh, I'll just show you." So I went back to the library that day. I pulled out the Smith College brochure from the shelf. I applied and I got in. That was how.

AMANNA: Wow.

WALRAVEN: I knew nothing about Smith. I knew nothing about Massachusetts, and I came.

AMANNA: How was that, when you first arrived here, what were you –

WALRAVEN: Yeah. Well, part of the kind of, you know, the greatness of faith or who knows what. That summer, after I had finished at The Woods, and knew in the fall I would be attending Smith as a junior, I went to – I was a camp counselor, a Girl Scout camp counselor throughout my years through high school and college. And I was attending a Girl Scout camp in Germany that summer. It's one of the few Girl Scout camps on foreign soil. And there was probably maybe, I mean, 30 staff, maybe fewer, from across the United States, that attend and go there for the summer to be camp counselors. And I walked in and somebody said something about, "Where you going to go to school?" I said, "Well, that's kind of interesting. I'm leaving one school and I'm going to go to Smith College." And this woman said, "Hey, blah, blah, blah, she's going to Smith." And this woman looked at me, like, "Are you kidding me?" And this woman that I met that summer ended up being my college roommate here at Smith, and who I had made the commitment to attend reunion, is the one that was across the room. And I said, "Hi. I'm going to Smith as a junior. She actually was on her junior – going to be the second half of her junior year abroad. She'd split it up differently. So she actually was not on campus when I

arrived. She came the following semester. So that was my Smith connection. It really started prior to even getting here. And so I had her to learn from over the summer, and it was wonderful. And I felt very – I mean, I didn't know anyone, but everyone was so welcoming. And, I don't know. I didn't really have fear about starting fresh and starting here. And to have her, to know she was going to be here soon was very comforting.

AMANNA: And did you live in a house?

WALRAVEN: We did.

AMANNA: Where did you live?

WALRAVEN: I lived both years in Washburn.

AMANNA: Okay.

WALRAVEN: A very small house.

AMANNA: What's your memory of the house culture? Was that something that was –

WALRAVEN: Oh, well, it was fun. We had a small group of seniors that ended up the second year. But it was – I was involved in campus government, and I was involved in house politics. I mean, I don't know what office or position I held. But we had a really good group. We had an enjoyable time. We had wonderful staff in our kitchen, and I don't know. It was a great house to live in. You know, I didn't have any other experiences, so I'm really limited. And I know the Green Street experience is different from the quad versus other individual houses with different identities at that time.

AMANNA: Yeah.

WALRAVEN: But Washburn was – it was really fun. Yeah. I loved it. Yeah.

AMANNA: And so what was your major then when you came to –

WALRAVEN: It was government.

AMANNA: Okay, okay.

WALRAVEN: Yeah.

AMANNA: And how was it for you? Did you end up going to law school?

WALRAVEN: I did.

AMANNA: Okay.

WALRAVEN: Yeah. Oh, God. I wish I had gotten career counseling at some point, got it like that. But, yeah, I did. You know, I don't feel I took advantage at all to the utmost of the Smith education. I mean, I got the best grades I could. My grades definitely were not in the stellar category as they were at my prior institution. But, you know, I did the best, and I stayed in the government, BA in government, and I didn't develop – which I now see in reunion particularly, students that have made very close connections with professors and academic research and study abroad. And it's just thrilling to see. And I wish I had. I guess I wish I was in – maybe in the right major, and maybe then I would have had more interest in forging these relationships. But, you know, I didn't form close relationships with any faculty. And probably more so, you know, the faculty I remember more in my mind, which was English.

AMANNA: Okay.

WALRAVEN: And I particularly loved the English professors here in poetry and –

AMANNA: Do you have any particular professors you remember?

WALRAVEN: Yes, yes. Pat Scarda and – God, who's my British lit professor? (Indiscernible) Jared, amazing. And then the guy that screamed in all Shakespeare all the time. I can remember that in the past what I loved. I took some writing courses with her and, you know, maybe I didn't click with the government faculty. And I don't know, I think it might have been being a junior transfer or it might have been I – I don't know. It's hard to say now, but, yeah.

AMANNA: It was an interesting time to be on a college campus, especially for women.

WALRAVEN: Right.

AMANNA: Did you consider yourself a feminist? How were you looking at the women's movement?

WALRAVEN: Yeah. Oh, I definitely did. And I – what really happened was, even though I didn't recognize it in my junior and my senior year, I ended up falling in love with my roommate. I'll refer to her as my roommate, because I haven't signed a release for her to be on this video.

AMANNA: Yeah.

WALRAVEN: So only the roommate.

AMANNA: Yeah.

WALRAVEN: And, you know, and we didn't – and so that wasn't happening for me yet. I was so homophobic. I remember, I'll never – in Seelye at the time, there was what downstairs – there was a coffee – it was called the coffee klatch. And there would be people who had – I don't know what we even did. I guess you just drink coffee. But there were tables set up and there were often tables of activities or groups. And the lesbian resource center had a table. And I was, like, "Oh my God." And I would literally walk down different stairs so I didn't have to walk by them. And I mean, I was just like, "I don't know who those people are, but I'm not going over there," you know. And I don't know how much of me was saying, "Because you need to go over there," or maybe I was just too scared or too – but I don't know. I knew there was something uncomfortable about the lesbian resource center, and I didn't know why. I knew I shouldn't be uncomfortable with the lesbian resource. So it was this weird sort of schizophrenic thing going on in my brain.

AMANNA: Yeah, yeah.

WALRAVEN: Yeah, yeah.

AMANNA: So not until after graduation did you really –

WALRAVEN: Yes, yes.

AMANNA: – understand?

WALRAVEN: It was after graduation, and my roommate and I ended up both moving to the same city, and then getting an apartment together. And we let some other people move in with us at the time. And then, you know, the other parties drifted away, and it was she and I. And at one point, I was out talking to a mutual friend, who I knew quite well, and she was a lesbian, and she looked at me and she said, "Berneta, you're in love with her." And I went, "Oh my God, you are so right." I mean, and it all went click, click, click, click, click, click, you know. And I was, at the time, you know, trying to study for the LSATs and I was going to the Philadelphia library at the time. I was in Philly. And I wasn't studying very much. I was mostly writing love poetry to her. And so did so well that – I don't remember. But I do remember I didn't – again, I needed someone to sit right in front of me and tell me what they saw or what I – you know. And once it was told to me, I was, like, "Yeah. Oh, my God, it makes sense, and I'm not going crazy. And, wow, I'm going to run home and tell her, and then go tell my parents, and then, well, tell everybody I know, and, yeah. Yippee, skippy, I've got this figured out." So I was thrilled. No one else was. But it was, you know, oh well. So it was –

AMANNA: How did you –

WALRAVEN: It was weird. It was so refreshing, though. I mean, I didn't – and then I think



my angst about the lesbian resource center sort of went, "Ah, ah, maybe it was a little close to home," or I don't know. But, yeah. So I – but I definitely – I mean, apart from all of that, I considered myself to be a feminist. And I was – I guess, you know, it really developed in the years after Smith. And, particularly, I had some years between Smith and law school, and then my law school career. For about seven to ten years there, I mean, I was protesting everything and involved in every movement. And, you know, living Philadelphia and going to DC and then living in Boston. I mean, I was right on the East coast and able to get involved and be active and knock on doors and campaign and help represent candidates, and just do anything I could to, you know, sort of move. I really – what I did, legally, was get involved in civil rights work. So I sort of took my feelings of a protected class status in some degree and said, "Well, I'm going to work for the rights of folks based on all protected classes," and so did that work for most of my legal career.

AMANNA: Oh, okay.

WALRAVEN: Uh-huh.

AMANNA: Did you work in the south or –

WALRAVEN: No. I worked for government agencies enforcing non-discrimination laws.

AMANNA: Okay.

WALRAVEN: So I worked for the State of Massachusetts, and then I worked for the State of Washington, doing non-discrimination, enforcing their state laws against discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations, based upon race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation and all the various protected class categories, yeah.

AMANNA: Okay.

WALRAVEN: So I wasn't in private sector. I was in the public sector. That was our focus, and really the sole statute we enforced. So we were considered sort of the resident experts on that law.

AMANNA: Okay. And do you remember any political involvement at Smith at the time? Do you remember a political consciousness? What was the campus like?

WALRAVEN: Oh, yeah. We were all – what were we all up in arms over? We were all up in arms over something. Because now I can't remember if it was – when I was in law school, it was South Africa, was –

AMANNA: Right.

WALRAVEN: – a big issue. But, geez, it was about our commencement speaker. It was a big brouhaha over somebody who either ended up being or we said no, we won't have her. And I don't know who it was. It was a woman, at first. And I think we had to get an alternate. I think we had to go to the substitute.

AMANNA: So they referred to –

WALRAVEN: Uh-huh.

AMANNA: Yeah, yeah.

WALRAVEN: And I don't remember who it was.

AMANNA: It didn't show up as the commencement speaker now?

WALRAVEN: Speaker, Huh, huh. Huh, huh. I could definitely find out.

AMANNA: So what about national politics? Was there a sense of awareness on campus? Was that something – or that came later, for you?

WALRAVEN: For me, it definitely came later.

AMANNA: Yeah.

WALRAVEN: Yeah, yeah. I ended up – again, I don't know how this kind of happened, but it had happened in Germany when I first learned I was – had met my roommate and realized we were both coming to Smith. I wanted to – I had done some athletics, but I wanted to row crew, and I'd never been in a crew shell. And so, as a junior, I joined the novice team, and I made it into the varsity boat by my senior year. So I worked very hard at crew, and it was all-consuming. So I think that was another reason. I was either rowing or studying, and I didn't – I really didn't do – and I did, I mean – did the house government stuff and I did SGA or – I don't remember the initials, for the first student government, I had some role there, I think representing either my house – I remember campaigning for something. But nothing – I don't remember being involved in national political issues or, you know, concerns during those two years.

AMANNA: Yeah. So your education, in general here, we're kind of interested in when you went out, after you graduated –

WALRAVEN: Yeah.

AMANNA: – how you felt about how Smith prepared you for the world as you found it.

WALRAVEN: Yeah.

AMANNA: How do you think about that? Do you think you got a good preparation?

WALRAVEN: I do. You know, I think Smith built on what I had already started to establish in my first two years. And I went from being a big fish in a little pond to one of all these other, you know, fabulous women who just do everything in the world, and (indiscernible) I don't have to think at all about it, you know. So it changed where I was kind of in the pecking order, I guess, but it was all right. I mean, I wasn't stressed about that, or – but it was a new, like, "aha" moment, you know. And I sort of remember feeling like – I mean, I graduated high school in Mississippi, and I grew up in different parts of the United States, but I did my high school and most of my junior high in south Mississippi and the gulf coast, and nobody was from Mississippi. And I feel there was some attitude about, "Who are you, and have you even read these books?" And, you know, "Didn't they have an airport," you know sort of thing. So there was sort of that feeling, but I really did feel Smith took me where I was and helped me grow from what I came with and what I was – but I never – I mean, I sort of never, you know, lacked confidence or felt that there would be any – that I would be treated any less for being female or being, you know, of this school or that school, or being – and I knew I would get into law school. And I really thought Smith would be a strong undergraduate credential for that application. That's what I was looking for.

AMANNA: Yeah.

WALRAVEN: I wanted to, you know, irritate that professor to some degree. I don't think he even knows. Mittler, if you ever see this, I got here. You just tell – I'm (indiscernible) bringing you now, because it was the only application I applied for as a junior transfer. I didn't even tell anybody until I got in. So I made it. But, you know, he could have said anything. I mean, you know – so it's kind of, like, crazy, you know. So, anyway –

AMANNA: So what about now? Is that part of your identity as a –

WALRAVEN: Being a Smithie?

AMANNA: Yeah.

WALRAVEN: Being a Smithie.

AMANNA: Some people are very strong –

WALRAVEN: No, no. It's not. I'm really glad I've been here, and I'm proud of it. But it's not of me. I mean, I'm not kind of, of this world. And I'm not – I don't know. I don't think of myself really as an academic or intellectual or with any of these categories, sort of, you know, but –

AMANNA: But you mentioned before that one of the things you enjoy about reunions is this network of interesting women that you meet –

WALRAVEN: Oh, I –

AMANNA: – years.

WALRAVEN: I do, I do.

AMANNA: So that is part of the experience, right?

WALRAVEN: It is, it is, yeah. So I guess I'm of it, but I don't necessarily – I still feel a bit "other," you know, even though I'm in it and I am a Smithie. I'm just so proud. I was saying to one of my classmates when we finished this morning, listening to the student speaker and thinking about – I was – there was just a Smith event in Seattle, and they were launching or had already launched the global campaign. And I'm so proud of Smith. I'm just now, I mean, ooh, it just makes me teary. You know, they've really changed, and it's like, this is – I mean, it's hard to change. And I look around there, and I say, "This is going to be such a different institution in a wonderful way." I think even in 20 years, maybe even in a reunion class I can come back to. And so I'm so – I'm really proud of them that way. I'm just – I love and I'm so respectful of President Christ and the other presidents who have the vision to, you know, get these large amounts of money and invest them and make this an institution that can be strong and hopefully give to so many women that it's not possible that they can get here, you know.

AMANNA: Yeah.

WALRAVEN: And I do, I wish every woman could come here, you know. I just, "Come, you'll love it." I mean, it just – it is –

AMANNA: And is your attachment to Smith changed at all since you came out, after you came out after you left?

WALRAVEN: After, yeah.

AMANNA: Is there any aspect of your lesbian identity that makes it important in a different way?

WALRAVEN: Yeah. I really wonder what I missed, was one thing.

AMANNA: Yeah.

WALRAVEN: Anything. I don't know. But that would just be an unknown. But –

AMANNA: But you went to the reception yesterday?

WALRAVEN: Yeah. Went to the reception. You know, it's nice to meet folks.

AMANNA: That was fun, yeah.

WALRAVEN: It is. It's fun. Huh. I'm very proud to be a graduate of a woman's institution, a woman's college. I mean, that was – I don't know if Mittler had said a coed institution if I would have maybe – if it would have been as meaningful or if I would have taken that next step. So I'm very proud of that. And I don't know. It's – I guess I kind of feel a little like – being lesbian in 1979 to '83, it wasn't really discussed that much. I'm amazed and blown away by the progress of the gay and lesbian movement, in a sense, since my college graduation, even since – well, since high school for sure and to the present. So it's sort of gone in such leaps and bounds in the last 20 years, that I – it's hard to kind of think back. I don't know. That's a hard question. It's hard to figure out what now – I mean, I don't think there's any way I could have been out at Smith. That's obvious. I wasn't and I wasn't ready for that or it just wasn't – I don't know what wasn't right about my preparedness. But I don't know, I don't know.

AMANNA: Something to think about. Well, we're coming to the end of our time. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your memories or reflections you have about Smith or reunions?

WALRAVEN: Well, you know, I just remember a lot of really early mornings standing and waiting for the shuttle to pick us up for crew practice. We were in the dawn patrol. We were out there at 6:30 in the morning. And I remember running from right out here all the way over across the bridge, over to the boat house, which was across the bridge through town and across the bridge and to row. And I'm really glad I had that opportunity and got to do that.

AMANNA: Great.

WALRAVEN: And I'm so thankful to my roommate for keeping bringing me back here, and, you know, having this experience.

AMANNA: Great, great. Well, thank you for sitting with me.

WALRAVEN: Sure.

AMANNA: It was a pleasure.

WALRAVEN: Sure, thank you. Thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, June 2013.*