

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Mary Werner, Class of 1985

Interviewed by
Rachel Dean, Class of 2013

May 14, 2010

Abstract

In this oral history, Mary Werner explains why she chose to attend Smith, her experiences with Student Senate, tutoring local children, and her work as a psychology major. She also describes the general campus atmosphere and diversity, her opinions on President Conway, 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 Lauren Hinkle 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: Werner, Mary. Interview by Rachel Dean. Video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Mary Werner, interview by Rachel Dean, video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

Transcript

Bibliography: Werner, Mary. Interview by Rachel Dean. Transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Mary Werner, 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:

MARY WERNER

by: RACHEL DEAN
filmed by: KATE GEIS

DEAN: –lot of information all at once.

WERNER: Yeah.

GEIS: OK, (inaudible).

WERNER: You don't ever get to be seen on the camera?

GEIS: Actually, she is. She's on the camera.

DEAN: Yeah, I'm being taped too.

WERNER: Oh, OK, good.

DEAN: Yep.

WERNER: You a budding journalist as well, or—?

DEAN: No, no, non-budding journalist. I don't know what I want to do with my life.

WERNER: That's OK. (laughs)

DEAN: Which is—my parents aren't that thrilled about, but—

WERNER: Yeah.

GEIS: You'll figure it out.

DEAN: Yeah, I'm not worried.

WERNER: *Something* will happen. (laughs)

DEAN: Definitely, definitely. My last goal was to graduate from high school, go to college, so I've gotten that one down, so I'll just keep going in that direction.

WERNER: Yeah.

GEIS: OK. (pause) Whenever you're ready.

DEAN: OK. This is Rachel Dean, and I'm conducting an interview with Mary Werner on May 14, 2010, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for being a part of this project.

WERNER: Sure.

DEAN: What were the benefits in choosing Smith over other schools for you?

WERNER: The benefits in choosing Smith. For me, I think it was just having the respect of an organization that's female-oriented. I remember when I was going and looking at different colleges and interviewing, when I went to Smith I had this really warm feeling about the interview process and how they treated me, and I felt like I was special, wasn't just a number when, you know, I went through with the interview process at other schools. And it just really stuck with me, and in fact, I ended up applying early decision. I didn't want to go anywhere else. So.

DEAN: What were the reactions you received from families or friends for choosing Smith?

WERNER: Some people couldn't believe that I was picking an all-women's college, and frankly I didn't really know what that meant at that age when I decided to go here. To me, it was just a great school and great facilities, great reputation, and I didn't exactly know what that meant. So some people questioned me about that aspect of it, but a lot of them were proud of me that I got in here, and I think that they were curious to see how it would fly for me while I was here and afterwards and so forth.

DEAN: Were there older women in your family college graduates, and did that influence your decision?

WERNER: Actually I think I was the first female graduate of a college. My mother actually went to nursing school, but for any other type of university or college experience, I was the first one.

DEAN: How did Smith live up to your expectations and your hopes or fears?

WERNER: You mean as I graduated and—?

DEAN: Or over the course of your four years.

WERNER: I think it totally lived up to my expectations. I mean, I came from a small town, you know, big fish in a small pond, and, you know, you're one of the smarter students and so forth. So it was interesting to come here and know that everyone else was from that same situation. And I remember at the beginning I felt a little bit overwhelmed just acclimating to how bright everyone was, and outgoing and so forth. But I felt like it was the place for me, and, you know, I enjoyed it the whole time.

DEAN: What clubs and organizations and/or teams were you involved in, and how did that shape your Smith experience?

WERNER: I was on Student Senate. I can't remember how many years I did that. That was just really fun because I had done something like that in high school, and just being part of the administration aspect or the governing of the college and knowing what's going on, that was really fun for me. I did some tutoring of local disadvantaged children, teaching them to read and things like that, so I kind of kept connected to the community in Northampton as much as I wanted to. Not a lot of time, but that as important to me too, just because it can be a little bit ivory towerish. I mean, I went to a small public high school, and this was a real different experience for me, so I kind of kept my hand in all types of demographics, I guess. (laughs)

DEAN: What did—when you were on Student Senate, what did you implement, or were you on any specific committees that you remember?

WERNER: Gosh. Unfortunately 25 years is a long time. (laughter) I don't remember now. I just remember trying to get votes and going to meetings and talking about things that were going on, but I can't unfortunately remember exactly.

DEAN: Jill Ker Conway was the president then. Do you remember her or any influence she had on the college, anything—?

WERNER: I remember she was really good at giving great pep talks and making you feel like you were on top of the world and you were going to go out and change the world and all the different all-campus events. She just seemed like a really neat lady, strong personality. I know she'd been in her position for ten years or something at that point, and I know that she had a strong marriage, and she used to talk about her husband sometimes, and it was sort of an interesting couple that was over at the president's house. And I felt like I—I mean, on several occasions I know that I went to little receptions or talked to her personally a few times. And I don't know how often someone does that at other schools. (laughs)

DEAN: So do you think she was really, like, an individual, based on the individual students and really connected with the student body, then?

WERNER: I think she cared a great deal about the students and doing something different for Smith under whatever her vision was for it. I definitely felt like she was a caring person. I did read her biography some years after I got out of school. And she grew up out in the hinterlands of Australia and she just had kind of an interesting life. It's kind of cool that she ended up here. Again, I can't remember too many specific things that she implemented herself, but I know that she was a great leader.

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

WERNER: I lived in—mostly in Hopkins B, which I understand has been turned—torn down some years ago. It was sort of dilapidated at the time that I was there and they were threatening to tear it down every year that I was here, but somehow it lasted. But it was a fun house, even though it wasn't probably the prettiest house on campus, and I know that it was one of the more diverse houses. We had a lot of international students, and the lesbian students, and things that I would never have encountered from my small town. I felt like it really helped me broaden my horizons and become friends with people from all over the world. I know that every house is a different—every year they have a different house that kind of gathers those different types of people, but our group was really eclectic, so that was really fun.

DEAN: So did you see any issues with diversity on campus while you were there with, like, religion or class or race or gender and sexuality?

WERNER: No, I recall it as being very open in every way. It was—I never saw any issues whatsoever. In fact, it seemed like the student population and the administration were open and diverse, and that's what they showed to be—you know, they believed in that, and it seemed to play out to me anyway.

DEAN: What did you see the campus atmosphere as? Just diverse and how—what else did you see the campus atmosphere as?

WERNER: Well, I know it was pretty academic. I mean, I felt like many a time, Friday and Saturday nights you're in the library studying till 10:00, 11:00 at night, and just knowing other friends, since getting out of college, knowing they weren't spending their Fridays (laughter) and Saturday nights in the library studying. So definitely that was much more of the focus here as opposed to some other places that I've become familiar with. So that's kind of like—that stands out to me. Of course you could go to parties and do fun things, too, but it was all up to you.

“Your social life is what you make of it,” that was always the coined phrase, and I think that was absolutely the case.

DEAN: Did you go abroad, and if so, how—or if not—how did you make that decision?

WERNER: I did not go abroad while I was in college. I remember it being an option, but for some reason I just felt like I wanted to stay here at Smith College because I really enjoyed it, and I don’t feel like I wanted to be away for a fourth of my time period in school in some other foreign country. I felt like I could travel anytime, which I have since, so.

DEAN: What—

GEIS: If you could just let go of the wire.

WERNER: Oh, is it—

GEIS: (inaudible).

WERNER: Oh, (laughter) I guess that’s not the thing to do. OK. (laughs)

DEAN: What were some of the challenges, if any, of being at Smith when you were here?

WERNER: Challenges. Really, the challenges were just trying to find your own—for me, finding my own way and trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, you know. You know, the academics were hard at times, but that’s a good thing, so. I don’t know.

DEAN: What was your major, and who were your favorite professors or mentors, and how did they influence you?

WERNER: Oh, gosh, you’re going to ask me to remember names. (laughs) I was a psychology major, and I just cannot recall any professors’ names. I’m sorry. (laughs)

DEAN: Well, that’s OK. How—do you, like, remember any instances of, like, great teaching or just great examples of how the Smith professors were different?

WERNER: Well, I do remember one professor really stood out. I think she ended up leaving, but she was very dynamic. Carla—I can’t remember her last name. But she was a psychology—Psychology of Women. That was class I remember being pretty interesting to me because she was pretty far out there as far as women’s issues and—I just remember her throwing tampons out into the crowd at the classroom for some point she was making at one point. I guess if it were—I think it was like if

the world were run by women, you know, tampons would be free for everyone, you know, because it—but it's run by men and they make us pay for them in these little machines. And so, (laughs) just like her thinking and stuff like that was pretty eye-opening. I can't believe I can't remember her name right now, but—

DEAN: It's OK.

WERNER: I do remember her also knowing every single person's name in that class. There was like 100 and something people in that class, and she knew every person's name, and I just thought that was pretty neat that she would—it wasn't like she just gradually figured it all out, she made that a point and an effort right from the beginning. So, I don't know, I thought that was pretty personal.

DEAN: What were your experiences with relationships and dating while at Smith?

WERNER: I'm not sure how open I should be on this video. (laughter)

DEAN: However you would like to be.

WERNER: Oh. I used to think of myself as the flaming heterosexual. (laughter) Because I just had this boyfriend from Amherst pretty much the whole time, I think, maybe since sophomore year on, and he became part of, like, the house. In fact, I remember we would have these meetings (laughs)—I don't know, the house meetings, I don't know if they're once a month or whatever—they started adding his name to the roll call. (laughter)

DEAN: He was a—

WERNER: And everyone knew him, and he had his own car, so we would drive back and forth, and I'd stay over there, he would stay over here. And so that was my—pretty much my dating experience.

DEAN: Do you think it was—how did other people view him, having a male around? And at least now it's like, Oh, who does he belong to? Like—

WERNER: He had a really gregarious personality, and I think he just fit in with everyone. No one—it didn't seem to be any—they liked having him around, I guess.

DEAN: Did your commencement address, if you remember it, did it leave you with any lasting impressions, or any commencement addresses before?

WERNER: I guess not. I overheard somebody earlier today talking about—I knew it was Beverly Sills that was the speaker. I remember thinking, Wow,

she's our speaker; that's really neat. Someone said that she had said, "Women can't have it all, so don't try to beat yourselves up if you can't do everything perfectly," but I don't really recall her saying that, (laughs) so.

DEAN: What do you think of that statement?

WERNER: That women can't have it all? Well, I know personally I couldn't do it all at once, for me, because I like to do things well. And I don't happen to have children, but if I did, I think I'd probably end up staying home to take care of them because I just don't think I could split myself off into so many directions. Some people are really good at it, but I probably would do something like have phases where I'd focus on one thing and then another phase where maybe I'd focus on my career or whatever. So I think you can have it all, maybe not at the same time.

DEAN: So after you graduated, what did you do the first summer after you graduated?

WERNER: I went to work for a regional magazine. I had this really neat job where I—it was an internship, what they called a residency, actually, and I was in the editorial department. It was *Yankee* magazine. And I lived in this house that was owned by the founder of the magazine. I lived with like six other people in different departments. They had like a public relations intern, and I was the editorial. They had a graphic artist, a travel person, and we each focused on our specific aspects of magazine publishing. So it was a really fun experience right after college.

DEAN: And who have you become since Smith?

WERNER: Who have I become? (laughs) Oh, gosh. Well, (pause) not sure, really. I'm at this point in my life where, you know, the recent economic downturn, I was one of the people laid off from that. I've done a lot of, like, good work in terms of being in the health care field. I was working for the American Cancer Society for the last three years, and before that I worked for a lot of HMOs and also a hospital. So everything that I have done has been sort of trying to help people get healthy or stay healthy or communicate messages about that. So I feel like I've always gotten paid to do something that's been good. So I'm happy about that.

DEAN: Do you think Smith or your experience at Smith really helped to prepare you for your jobs and life outside of Smith?

WERNER: I think that it didn't specifically prepare me, but maybe it did generally. I think that a lot of Smith women just expect themselves to go for the jobs they want or to do whatever they want, and I've encountered a lot of situations with women asking me, "How did you get like that?" or "Why do you think like that?" And I'm like, Why don't you think like

that, you know. (laughter) You just naturally don't put any barriers on yourself as to what's possible. Now, I don't always reach the things that I set out to do, but I don't dismiss myself for wanting to try things, where I think a lot of women that I know tend to do that. So I think Smith prepared me in terms of giving me sort of a background or a foundation of what is possible, and I think that comes from all the pep talks we had and telling us that we're special. You know, sometimes I really miss that because, you know, it was a great resource for building women's self-esteem and coming up with goals for themselves. So it's fun to be back here.

DEAN: Do you think that was coming from the college and the administration itself and the professors or also your fellow peers and Smithies?

WERNER: I think all the way around. I mean, there's this certain culture of pride that everybody has going here. I think it starts maybe the first day with some of the rallies that you go to and things like that, but, you know, you also see people, like alums coming back for reunions and graduation ceremonies, and, you know, they're coming back 25 years later, and why are they doing that, it must be something special about it. I mean, I think it's throughout the whole process.

DEAN: Looking back, would you encourage young women to attend Smith, and why or why not?

WERNER: I would definitely encourage them to attend. I don't know if everyone would want to go to an all-women's college. I'd prefer probably to encourage the ones who already want to go. (laughs) So I think you self-select. You know, I remember being attracted to the—maybe it's the brochure that I read or whatever it was. I just thought, This is already interesting, and then when I came here and interviewed, it was like confirming what I already saw that I liked. So I would definitely recommend people come here.

DEAN: Do you have any advice from current or future Smithies, and would you have done anything differently?

WERNER: I don't know that I could have done anything differently. I mean, there's things that I wish had been different. I was pretty naïve. Like, I'd never even worked in an office environment, and—of course, I was in high school—but I mean, like, I just didn't—I was from a rural area, I didn't know what corporate world was and all of this kind of stuff, and of course I've learned that over the years. It would have been great if I weren't so naïve when I first got here so I could sort of hone in on, Oh, [I want to be?] an economics major and, you know, these are the things you can do to lead to this path or whatever. I mean, I eventually went and got an MBA, but it sort of was a longer enlightenment period for me to realize the workings of the corporate world, I guess you'd say. But,

you know, I took classes that I was interested in and don't regret that for a minute. I mean, I think you learn best when you're most interested in the topics. (laughs) And as far as recommendations go, I say don't beat yourself up if you don't know what you want to do. I mean, something will happen; you'll figure it out. Just have confidence in yourself as you try to take the next step.

DEAN: What did you get your MBA in, in what?

WERNER: In entrepreneurship.

DEAN: OK, and what did you do with that, or how did it affect you?

WERNER: Actually, I went back when I was 40, so it wasn't that long ago that I went and got that. And I'm actually, like I said, I'm at the point now where I'm trying to decide of what to do, and I'm thinking of doing something along the lines of social marketing or media and doing some consulting for companies and just trying to get my feet wet in that end of things.

DEAN: What does that mean exactly, social marketing and media?

WERNER: Like companies these days really need to be—have a presence on the Web to get their name out there. They may have a bricks-and-mortar business, but if nobody sees anything about them on the Web—I mean, people go there to look for reviews on every kind of product and service. They go there to see what's in their area. If you don't have your business representative there, then you're losing business and probably may go out of business, because people seem to want to trust other people's opinions of a product and service now. They don't believe the TV ads and the radio ads or the—you know, and magazines and newspapers are practically going away anyway. And those are like real sales-y ads that people don't seem to believe in what those say; they go to the Web for their information. So I think it's important for companies to get something up and running, at least listings at the very minimum, if not a website. So that's kind of where my focus is right now.

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

WERNER: Say the audience for this again is—?

DEAN: Just current Smithies, future, in future years, people that are doing research about Smith, and college students, college women.

WERNER: I guess the other big thing I think about going to Smith, and I kind of alluded to it already, is that there are all these Smithies all over the place. They have a very strong alumni association, and there's a Smith

club in just about every city. Whenever I've moved somewhere, I always look up the Smith club, and there always is one, and it's like a nice way to connect. And I don't know how many other schools have something like that that has the strength that Smith has, and I think that's something to think about. Because you're here four years, but, you know, you're an alum for the rest of your life, and it's nice to have that to go back to whenever you need it, so I think that's an important piece.

DEAN: Have you been involved in the alumnae clubs, or how have you seen that influenced other people?

WERNER: I've gone. Like I said, it seems like every time I moved or have moved to a new city, it's always a great way to get connected, and I occasionally go to some of the events and so forth. And each club has a different feeling to it. You know, some of them are, like, all the older ladies are there, you know, which is a nice perspective, and other cities it's only the younger folks. But it just enables you to kind of connect in and get acclimated. For me, that's mostly what I've done.

DEAN: Is there anything else you'd like to—?

WERNER: I think that's it. (laughs)

DEAN: OK. Thank you very much.

GEIS: I had one questions. This kind of follows up with—I was curious, when you come back here now, what's—what are you getting out of being here this weekend, do you think? Like, what drew you back to Smith to be back here?

WERNER: Well, I think, because I said, because I recently went through the layoff situation, which so many people have, so I'm not really bummed about that, but I thought, Wow, what a great time to go back to Smith and get a little positive reinforcement for having gone here, from being around strong women, obviously the networking aspects. But mostly that's like—I feel so, like, respected just being here, going to all these events that are put on especially for—the Alumnae College. It's just really neat. Where are you going to get that? I mean, to me it's like I'm going back in time or something. It's just like I felt when I first came here and interviewed. It's the same kind of feeling, like, Wow, this is a great place. (laughs) So I guess I came back to get a little pumped up. So.

DEAN: Are you getting that out of it?

WERNER: Yeah.

DEAN: Good.

WERNER: Definitely.

DEAN: OK, well, thank you very much.

WERNER: Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Lauren Hinkle, May 27, 2011.