

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Rachel Willis, Class of 2004*

Interviewed by  
Julia Greider, Class of 2016

May 16, 2014

## **Abstract**

Rachel Willis begins her interview with the story of coming to Smith as a result of her sister attending before her. She recalls the campus reaction to 9/11. She moves on to tell about her close relationships with her friends in Wilder House and some of the pranks that they organized. She next talks about being on the croquet team all four years. Willis discusses the difficulties involved in the change of presidents from Ruth Simmons to Carol Christ, as well as the sense of pressure she felt to do great things after graduation. She recalls what it was like to be African American on campus and the reactions to racist incidents in the Quad. Willis concludes by talking about the role of the Internet in her college experience and the value of her relationships with professors.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Taylor Maurand, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Willis, Rachel. Interview by Julia Greider. Video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Rachel Willis, interview by Julia Greider, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Willis, Rachel. Interview by Julia Greider. Transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Rachel Willis, interview by Julia Greider, transcript of video recording, May 16, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 16, 2014, with:

RACHEL WILLIS  
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: JULIA GREIDER

GEIS [videographer]: This is just a little reminder, but if you want to encourage her as you're talking, just do it silently, like nodding.

GREIDER: Yeah, OK.

WILLIS: (laughs)

GREIDER: OK, great. All right. This is Julia Greider, and I'm conducting an interview with Rachel Willis, Class of 2004, on May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014, for the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this.

WILLIS: Thank you.

GREIDER: So, how did you end up at Smith?

WILLIS: So I actually got a chance to come to Smith a lot. My sister was a Smithie, and she was class of '96. And I remember Mary Maples Dunn was the president at the time, and she's like, "Oh, you're going to be the future Smithie." And it was my sister's, like, orientation on campus. I was like, "No, I want to go to a school where boys are." And it was the running joke in my family that I was never going to Smith. But because I spent four years on campus with Claire, and like, just frolicking and, like, getting to see her friends, and getting to see the type of woman that she became afterwards, as I got in high school and started taking a look at different colleges, nothing really compared. And so, then I had to weigh, like, do I really want to be where boys are, or do I want to be somewhere where I'm going to grow up and be the type of woman like my sister became? And so that eventually led me Smith. (laughs)

GREIDER: OK. So what did you decide to study here?

WILLIS: I was a government major. I came into college, and I knew everything that I wanted to study. I'd already decided like, I'm going to be in the Picker Program, so I'm going to take all of the classes that are going to set me up to get me in that program, and make sure I'm successful. I

thought I wanted to be the president of the United States when I was here. So everything was geared around that. But then I also had this interest in theater that just stuck with me, so I ended up becoming a theater minor at the very end, and doing independent studies through that coursework, so that I could really just make sure to focus on both aspects of what I loved.

GREIDER: OK. So you ended up being your class president, right?

WILLIS: Yes.

GREIDER: OK. So, tell me a little bit about that experience?

WILLIS: I think one of the reasons that I wanted to do it was just this overwhelming feeling of loving Smith and wanting to get back to Smith. And making sure that everyone else was having the type of experience that they needed to have, and in order to stay connected to the community. I think that has actually been something that's been very challenging for me, actually. Just taking on a lot of responsibility and balancing everything that's going on in my career and personal life, and also being class president. But I love the energy that I feel, being back on campus now, and being able to reconnect with all of the classmates.

GREIDER: So, being class president, you must have experienced a lot of the controversies and stuff around campus. So you can you tell me a little bit about those?

WILLIS: The controversies that are happening like right now, or—

GREIDER: When you were here.

WILLIS: Yeah. So I actually — I'm just class president. I was elected from the fifth year reunion, so I've just been serving for the past five years.

GREIDER: Oh, OK. I see.

WILLIS: Yeah.

GREIDER: OK. Well, do you want to — do you remember any of the controversies, or anything that were going on while you were here?

WILLIS: I don't really remember any of the controversies. One of the biggest things that sticks out for me, though, is 9/11. And that happened for me my sophomore year in college. And I remember waking up in the morning. I hated taking early morning classes, and my morning ritual was to wake up and turn on *Regis and Kelly*. And so I had my station set to that. But when I turned it on, there was actually like breaking news. They were talking about a plane that had crashed into the first World

Trade Center tower, and just watching it unfold live, as the second plane went through, and I just — being back on campus this week, it's reminding me a lot of that pivotal moment, and how our campus really came together and what the community felt like, as students didn't know what was happening with their families back at home. And just for me, even being from Georgia, and not having a connection to New York City at that time, besides having a family member who wasn't touched; just feeling this longing of needing to be around family, and really feeling like Smith came together as a family during that time.

GREIDER: Do you remember any specific ways that that happened or is it just more of a feeling?

WILLIS: I think it was more of a feeling. I remember the chapel, there were students in and out all day long; students of, like, very strong religious backgrounds, and students who had never stepped foot into a church before. And just that sense of openness and belongingness. I remember one of my friend's families just inviting everyone down to New York two weeks later, so that we could, like, all be together, and all be family and have that sense of community together. And that's just something that really stands out as one of the pivotal experiences during my time here.

GREIDER: Mm-hmm. So, what was your house community like?

WILLIS: Oh, I lived in Emerson. It was the best house on campus. (laughs) We liked to work hard and play harder. And I think it was really great, because all of the first-years were together on the fourth floor. So we developed what was called [E-Fo?]. And it was just this community of all the girls on the floor, who really hung out, and to this day, are my best friends, even though we don't see each other. We're still sending emails all of the time. We got into a lot of raunchy things, and (laughs) we caused a lot of trouble, a lot of pranks. We were not Public Safety's favorite people. (laughs) But just watching how we've evolved from those girls who used to, like, play pranks and carry around a six-foot bunny, and, like, we rearranged one of my friends' rooms and put it into the living room corridor, so everything was set up identical to that when she returned from classes. Like, watching us go from that to women who are leading high-powered careers, and just finishing their doctorates, has been pretty astounding.

GREIDER: So you do you have, like, a favorite memory of your time with them, or a favorite prank, or anything?

WILLIS: So there was the Hamburglar, which was (laughing) actually our senior year. We had Smith barbecues in the spring, as the time was closing up. And one year, one of my friends, Sarah Records, just got the idea that she was going to be the Hamburglar. So she dressed up in black and

white, and she created a cape, all in one day. And she went around to all of the barbecues across campus, and just started stealing people's hamburgers. And people actually started calling Public Safety about it. And so Public Safety was going around campus looking for the Hamburglar. And it was just like one of the best ways to close out our senior year.

GREIDER: That's great. So, what was the dating culture like here?

WILLIS: Oh, my goodness, the dating culture. I didn't have a dating culture here. (laughs) It was really hard. So, a lot of my friends definitely were, like, had experiences, but for me, it actually felt kind of isolating, being a straight woman on campus. And just not being able to navigate, like, going to parties at UMass or Amherst, and honestly, being called a lesbian, which was degrading, one, that something is wrong with the word lesbian or that I should feel attacked for it. But not having like the opportunity to explore that life. So, for me, dating was something that was on pause, all four years, until I got out of college. But I look back on it now, and I'm so grateful for that, because I didn't really have any distractions that other people had. My friends here, and my friends at other schools, and I was really able to just focus in on developing really strong friendships and really taking advantage of the education.

GREIDER: So how would you describe a typical Smithie when you were here?

WILLIS: Oh. A typical Smithie was passionate, had something that she wanted to do to change the world, whether it was in the field of geology, or medical research, or teaching English. Had some type of extracurricular activity, and it was probably quirky, and it wouldn't match, like, the exterior that you saw with her. And definitely had a balance between being up really late at night, but being extremely studious, and, like one of the smartest people in the room in class.

GREIDER: OK. So what kinds of — were you involved in any extracurriculars, or anything?

WILLIS: I did, I was on the croquet team. (laughs)

GREIDER: Oh my goodness, I didn't know there was one.

WILLIS: Oh, yes, we had a croquet team. And we still have everything, if you want to go to the field and play. It's regulation size. (laughs) I joined with a couple of my friends, because there was a girl advertising there had been a croquet team in the years before. She was a senior, and she really didn't want to have it die down, and she was advertising, like there's a free trip to Philadelphia. And I'd never been to Philadelphia, and neither had one of my friends, so I was like, All right, we can do this croquet thing, and see how we do. And my claim to fame is that we

placed fifth in Nationals, at the croquet tournament in Philadelphia. I'm not going to tell you how many teams there were. (laughs) But I still feel pretty good about that, because we went to Nationals. And it just turned out to be this community of about ten girls, over the course of my four years. And we would meet up, and we were very serious about practice. You had to be there. You had to be on time. It was just like, one of those, like, neat, unique things about Smith that there is an official croquet team that goes to competitions every year. And so it was something that I loved.

GREIDER: Cool. Do you remember any ways that the campus changed during your four years here?

WILLIS: Yeah, we got that green building. (laughter) That was one of the biggest things. Just seeing even the change. But we had three presidents, over the course of my time here. We started with Ruth Simmons, who I absolutely love. Ruth used to walk with me. She would catch me on campus, and we would make the walk back from Seelye sometimes, all the way — I would drop her off at the president's house. And she was always just very eager about what was happening in my life, what did I like about classes, what was it my parents were packing in those care packages every other week that she sometimes would help me carry? And then, when she transitioned to Brown, we had an interim president, and then having Carol Christ settle in, my junior year. Just seeing that, I think was one of the biggest transitions of coming in, being very attached, I think particularly for me, because my sister's senior year, Ruth started. And so it was kind of a book-end of the end of my sister's tenure at Smith, and the beginning of mine, and seeing that evolution.

GREIDER: So how did you feel about that change?

WILLIS: It was very hard. I think I loved seeing Ruth Simmons. She was such an example of, like, how far the college had come, I think. Having a black woman as president, and one who was so extremely personable. And for me, it was just difficult when Carol Christ came. I think part of it is just who I am. I don't like change. (laughs) But part of it is that they just have very different styles. And a lot of the things I think that had to come because of economic changes in America were often attributed to Carol Christ's reign, in terms of, like, how, like dining halls were changing, and where things were getting cut back. And I think probably, like, looking back on it with adult eyes, I think Ruth would have had to make those same tough decisions, given the economic climate, but at the time, it was really hard, because I associated it with the new president.

GREIDER: Let's see. So what do you feel was expected of you once you graduated?

WILLIS: Oh, gosh, that's a good question. I felt this sense of pressure that I had to do something and I had to do something big, because I had Smith's

name attached to it. And I think some of that came from inside of Smith, and some of that came from the external world of just knowing, like, what was expected of a Smithie. I remember I had a friend from high school, and her mother was like, you're going to go to Smith, and you're going to come out making eighty grand, and I had this — this pressure of, like, oh my God, if I don't come out making eighty grand and I graduated from Smith, am I a failure now? But I feel like one of the things that I picked up just like being in this environment is that whatever I do, I have to go and I have to do well. And I have to make sure that I'm helping people that are coming behind me.

GREIDER: So, talk a little bit about what you have done since Smith.

WILLIS: So, since Smith, I joined Teach for America. And it actually had nothing to do with what I expected for my life. I thought I was going to go work on the Hill after graduation. And eventually, like, become a United States Senator, and be president. But I remember senior year, just walking around in the fall, and there were Teach for America signs plastered all over campus, and I really wasn't that familiar with the organization. And I went to an information session, and I bawled my eyes out with the video. And I still felt like, though, this is not what I came to Smith for. Like, when I came into Smith, I actually already had all of my classes picked out for the first two years. Like I'd marked them and highlighted them in the course catalogue, and this is not how I envisioned my life, and that felt scary.

But at that time, I'd actually finished all of my required courses for my major and my minor. And so, I was just like shopping around for fun classes on campus, and I told people, like, whatever it is, give it to me. I don't want any math classes, because that will not be fun my senior year. But anything else, I want to do. And a couple of people kept telling me to take Sam Intrator's class. And I ended up taking one of his education courses, and it just stuck with me. He required that you did practicum hours in a school. And so, I was volunteering at a local middle school three afternoons a week, teaching drama, working with a student one-on-one, and mentoring, and helping him with his homework, and just learning about the education system, particularly in urban areas, through Sam's class made me feel like, this is something I need to do, and I need to do it for at least two years. I originally thought like, OK, I'm going to do it for two years. I'm going to get an understanding of, like, education from this lens, and then I'll eventually go back into government. But Sam told me — he was like, I'm going to recommend you for Teach for America, but only if you promise that you're going to stay more than two years. So initially, I was like, all right, I'll give you three. I promise I'll give you three. Go ahead and make my reference.

But I got in the classroom, and I just absolutely loved it. I became a teacher for eight years. Sam kept up with me throughout that time, which was very helpful. And I feel like every time I was kind of

like, on the fence of, like, is this something I should continue to do, I would get an email from him asking me about my kids, asking me about what I was thinking, and it would just re-energize me. Since then, I was — in 2009, I actually became Atlanta Public Schools' Teacher of the Year for elementary teachers. And I won the Milken Award, which is a national recognition for teachers across the country. It's like the Oscars for teaching.

GREIDER: Congratulations.

WILLIS: (laughing) Thank you. And then in — two years ago, in 2012, I actually moved from Atlanta, where I was in the Corps, which is my home town, to Washington, D.C., and now I design professional development for teachers in D.C. and Prince George's County, Maryland, particularly around race, class, and privilege, and how it impacts our students. And I also teach a course at Columbia University in the summer, at their Summer Principals Academy.

GREIDER: Cool. So, OK, going back to the Smith years.

WILLIS: Yeah.

GREIDER: How do you feel that, like, race, class, and privilege operated on campus?

WILLIS: Yeah, it was interesting. I remember hearing a rumor actually about my house, that there had never been an African American woman that lived there. And I mean, it was kind of like this urban myth, but it was like an urban myth that had lived even from the time when my sister was here. And so, for me, coming in and being the only African American woman in the house, I was like, oh my God, how is this possible? And just really trying to navigate what that meant, but, like, not feeling any of the effects of it.

But I do remember sophomore year, there was actually — someone spray-painted in the bathroom in Gardiner House, the word nigger. And feeling very overwhelmed, like, coming from Atlanta, and coming from the South. My father used to, like, sell shoes to the King family. Like, I felt like I was very much like, invested in the Civil Rights Movement. I knew the stories of segregation, and what it had been like for my father, for my mother, who grew up in Dynamite Hill in Birmingham. But then, like, being on campus in the North, where I felt like I was very safe, and then for — that being the first time I was exposed to the word nigger, in the quad, that felt very unreal to me.

GREIDER: Yeah.

WILLIS: And it was something a lot of my friends in my house — I lived in Emerson. They, like, struggled to understand why I felt so affected by

that, because it was in a different house, and it didn't happen to you, and we love you, so just get over it. And I remember setting up a conversation, like, watching a movie, and wanting to have a dialogue about it, and hardly anyone showing up. And just feeling like this sense of isolation from the community at that moment.

And then, there was actually a woman named Mary Ann, who was a landscaper on campus, but she just, like, spoke to everyone, knew everyone, like, just loved students. And she gave me a quote from the Dalai Lama, about like how you keep your head up, and how you continue. And has kept up with me all of these years, since then. And one of my friends, Bridget, like, writing me a letter and saying, you know, "I'm here for you. And I don't understand, but I want you to know that you are important to me." Oh, this is making me emotional. (laughs)

And just this past year, actually, one of my best friends on campus, Kate, went to a training on race and equity in education. And we were talking about it just from, like, a very intellectual space. She also had joined the Corps, and now works at D.C. public schools. But she said, "One of the things that I've learned is, like, one of my failures was not supporting you during that experience on campus." And it was just very powerful to hear, like, nine or ten years later, like, I'm sorry, and I realize what that meant. And so I think that's one of the pivotal ways it played out for me here, in a way that was completely unexpected.

GREIDER: Yeah. Well—

WILLIS: Yeah.

GREIDER: Let's see. So—

WILLIS: Do you have a Kleenex?

GEIS: Yeah.

WILLIS: (laughs) Sorry.

GEIS: I'll get it. I'm going to pause for one second, OK?

(break in audio)

GREIDER: So did the growth of the Internet have any impact on your experience here?

WILLIS: Yeah. I remember — I remember there being computers, but them still being like, very clunky. I also remember, like, there was — like I had the chance to really be able to still feel connected to my family at that time. My little cousins were, like, instant messaging me, and they would

see my away statuses. So I remember freshman year, I, like, had on my AOL Instant Messenger away message, like, I'm out for the weekend, I'm going to skip my classes on Friday, and go to New York City with my friends. And my cousin, who was eight at the time, wrote and was like, Have fun. I won't tell anybody. And I just felt so guilty. I was like, Oh, God, I'm supposed to be a role model, and I'm, like, talking about skipping classes, and I got caught. So I went to my friends, and I was like, I can't go. I have to stay. They're like, Why don't you just tell her that you didn't go? Like, you're going to miss New York City? I'm like, I can't. Like, in my soul, I have to feel like I'm still a good role model for Essex. So I remember it was like a good touch point for that.

And my mother, she didn't like technology, but she just really missed me. So she was like, chicken-pecking away, and like, sending me messages. And those meant so much to, like, see her do that, as opposed to just, like, having my sister type out an email, or calling. Like, knowing that she was really connected. And so that felt good.

I also remember my junior year, when I was at the Picker program, learning what Google was, where — and I feel like I became an official, self-proclaimed Google stalker, that moment, and, like, realizing that I could find out all these information on people, just using this one search engine. And now I can't remember what life was like before that moment that I learned what it was.

GREIDER: All right, well, I think we're getting about to the end of our time.

WILLIS: OK.

GREIDER: So, do you have any other things that we haven't touched on, that you feel were really important to your time here?

WILLIS: Yeah. I think the biggest thing that was really important to my time was just all of the professors. I think when I look back on it, that was one of the most powerful things about Smith, is the way that they really invested in getting to know all of us on a very personal level, even to the point — I had one professor; I went in to talk to him, and asked for an extension on a paper. I'm like, I'm just so tired, I can't do this. And he was a really, like, very well-respected, very powerful professor in the government department. And he looked at me, and he was like, This scarf is just not becoming on you.

GREIDER: (laughs)

WILLIS: You shouldn't wear scarves on your head. And I was like, I just — it's finals, and I haven't done my hair in a couple of days. Like — the level of, like, just intimacy that professors would build with you, to the point where, like, this man, who was, like, so revered, could just tell me, like, You don't look cute today. It's something that I really loved about Smith, and that I think is just really powerful. And having had the

opportunity to go on and continue my studies, I feel like there is something very unique about this college, and the way that we create a holding environment for students. Just the way that, like professors become family, and particularly when I think about the fact that my family was so far away from me. But still feeling like a sense of belonging with everyone here was just one of the things I think that brings me back, and makes me feel like Smith College is actually better than Disney World. (laughs)

GREIDER: All right. Well, thank you so much for doing this for us.

WILLIS: Thank you. I appreciate it. (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Taylor Maurand, June 2014.*