

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Abby Berns, Class of 2008

Interviewed by
Tanya Pearson, Class of 2015

May 23, 2015

Abstract

Abby Berns begins her interview discussing the factors that led her to choose Smith. She recounts her experiences within the Jewish community and the climate on campus during the Bush administration. She discusses the contention surrounding Christine Legarde's rescinded commencement speech and relates it to a similar incident during her undergraduate years. Berns details the advantages of having attended a women's college and the benefits it has afforded her after Smith and in the field of public health.

Restrictions

No online access

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geiss .

Transcript

Transcribed by Jeff Tiedman, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Berns, Abby. Interview by Tanya Pearson. Video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Abby Berns, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 23, 2014, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Berns, Abby. Interview by Tanya Pearson. Transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Abby Berns, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Alumnae Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 23, 2015, with:

ABBY BERNS

by: TANYA PEARSON

PEARSON: OK. Good to go. All right. This is Tanya Pearson and I'm conducting an interview with Abby Berns, Class of 2008, on May 23rd, 2015, for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. Thank you, very much, for participating. You're our first successful recruit. (laughter) So just, starting from the very beginning, how did you choose Smith College?

BERNS: Well, I knew that I wanted to study science. In high school, I wanted to study microbiology. And I felt like Smith was pre— was really strong in science. And it seemed like a women's college was a good place to study science. And I think, being gay, I didn't have that barrier of maybe I shouldn't go to a women's college, because where will I meet men? So I think it — People say, Oh, did you go to a women's college because you're gay? And I don't think I did. But I think it also opened it up to me. And I also — my dad works at Rochester Institute of Technology and they're part of the Tuition Exchange Program. So Smith was one of the colleges on the list of that.

PEARSON: Oh, OK.

BERNS: So that was a big — a big reason I ended up here. And I got offered a STRIDE Scholarship. So that drew me here, as well.

PEARSON: Mm. I'm going to — because you just mentioned this, I'm going to skip ahead. And this is a question that's a little further up —

BERNS: OK.

PEARSON: — in the questions. But — So you were here 2004 to 2008.

BERNS: Yeah.

PEARSON: So at that time, Smith sort of like developed this reputation in the press in the '80s as being a lesbian institution.

BERNS: Yeah.

PEARSON: So would you say — is that wha— is that the impression that you had at the time?

BERNS: Coming here — So I visited Smith a couple times and Mount Holyoke a couple times. I ended up choosing between the two. And the first time I visited Smith, I felt like it was just so gay! And I — it was a little overwhelming to me, at the time. And then — and then, I think when I came here the second time, I thought, Oh, OK, this is — It was sort of the group of people I had encountered. It was like, Oh, there's gay people who, you don't immediately know they're gay. And I felt a little bit more comfortable. But I don't think that that's a big reason that I came here, I think was not because I knew it was a super gay school. I think — Yeah.

PEARSON: OK. And then just, how did you feel, if you can just remember back being a freshman, like your first couple months, just your general feelings about Smith? Was it what you expected? Was it better? Was it worse? (laughs)

BERNS: I think it was so much better than I expected. Yeah. I —

PEARSON: Or how did you fit in? I know there's also kind of — there's this idea of the typical Smithie. That's also something that I'd like to ask. And then how did you fit in? Or where did you find friends?

BERNS: Yeah, yeah. I think I felt, in high school, like I had trouble making friends. And so I did kind of a lot of work, before I came to Smith, to sort of learn how to open myself up to people and self-disclose and things like that. So then, when I came here, I just kind of jumped into doing that. And I couldn't believe how receptive people were. I just felt like suddenly it was so easy to make friends and meet people. I just remember sitting — I went to a pre-orientation trip. We did — we went camping and hiking — which I had never done before. But I had a great time. And then, coming back and going to the — It was like a back-to-school picnic on Davis Lawn. It was like a dine-around-campus. The dining had recently transitioned from being everyone in their own house to having kind of some theme dining in more central houses. And so they were sort of highlighting that. I just remember sitting in a circle with people I had met on the camping trip and people in my house and feeling totally comfortable and having this moment of total self-awareness about I'm here and I'm socializing and it's so great; I have friends! And then I'd been there a week. But it was — it felt really great right away.

PEARSON: So much better than high school.

BERNS: So much better than high school.

PEARSON: (laughs)

BERNS: And I think one thing that was unexpected for me was how involved I got in the Jewish community here. I had certainly looked at Jewish communities. As one of the — one of my — came to college visits extremely prepared, with a really big list of questions and one of my questions was about the Jewish community. But I think I thought it would be more peripheral involvement. And then I went one week. And it was — it was OK. It was — I was uncomfortable. But then I — somebody started — There were some people who were using sign language. And I know some sign language. So I started talking to them. And that really drew me in. And then, the next week, I want to a concert or something else. And people were like, Where were you? We missed you. Like, You don't even know me! But they were so welcoming. And tha — I just suddenly — I found myself becoming a very big part of that community. And I ended up — I ended up leading that community, later, at Smith. So I think that was sort of an unexpected way that Smith became mine, was to become — becoming involved Jewish-ly.

PEARSON: Mm. Were you involved in any other —? Well, that seems like it was probably very time-consuming.

BERNS: That was kind of — that was the biggest one. I was involved in Haven House, as well, in some leadership there but not as much as in Hillel.

PEARSON: OK. Anything in the queer community on campus or —?

BERNS: No! I think I — I was very involved in high school in GSA. But I think — I felt like, once I came to Smith, I didn't need that, because it was just so common here.

PEARSON: Yeah.

BERNS: Yeah.

PEARSON: OK. And then, how would you describe the campus atmosphere, during your time at Smith? Well, you kind of already went over the — socially. But also, politically?

BERNS: Well, I was here — my first year, fall of 2004, George Bush was reelected. And it was rough! It was — We — There was a Facebook — Facebook was pretty new at the time, for Smith. Other colleges had been involved before that. But I think it wasn't until I arrived at Smith that Smith went on Facebook. And so there was a Facebook group, Dorm Rooms that Have Seceded from the United — from the Union as of — the date of the election, 2004. And so — Because we were — we just couldn't believe that tha— that that's what had happened. So that was, I think, a big — a big factor on campus. I was not really involved politically, on campus.

PEARSON: Or any demonstrations or political demonstrations that you can remember?

BERNS: (laughs) I do remember Coke getting kicked off campus. When I was a prospie, I had come — happened to go to a talk by — Nosostros, I think, is the name of the Latino organization. I'm not remembering the name. But they had a speaker come who had been persecuted by the Coca-Cola Company. And it was just pretty dramatic, the story. And then — so then that sort of had set things in motion. And Coke got kicked off campus, I think, right before my senior year. Because we used to be a Coke school. So in 2007, their contract was up for — Smith's contract was up for renewal with Coca-Cola and they did not renew the contract.

PEARSON: Oh.

BERNS: And so, instead, they — I don't know. There was a lot of different companies. Now they — And they had Polar and some Pepsi stuff but just all these different — not Coke companies anymore.

PEARSON: Yeah. I'm trying to think of what we have. I guess I don't (laughs) —

BERNS: I remember, my senior year, being — there being like RC Cola in the — Is there still? I don't know. if it's still in the —

PEARSON: I don't know!

BERNS: And —

PEARSON: Now I'll look, though —

BERNS: Yeah!

PEARSON: — when I go to the Campus Center.

BERNS: Yeah. And Odwalla got kicked — Odwalla is a Coke product, so that was no longer on campus. So that was — that was kind of a neat thing. The other thing I do remember, my senior year, the — oh! — I don't know what organization it was — invited Ryan [Sorza?] to campus, who was antigay. I don't remember what his — if he wrote a book. I do — I don't remember what he did or what his profession was. But he was coming to speak. And the queer community was pretty upset by that. And there ended up being protests, in Neilson Browsing Room. So he was speaking in Nielson Browsing Room. And people came in in protest. There was a lot of conversation about what were we — what were people going to do. And a lot of us felt like we're not going to go to this talk, because that's sort of protest in its own way, of just not showing up. And some people said, OK, when he says something, we're going to turn our chairs around. But what ended up happening was people dressed really flamboyantly and came in and started shouting. And Campus — and Pub Safety had to get involved. And people were coming in through the windows. And it wa— it was really crazy! And

then the campus didn't really handle it that well, is my memory. And a lot of queer people felt like he should not have been invited to speak on campus.

PEARSON: Do you know who invited him? Was it an administration — is that —

BERNS: Certainly not.

PEARSON: — an org or —?

BERNS: It was certainly an org. I want to say it was the Republicans. But I also don't want to say that —

PEARSON: Oh, OK, like —

BERNS: — because maybe I'm just thinking it's the Republicans. Or it was a c—

PEARSON: I was more just wondering if it was a student organization or —

BERNS: Certainly a student organization. Yeah

PEARSON: — like faculty or —

BERNS: Right. It was abs— it was certainly not a department. It was certainly not like an administrative choice. But it was (laughs) an administrative choice to say, "Yeah, you can spend your money on that," to not sort of — I think it was a bad choice on the campus's part or whoever was seeing — overseeing student organizations — to say, "You know what? Maybe — let's rethink this. Let's look at what —" Because he had said negative things about Smith College and lesbians at Smith College — that was my memory — before he came here. And he was kind of using it as a publicity stunt, because he knew there was going to be pushback about it. It jus— it just got icky really fast. But a lot of people felt unsafe. This is our — as gay people, this is our home. This is a safe space for us. And you're letting this guy come in and say bad things about us? So then, after that — And it just was — it was chaotic and it was unorganized. And a friend of mine got — somebody — I think she pushed somebody or something. There was some kind of physical altercation. And the other girl decided maybe she wanted to press charges. It was — it was like a thing.

And so we ended up having to have kind of a — sort of therapeutic debriefing session, but that the — Jennifer Walters, the Dean of Religious Life, led, to kind of just hear some voices and — I'm not sure wha— and what part of the administration was there. I don't think Carol was there, Carol Christ. But — you know. And I think then people felt a little more heard. But it was sort of — it was a little bit of too little too late. Because it felt kind of damaging to the — to the queer community. So. Yeah.

PEARSON: Well, yeah. I feel like that is kind of like a cyclical process. Because the commencement controversy —

BERNS: Oh, yeah. (laughs)

PEARSON: — last year —

BERNS: Yeah!

PEARSON: — that's pretty similar. And I guess, if you don't mind, what is your stance on those kinds of issues? Because I think you just said that you wished he hadn't been allowed to speak or invited to speak or that administration had stepped in.

BERNS: Yeah. I — Not that administration had said, "You may not come" but had sat down with whatever student org invited and said, "OK, what are you — what's your purpose here? What are you — what are you going for? Are you trying to incite things?" So I think — I think it was something tha— in the Ryan Sorza situation, that spiraled out of control really fast. And I don't honestly think the student org who brought him in thought, Let's anger all of the gay people at Smith campus. So I think it was — I think it was misguided rather than intentional. But you're asking kind of what are my feelings about —

PEARSON: Yeah, I guess. And those are two —

BERNS: — Christine Lagarde and —? Yeah.

PEARSON: — very different situation.

BERNS: Yeah.

PEARSON: D— is your opinion similar about Lagarde and being asked to speak at commencement and then not showing up, the protests surrounding it?

BERNS: (pause) I don't know. I have — I have sort of mixed feelings about that. I'm just trying to think back about how I felt at the time. I remember thinking, Maybe that isn't the smartest choice, Smith, about who to — who to come and have speak. And then, again, she's a woman who's done — who's risen to a very prominent position in the world and maybe she does have a place. And we don't know what she's going to say. But it was — it was a weird year in university land —

PEARSON: Yeah.

BERNS: — of commencement speeches — or not commencement speeches. So I think it's — it was bigger than Smith. And —

PEARSON: That's an interesting perspective. Yeah, no one said that yet but that's true.

BERNS: Yeah! I'm not remembering the other — the names of the other schools. But it wasn't just us who had a commencement speaker withdraw.

PEARSON: Wasn't it Condoleezza Rice too? I feel like she was —

BERNS: That's vaguely familiar.

PEARSON: — supposed to speak somewhere and ended up withdrawing, because of protests —

BERNS: I think maybe.

PEARSON: — student protest.

BERNS: Yeah. Yeah. I don't know that —

PEARSON: I was wondering —

BERNS: — I have all to say about that. Yeah.

PEARSON: — your general opinion, (laughs) [knowing?] the point of contention with speakers or something. It's like a yearly —

BERNS: Yeah. Yeah.

PEARSON: — [thing?] happening. But back to just you, what were your academic interests? What was your major and your —?

BERNS: I was a biology major. And I came in with a strong desire to study microbiology and to do the Five College certificate in Culture, Health, and Science — and forgot about it (laughs) as soon as I came here. But then, actually, someone mentioned it, my senior year. So I got my act together and also did the Five College certificate in Culture, Health, and Science. Yeah.

PEARSON: Did you have any — or did you take advantage of any academic opportunities, while you were here, like Praxis or study abroad or —

BERNS: Yeah! Yeah, I did.

PEARSON: — internships, anything memorable?

BERNS: Yeah. I did — I worked in — I did the Summer Science — Maybe it's called SURF now, Summer Under — No.

PEARSON: I'm not acquaint—

BERNS: I don't — OK.

PEARSON: And that's why it's interesting.

BERNS: There was a — it was a summer science fellowship, basically. So I worked in Chris White-Ziegler's microbiology lab for a summer, doing research on *E. coli*. And we got — we got a stipend for that. And my roommate and I lived off campus. And it was fun being here over the summer. I also did — I did use my Praxis internship. Sort of by the end of — I guess, by the end of my junior year, I was moving towards public health. I was not loving lab stuff. But I knew that disease was an interest — (laughs) infectious disease was an interest. So I interned at the Boston Public Health Commission, using a Praxis internship, for a summer, which was pretty neat, doing — I drew hand-washing posters — looking — And —

PEARSON: Oh, really?

BERNS: (laughs) I think they didn't have enough to do — enough for me to do. But at the time, we were prepping for possible bird flu. But it turned out that it didn't end up being bird flu. It ended up being swine flu. So it was kind of interesting to be involved with that before anything really happened. And then later on, when it was H1N1, in a professional role, I was — I was involved with that. I'm in public health now.

PEARSON: Oh, OK.

BERNS: But the other thing that I did was I studied abroad in London, at King's College. And I got to take parasitology classes with these old British parasitologists who were just awesome. Yeah. I th— England, because of its (laughs) colonial history, has really strong tropical medicine. And so there's a lot of people who study parasites. And I think some of the — some of the kind of best scholars of parasitology are in — are in London and I got to study with some of them. So that was pretty neat. Yeah.

PEARSON: Were you particularly close to or inspired by any professors or faculty, that you can think of? Anyone make a real impression? (laughs)

BERNS: Yeah! I think that — I took a class — it was Asian American Women Writers, with Floyd Cheung. And I think that class changed me, in a way. I don't know. We had to keep these commonplace books, which were books of quotations we write down, in different — They were cat— we had to make categories and put quotes in them from books that we — that we read together. Yeah. I think that was one of my more influential classes. I'm not exactly sure why. But I think, for many — for myself and many of my classmates, there were — there was a class that you took that was not in your own major that sort of — that stuck with you or brought you into — that you use in your life or something like that.

PEARSON: Yeah. I was going to say, that's interesting —

BERNS: Yeah!

PEARSON: — because that's not biology or —

BERNS: Yeah. Yeah.

PEARSON: English class, right?

BERNS: Yeah. But also —

PEARSON: Your —

BERNS: I think Jennifer Walters was definitely someone that I was close to. And she came to my wedding last summer. I go— I married another Smithie, last summer.

PEARSON: Congratulations.

BERNS: (laughter) Thank you. So — yeah, so I was involved with the chapel and that was pretty influential. So.

PEARSON: Yeah. And tha— You sort of already answered this but did attending a women's college give — do you feel that it gave you a unique experience — outside of not having to be — not being heterosexual and having to be dating —

BERNS: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

PEARSON: — for any other reason?

BERNS: I think that I'm just more willing — I'm willing to speak up. I went to graduate school; and I was always the one who was willing to ask questions in class. People wouldn't understand things but I would be the one asking questions. Sometimes I felt like, Oh, my God; I'm that girl. But then people would be like, Oh, I'm so glad you asked that, because I was curious about that too. And, Well, why aren't you saying anything? So I think — absolutely, I think I — It taught me leadership skills, being at Smith. And when I meet someone else went to a women's college, I have something in common with them. I just — I think we have a similar way of being in the world, even if it's not the same women's college. I think — I don't know — I think people who go to women's colleges are different. Yeah.

PEARSON: Those are — yeah, those are very common feelings, actually.

BERNS: Yeah! I think we just know how to identify what we want and how to get things done. And I think we take — maybe we have a little bit of lower tolerance for — mm — bullshit. (laughter)

PEARSON: And do you think that that is something particular to Smith? Because actually, I have a couple friends who sent to Mount Holyoke, and one who recently graduated. And even she says that Smith women are different —

BERNS: (laughs)

PEARSON: — like Smith women are the more aggressive ones, they're both women's colleges and we're strong women doing great things or strong people doing great things but that, yeah, Smith is different —

BERNS: I —

PEARSON: — and no bullshit. Do you —?

BERNS: — I think that's true. I think Wellesley also has some of that. Women I've met from Wellesley have that, sort of, similar thing. But when I meet women who went to schools that were closer to men's colleges, like — or to coed schools, like Barnard or even Bryn Mawr, just don't get that same vibe.

PEARSON: Yeah.

BERNS: Yeah. It's — You know. Sometimes when I meet somebody from a school — from Barnard or something and I don't click with them, I'm like why not? Why aren't you like me? (laughs) But, yeah, I do think there's something unique to Smith, in that.

PEARSON: How has your Smith education served you since graduation, personally and professionally? Or just, what have you been doing?

BERNS: Yeah.

PEARSON: (laughs)

BERNS: Yeah. After — So the biology major here really prepares you to work in a lab. So after college, I went to work at NIH. And actually, this is a cool — this is cool. I — so I was a STRIDE scholar. And I did not have a great STRIDE experience. But my professor wa— is pretty — is also a well known parasitologist. And so my — so he had worked with the guy who ended up being my boss at NIH. So when the guy from NIH saw who I had worked with at Smith, he was like, Do you know Steve Williams? And I was like, Yeah. And so that kind of got me in the door. So it's kind of a neat example of Smith opening a door.

So I worked there for a year. And then — I knew that it wasn't what I wanted to do. And this program was a one- or two-year program. And most people did it for one year and then went to get a PhD or an MD or did it for two years. And I did not want to get an PhD or an MD. I knew I wanted to get a master's of public health — but not yet. I wasn't ready to go back to school yet. And so, after a year, I left, with no plan. And I think Smith kind

of gave me the courage to do that. Like, I'll find some— I'll figure it out. And within — I don't know — a month, I had another job. It was H1N1, in the H1N1 flu pandemic. And so I got a job at a local health department in Virginia, coordinating efforts for their response to the pandemic.

And that was a great job for me. And I think Smith really taught me the writing skills for a lot of the work I did there. I ended up writing a really large — it's called an after-action report. It's — after there's a big emergency, you kind of write down what happened and how your area handled it. So I wrote the thing for the whole health department. And I think Smith also gave me the confidence to jump right into that job, as the youngest person by quite a bit in that health department. I was — I don't know. It was like day two. We were at some meeting. And I had some piece of information that I felt was important and so I just jumped in and said it. And everyone's like, Yeah, jump right in, yeah. (laughs) So I think — I don't think tha— I think that's a Smith thing.

And then, after that, I worked for a national public health organization — this is all in the DC area — for a year and then — during which time my now wife graduated from Smith. And then it was time to — for her to go to grad school. So she said, "Let's go to go grad school." So I went to Emory for master's in public health and graduated from there in 2013. And she graduated from Harvard in 2013, with a master's of theological studies. And so she was going for a PhD after that. And so I knew that, wherever she went for a PhD, if we wanted to live together, that was where I was going to have to go. So we moved to Providence, Rhode Island. And she's at Brown, getting a PhD in religious studies. And I am — I work at the health department in Rhode Island —

PEARSON: Oh! All right.

BERNS: — as an infectious disease epidemiologist, which is basically what I went to grad school for.

PEARSON: Yeah.

BERNS: So it was great. It took me about six months to find a job — but is no— that's not bad, in Rhode Island.

PEARSON: No.

BERNS: So.

PEARSON: My family lives in Rhode Island.

BERNS: Oh! Yeah!

PEARSON: So (laughs) it's not bad at all.

BERNS: No, no. It's a state with high unemployment. So it's good. It's a good job. So that's — Yeah.

PEARSON: It's funny. You're probably one of the only people I've interviewed who came to Smith with a plan or sort of knowing what you wanted to do and it didn't change and you're like doing exactly what you wanted.

BERNS: It's kind of crazy! Yeah!

PEARSON: Yeah! I think you might actually be the first one.

BERNS: (laughs)

PEARSON: It's impressive. (laughs) But I guess just a couple closing questions. What advice would you give to an incoming student? And then what advice would you give to someone who is graduating?

BERNS: I would say —

PEARSON: Or one or the other, if it's too —

BERNS: Yeah, no. I think — I think I would say to an incoming student, "Don't be afraid of the Career Development Office. It's not as scary as you think it's going to be. I really avoided them, very hardcore. But once I went, it was — it was a good thing. I think, also, listen to what other people are saying about professors, that a class with an interesting course description, with — is not as interesting or valuable as a class with a so-so course description and a professor who's really great. I think that's important.

And I don't know. To a graduating Smithie? I think we have — we put this pressure on ourselves to be really excellent all the time and to — that we can always achieve. And I think many of us achieved a lot at Smith and were in charge of a lot of things and juggled a lot of things at Smith. And I think it's OK to not be in charge of everything, once you leave Smith. I think that was hard for me to not do. I would try to get involved with Jewish things, right when I left Smith, and I just wanted to be in charge. I jus— it was hard for my soul to not be in charge. And it's OK. It's OK to let somebody else be in charge. That's what I would say, that it's OK just to be a participant. You don't have to be a leader in everything. That's what I'd say.

PEARSON: Well, thank you, very much.

BERNS: Yeah! Thank you.

PEARSON: And Adelaide is here.

BERNS: Great!

PEARSON: Get the eyes from — If you turned around, you would see. (laughter)

BERNS: I saw –

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Jeff Tiedeman, June 2015.