

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Carol Berde, Class of 1964*

Interviewed by  
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 15, 2015

## **Abstract**

Carol Berde discusses her apprehension upon arriving at Smith, how she eventually found her footing, despite religious segregation, in part by becoming president of Wilder house and her involvement with the honor board. She recounts the political culture at Smith during the Civil Rights Movement, regret at not being more involved out of fear, and her memory of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Berde details her life and career after Smith, particularly her work with Planned Parenthood of Minnesota, and offers unique personal insights regarding the evolution of student engagement pertaining to political and social justice issues on and off campus.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geiss .

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Ann-Marie Strazzullo, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Berde, Carol. Interview by Izzy Levy. Video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Carol Berde, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Berde, Carol. Interview by Izzy Levy. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Carol Berde, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 15, 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 15, 2015, with:

CAROL BERDE  
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: This is Izzy Levy. I'm interviewing Carol Berde {pronounced "Bird"}, at the Sophia Smith...

BERDE: Can I correct the pronunciation?

LEVY: Yeah, of course.

BERDE: I'm Carol Berde {pronounced "Birdy"}.

LEVY: Berde, oh, I'm sorry. So Carol Berde, at the Sophia Smith Archives at Smith College. It's May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and we are interviewing for the alumni oral history project. So for my first question, I just want to ask:— bring me back to when you first got to Smith. What were you feeling? What was going through your head? What were the expectations of your next four years here?

BERDE: I think the main expectation was fear, or main feeling was fear. In fact, I just had lunch with a classmate whom I had gone to school with ever since first grade, and we had walked to school together all those years, but we drifted apart in the last few months of our senior year. But when she and I saw each other at the president's reception and our parents left, we just clung to each other. (laughs) So yes, fear, and I think great uncertainty about whether I would be able to handle the work intellectually, and where I would fit socially.

LEVY: Where did you think, by the end of those four years, you ended up fitting socially?

BERDE: I really didn't have a good answer. I was not part of the inner circle of my class at Wilder House, but I wasn't excluded there; I was the house president, so somebody must have liked me. (laughs) But I was still not at all certain of my social footing.

LEVY: So what was your house community like?

BERDE: Well, I have to say, the first thing that I realized, before I even got here — when I got the letter with my roommate's name, it became very clear that Jewish girls were paired together, which today would be unthinkable. We had two pairs of Jewish girls in the house and one pair of Catholic girls. I think the culture — we were not — part of the culture. We were on the edge. Nobody was unfriendly, but I kind of didn't speak their language. I didn't know any of the cultural rituals that were important in their growing up and in their families, and I was more serious than most of the others. Judy and I — Judy Wells, whom you interviewed this morning — we were right across the hall from each other, and somehow we clicked right away. So it was not an unwelcoming culture, but nobody went out of their way to make me feel comfortable.

LEVY: So you said you were the house president?

BERDE: Yes.

LEVY: What was the role sort of the house presidents and student government generally during your time at Smith?

BERDE: It's a great question. I think overall, student government — I believe there was somebody who was the president of the student government, but I don't know that it had a very substantial role. There were two boards. I was on the honor board, and then there was something else called the judicial board. And I can't tell you now what each one of those did, (laughs) but honor board had something to do, I think, with academic — infractions of academic rules, plagiarism. House president had a substantial role, but no daily responsibilities. The house mother was the figure — the leadership figure in the house. We had a fabulous English house mother our first several years, Mrs. King, and I think I had to meet with her periodically. And there were house meetings once a week, once a month, something like that, in the Smoker, which — I just visited Wilder House, the Smoker's not there anymore — so there was house business to organize and take care of, and I had to lead that. And then because I was the house president, I got to be a junior usher Ivy Day. So it was leading an organization, but not with life and death responsibilities.

LEVY: And to what degree were students sort of able to make their own decisions about — I know that the social structure of the house system and of the college in general at the time was pretty strict. To what degree were students able to make their own decisions about how that was structured?

BERDE: About their social lives?

LEVY: Mm-hmm.

- BERDE: Well, first of all, you had to be in the house at 10 p.m. on week nights, and I think it was midnight on Friday and Saturday. And if you were going away for the weekend, you had to get the house mother's permission and sign what was called a blue card with all this information about where you were going, etc. So right there, that constrained some kinds of social relationships. Men couldn't be upstairs. There was always — almost no place for a student and a male friend to be alone together on the campus, especially when the weather wasn't nice. But otherwise, you know, if you were going to go out drinking, that was your choice to make, as long as you were back in time.
- LEVY: And what was sort of the general student opinion of that system, curfew system, and the blue cards?
- BERDE: You know, this was what we had — we had grown up with that. We didn't have to sign out at home, but it was effectively the same. And the college, as many colleges were in that time, was acting in loco parentis, and I don't think we rebelled against that. There were some people who would have liked the library to be open later, but overall, it was just accepted as part of what — how a women's college conducted things.
- LEVY: So what were your academic interests when you were here? What did you major in? Minor in?
- BERDE: I majored in American Studies, and in American Studies, you had to choose a concentration, and mine was government. I was very interested in American history. I had a wonderful, wonderful teacher of early American history and so for awhile, I was passionately interested in colonial history and reading microfilms of old newspapers. (laughs) But that whole — I always was, and I still am, interested in how particular things fit into a bigger picture, and American Studies enabled me to do that.
- LEVY: So what was the political culture like on campus? You know, it was just — the Civil Rights Movement just started. How did that manifest itself?
- BERDE: Well, first, about the Civil Rights Movement itself, I don't — I certainly never considered becoming part of it. And when my husband and I saw the movie *Selma* a few months ago, he had — he was a senior in law school when I was a senior at Smith, but I didn't know him then. But we both said there same thing on leaving the movie: we regret that we didn't participate, but we were too scared, too averse to risk, to really have done it. So I look back now and feel that I missed making a contribution that was important to American culture by not participating in that. But I have to say that the whole emerging culture of protest was felt here. My friend Nancy Weiss and I led a movement — I forgot

exactly what we did — but a protest movement so that the library hours would be longer. We were not successful, but it was on that level. I know there were classmates who did go to Selma in the preceding summer, the Freedom Summer. I was in Washington the summer of 1964 working as an intern through a Smith program, so I knew about all this, but I was not going to be an active participant. And it was — we heard about it here, but I can't remember that it was a major topic.

LEVY: So can you tell me a little bit more about your library campaign? Just what —

BERDE: I wish I could. (laughs) I don't remember what we actually did. You really — I hope you get a chance to interview Nancy, who unfortunately couldn't be here because her mother passed away. But she was the dean of the college at Princeton and had been on the Smith board so — and she has a much better memory than I do. So she could, I'm sure, tell you more. I'll try to find out more from her and send an email, if that would be helpful.

LEVY: Sure. Thank you. So how — I guess to be a — to keep a little more with the time period, how did the campus react to the assassination of President Kennedy?

BERDE: See, that I remember like it was yesterday. So we were eating lunch in Wilder House, because then, everybody ate in their house, and a group of our classmates at Wilder always watched a particular soap opera after lunch on a television that one of them had in her room. So all of a sudden, there was people spilling out of that room because the show had been interrupted to announce that he had been shot, and then that he had died. So then we were all confused. Should we go to our two o'clock classes? So some of us decided to go. Mine was an American history class in Wright Hall, and somebody had brought a radio, and the professor, Donald Sheehan, asked that person to let everybody know if there were some new developments. And it was the middle of his lecture that there was a new development that the president had died. And I remember very clearly that he folded his — he closed his folder and he stood there silently and then he said, "Well, that's enough," and told us all to go back to our houses. So for the next three days, I think it was, the whole country was riveted to the television, as we were here. And, you know, then we were on the phone with our parents, which was — there was a pay phone, two pay phones in the dorm — so that took awhile until we all got a chance to do that, and we watched a lot of the proceedings on television. We were quite horrified. Nothing like this had happened in our lifetimes. It was a very somber environment.

LEVY: So what were the expectations for your graduating class as you were leaving Smith?

BERDE: I don't know that I could say there was one expectation that would apply to the whole class. For me, personally, I know my parents expected that I would get a good job. My father wanted me to go to law school. Because I had worked for a congressman in Washington the summer before, I was bitten by that bug, and I was going to get a job in Washington. But first, my friend, Timmy Jones Weintraub and I traveled in Europe for about six or eight weeks, so that was the first thing. And then I moved to Washington, or went down to Washington, stayed with some people who graduated earlier to find a job, and through the contacts I'd made the preceding summer, I easily got a job with a congressman, found a place to live, and started my life in Washington. And I said to my father, "Give me a year. In a year, we'll talk about whether this is a fulfilling career for me for now." And at the end of the year, he didn't even raise the subject again, and I didn't want to go to law school, (laughs) so I worked for this congressman for six years.

LEVY: So where have you gone since Smith? What has your life been like since you graduated?

BERDE: I lived in Washington for six years. I met my husband there. He was from Minnesota, and when Washington was becoming a little too much like New York for our tastes, we moved to Minnesota, which, for him, was back home; for me, it was a culture shock, big time. I was from New York City. So it took me awhile to find a job, but the job I found was through Smith contacts. I worked for Planned Parenthood of Minnesota for — I think it was two years. They had gotten a grant to start a library about population issues, and so I set that up. Then, just about the time I was getting bored with that and realizing that I couldn't have my work devoted to a single topic, that that was just not stimulating enough, I got a call from a friend of a friend of a friend whom I'd known in Washington, and her boyfriend worked for a major department store that had a private foundation that did a lot of important charitable work in the Twin Cities. And they were looking for somebody called an administrative director. So I worked there, I think, for three years. Then I was home for a couple of years because my oldest son was multiply handicapped, and then started doing little projects here and there, and then the director of the largest foundation in Minnesota said, "How much time can you give me?" I worked for him for — I worked there for 25 years. And for the last ten years, I've been a consultant to nonprofits and foundations, and I'm winding that down, and now I'm just starting to be a volunteer guardian ad litem, which is also called a court-appointed special advocate for children. This is to represent the children's interests for families involved with child protection. So that's my next venture.

LEVY: Excellent.

- BERDE: And we've lived in Minnesota for 42, 43 years by now. Yeah.
- LEVY: So I have a few more questions, just to wrap up. So Smith is really a place that's both steeped in tradition, but also constantly evolving.
- BERDE: Right.
- LEVY: And I was wondering what you see as some of the biggest changes at Smith since you were here.
- BERDE: It's a great question. Excluding the campus changes, which are tremendous, and the fact that you can come and go from your dorm and have men in the room and all that, and you don't have to sign a blue card, there seems to be a much greater sense of students being engaged in the world. You know, in 1964, '65, there were only a handful of our classmates who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Now, I'm sure you, or many of your classmates, are involved in comparable things now. It's just a greater sense of engagement with what's going on outside of this bubble, this beautiful bubble.
- LEVY: What hopes do you have for Smith for the future?
- BERDE: I hope that this college can continue to really fulfill its mission, educating women of promise for lives of distinction, and women all over the world. Women — progress in countries, Africa and Asia, is not going to be great until women are educated and have opportunities to lead and to make better lives for their families, and this is a great place for them to do that.
- LEVY: So what, as the last question, what advice would you have for current or future Smithies?
- BERDE: (laughs) Hold on to your firmly held views, but think carefully before you open your mouth, and realize that there's generally at least one other point of view in addition to the one you hold, and that maybe it's not so bad. At least, it's worth thinking about.
- LEVY: Is there anything else that you wanted to touch on that — and we have a little bit of extra time. I think I overestimated and —
- BERDE: I talk fast; I'm still a New Yorker. Just an enormous variety of experiences you can have here, and now since there are women from all over the world and from so many different levels of American life, to take advantage of that. Get to know people who are not from your same background and explore the world together. I think — the other opportunity here that I think is unparalleled is to work with faculty and to consult them. My son went to a largish, private, Midwestern liberal arts college, and I was very — I said it was very important that he



should go to a private college, because that's how you get to work with faculty and for them to take an interest in you. It didn't happen anywhere nearly the way I believe it still happens here in what I have heard in the last 24 hours. So that's an enormously valuable contribution that Smith makes, and a reason for women to come here and keep it going. Thank you.

LEVY: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Ann-Marie Strazzullo, 6/12/15*