

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Devon Wilson-Hill, Class of 2005

Interviewed by
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 16, 2015

Abstract

Devon Wilson-Hill recounts how her decision to attend Smith was cemented after a last minute visit to the campus. She discusses the close knit Hubbard House community and the close friendships she made as a result. Wilson-Hill also talks about her involvement in the Radical Cheerleaders, student response to racist incidences on campus and the September 11th attacks, and details a trip with fellow students to Washington, D.C. to participate in a march on Washington, protesting the war in Iraq. In closing, she considers the influence Smith continues to have on her life and career.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Anne-Marie Strazzullo, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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

Transcript

Bibliography: Wilson-Hill, Devon. Interview by Izzy Levy. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Devon Wilson-Hill, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 16, 2015, with:

DEVON WILSON-HILL
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: Ready when you are. All right.

WILSON-HILL: All right.

LEVY: So this is Izzy Levy. I am interviewing Devon Wilson-Hill at the Sophia Smith Archives, here, at Smith College. It is May 16th, 2015, and we're interviewing for the alumni oral history project. So my first question is just for you to bring me back to your first day at Smith, when you first arrived — how were you feeling, and what was going through your head? What were you expecting?

WILSON-HILL: Gosh, I was very excited to be here. I remember touring the previous year and figuring out where I wanted to go, and I originally wanted to go to Amherst. And I went to Amherst, and I was like, "This is just like my high school." I went to a prep school in New Jersey, and I was like, "Oh, why would I do that again?" And it was not my idea to look at Smith. I wasn't against it, but it wasn't my idea when I came here. I mean, it was summer. The garden was in full bloom. Everything was spectacular, and my tour guide was just out of this world, and I was like "Yes. This is it and this is only it." So there were high expectations for when I got here. And I remember driving down Main Street — or the one that intersects — maybe King Street? And I just remember my mom saying like, "All these people have so many piercings!" She's like, "I don't know about this — and the hair — it's all different colors!" (laughs) And I remember thinking, like, "Great, we're going to have a fight." (laughs) And we didn't. I think — she had not been on this college tour, so this was actually her first time to the college. And it was interesting to see it through her eyes, because I was just excited to start this chapter. And when we finally arrived at Hubbard — when we found it — my HONS — Allison Crosby and Amanda Wenzel met me. They're still my great friends, to this day. I just went to Allison's son's christening, and Amanda is about to defend her dissertation, and I'm going to New Jersey for that. But — so I had no idea that we would be so close, then. So they greeted me, and they helped me take some stuff upstairs, and they were just so excited, and they were happy, and I just

remember feeling like “Yep, I made a really awesome, awesome choice.” And it was.

LEVY: So what was your house community like?

WILSON-HILL: My house community was great — Hubbard, H-U-B-B-A-R-B-R-D [sic]. Anyway, Hubbard is amazing. It’s still amazing to this day. They just won, like, an amazing award from the alumni house — probably not that amazing. They just raised some money. But that’s good — they’re starting young. Our house community was really close, because we didn’t have a TV. So there was a lot of drama in the living-room — lots of sock wrestling. Do you know about sock wrestling?

LEVY: No. (laughs) I can’t say I do.

WILSON-HILL: So I have no idea who invented this, but probably a great Hubbardite. There are two parties — two opponents — and each of them only wears one sock. And you have to try to get the sock off the other person before they get the sock off of your foot. So, I never participated in a match, but I was a spectator countless times, so there was some of that. (laughs) Yeah, so — and we had a kitchen, so that was also a big deal. And it was shunned upon to go eat dinner with your friends someplace else and not have lunch in Hubbard or dinner in Hubbard, and, you know. (laughs) So it was funny that some people got, like, the stink eye for, like, “making friends” across campus. I made a bunch of friends across campus, but it was always nice to come home and have other people look out for you. And then, my first year was when 9/11 happened — so, I guess, the second week of school — and someone brought their TV — I was in Italian class with Victoria Poletto, and we came back to the house after — got out of early for some reason, because somehow, we heard, in class. And someone had moved their TV downstairs into the [bow?] parlor, and we all sat around watching. And we had a lot of girls from New York City in our house, and I think that was — at the very beginning of my time at Smith — also helped me feel connected — to support other people, and to be supported, and to go through this grieving process together. But there were a lot of fun times in the bow parlor — lots of all-nighters, lots of Diet Coke. Yeah, we had a really strong house community.

LEVY: So what was the general campus response like to 9/11?

WILSON-HILL: (sigh) You know, I don’t know if I can speak to that. There’s one class — it was with Eric Reeves — it was, maybe, “The Wasteland?” I can’t believe I can remember that. But he was the only professor that took time from class to, kind of, talk about how people were feeling and what was going on, and if anyone needed anything. And now that I know more about him and his work, it seems like, “Well, obviously, it would be in his class.” But, I remember — there was a lot of grieving and a lot

of crying. I wish I could say more about what I remembered, but I don't — and I think at that time, even though I felt close to my own house community, I had gone to — I'm from New Jersey — from an area of New Jersey — Princeton, Lawrenceville — [where?] many people's parents commuted to New York City to work. And, so my personal stories were high school related. And so fortunately, no one in Hubbard was directly affected. So, yeah, I don't remember a huge response. I remember bigger responses that year. There were a few brown-outs or things, and people really mad about lots of other things. But I don't remember — I don't remember that, but I remember that we came together from that, yeah.

LEVY: Can you tell me more about the brown-outs?

WILSON-HILL: (laughs) I think they were about, well, some choice words that were said among some people in the quad. And at one point, there was a noose left in someone's room in the quad. So it was a big deal, and so — I wasn't involved in — I don't even know what it's called — the African American Student Society or Students of Color — I don't know what the group was called. I didn't do Bridges, which is kind of, almost, the pipeline that gets you involved. And — but, you know, rightly so, they figured they needed to do something to make a presence and to make things — make their existence and the black, brown community relevant and relevant to everyday life at Smith. So there was one in Cutter Ziskind, and there was one in the house where it happened, in the quad. People sat outside — you'll have to help me with this — right across from Hubbard House, where the administration buildings are —

LEVY: College Hall.

WILSON-HILL: College Hall. (laughs) I was like, "That important building." College Hall — people sat out on the lawn overnight and then inside, in the hallways. And they really just wanted to talk, and I think, like most things and most people who are upset, they want their stories to be told, and their story to be heard. And so, they also — people who — the activists, when I say they — the activists who were most front-and-center in this, I think Mika Cade and Hope Freeman were very vocal in that — probably [Cary Carr?], too. And they had several meetings with Carol Christ at the time — and Maureen Mahoney. And I don't know what changed, but there were — there was — they spoke to that at celebration. That happened later. And I don't know if things — what happened in quad life, because — this is my first quad experience, this reunion, and whoa. I'm really glad I lived on Green Street. (laughs) That's not to say, you know, we were modest or prude or anything, but it's loud. It's loud in the quad. But, yeah, I don't know exactly — I don't remember exactly what happened or what came of it, but I remember — for me, it was important, because it was the first time where I felt like — I hadn't felt before that I needed to be involved with

Student of Color groups — not because they're not relevant and not important, and they do have a place here and any other place of higher education — just because I was excited about learning Italian and going JYA, and there were other things that I was very excited about. But it made me become more active, and — I don't know if — are the Radical Cheerleaders still around on campus?

LEVY: Not — I don't know about radical cheerleaders.

WILSON-HILL: (laughs) So I mean, we just wore crazy stuff — often sex-positive stuff — whatever that means. And Mika Cade was also, like (laughs) one of those bi- big proponents. So, like, we would stand on the steps of Neilson Library, and like, “Rah, rah, rah,” about whatever was happening. There was a lot of cheering, because we didn't want the war in Iraq to start, so that was another thing. But that was kind of how — after, I think, many of those brown-outs — the Radical Cheerleaders got started. This is my memory. I have no idea if that's totally accurate. But then, so my involvement with the Radical Cheerleaders began. So we would just go to certain things around campus and UMass and Amherst, too, and definitely here on campus. We'd be like, “No Coke on camp-.” You know, other things like that, too. Yeah.

LEVY: What was the general political climate like on campus, especially with the war beginning?

WILSON-HILL: Yeah — I think, in my house, and in some of my interactions with people, it was very divided. And I was kind of surprised that it would be so divided. One of the great benefits of being at Smith College is that you get — I mean, I don't know if this still true — probably not because everything's digital — but we got the *New York Times* delivered for breakfast every morning. Like, that's amazing — and were very, like, old people, like, sitting around the breakfast table, sharing the *New York Times* sections together. But, every day, trying to — because, I guess this was my sophomore year — and figuring out, like, what country are things going in. And there were — and I'd say it was divided in my house, because some people had family members — brothers who were in the marines or other places that were about to be deployed, and they were saying it was the right thing to do, and I was saying war was not the right thing to do. So after — there were a couple protests that — at UMass's campus, but Smith broug- I think there were several buses — not PVRTA buses, but, like, several buses to bring us to the start. And I think, as Smith students, we were very vocal. There was a group that went and s- my parents are in New Jersey, so we went down one night — we had, like — got two vans, I think, from the community service or the chapel, and we drove down to — and we stayed at my house, and then, we went to DC and marched on Washington together. And that was a fantastic group of people who I had never — I didn't know. We were just trying to figure out how to get there and how to be a part of it.

Yeah. And that — I guess that was one of my first big protests that I ever did. So, yay Smith, for getting me to do that.

And I think — and when we came to campus, there were many people who were like, “We’re so glad you went.” And then there were other people from the group — the larger group — there were two vans that went to my house, but there were many people from Smith that went — who were like, “I don’t know why you went — why you would do that. Like, you know, you get so much from this country, and you’re getting this great education. Why would you miss a class to go to a protest?” And I’m thinking, like, “One class? Two classes?” — (laughs) to make a stand and make a difference. And I have to say, even though this isn’t my experience as a student — as an alum, last year — when there was some upset about the graduation speaker — as an alum, I kind of felt in the minority, because I was so glad that students said something.

I wanted to come and I wanted to hear her speak, but I think, if people want to resist something and fight something that they are willing to stand up for and say why they didn’t think she was an appropriate speaker for Smith College — I’m glad they did. I think there were only two — Ginetta and someone else who wrote something in the paper — and I know — my Smith that year was, like, directly to faculty, because I was so glad Ginetta wrote something, saying that protest is a wonderful voice, and it does make change. And it’s not the only way, and it’s not always the way I’m going to go about making change, but it’s a big deal. And so, I’m glad for my time, with the war in Iraq, that even something that seems so passive as protesting is something very polarizing and — it’s visual, so I think it’s really important for other people to see. Anyway, that was a tangent.

LEVY: No, that’s fine. It was a lot of good stuff. So can you tell me a little about your junior year abroad? (inaudible) really excited about it.

WILSON-HILL: It was amazing. It was the whole reason I came to Smith — no. (laughs) It was a big reason of why I studied Italian in high school. My senior year, I took a class, an interdisciplinary class — “art history something, something, something” — and we went to Italy for two weeks. And I was like, “That’s amazing. So what do I need to do to go back to Italy?” And I was like, “Oh, right! Smith has this JYA program that’s been around for so long — one of the original programs in Italy — and I can do that.” So I obviously signed up, and I took Italian my first year, and I was going to get to Italy, and — I just had dinner with my JYA people. They are some of my closest friends — besides the select Hubbard people that I still keep in touch with — I keep in touch, every day, with my JYA people. So yeah, that was amazing.

I lived with a very amazing family — the family [Raleigh?], right

outside the Piazza Santa Croce, in Italy, which was, like, prime real estate. And I had the best — not only did I have the best house, I remember coming home, and people were like “Oh, we’re going to do this for dinner, and that for dinner,” and you were supposed to have dinner with your family as part of the JYA program. And most people didn’t, because they were like, “Eh.” And, like, my friend, Lily Hindy got fish sticks and peas for dinner, and I was like “No, we have a first course and a second course and a third course, and then there’s, like, salad, and then there’s like chocolate and biscotti.” And they’re like, “What?” I’m like, “Yeah, I’m going home for dinner every single night,” and I did. (laughs) And you were supposed to, like, go and explore and go over to places during our breaks, and I ended up staying with my family or staying with my family and visiting other places in Italy with them, because they are amazing. So yeah, JYA was amazing. Monica’s still the director over there, and I keep in touch with her and Giovanna Bellesia, who’s just fantastic.

Yeah, so it was a great experience. We were one of the smallest JYA groups. I don’t know why people didn’t want to go to Italy that year, but they didn’t — better for me. (laughs) So, yeah, that was really fun. The history, traveling, living abroad — I made a point not to come home that entire year, and then I got really excited, and so I wrote a proposal so I could stay for most of the summer, and I did some research on the Italian resistance, and that was fun. Yeah, that was really, really great, and I loved it.

I took a couple of classes at the university. You only had to take, I think, one a semester, but I took a lot. So I was an Italian major, but I thought, going in, I was going to be a Spanish major. I was just going to go to Italy — because I had lived in Spain in high school and I was — it would be fine. And, of course, it wasn’t, because I had to fulfill my Spanish requirement in Italy. So I took a couple of classes — of Spanish literature in Italian. So I read all the books in Spanish, then went to lecture in Italian, and then I did the final exam, the oral exam — which I think is a great thing that they should bring everywhere — so I had to sit there and, like, for 45 minutes, answer questions in Spanish — which I hadn’t really spoken for the whole year — about the text, even though all the lectures for the course were in Italian. It was really bizarre. But I — yeah.

But, I took an art history class at the university, and I sat in — because many of my friends were political science majors — so I sat in on an Italian history course, which was just good, since I was living there — to do. But that was definitely a hallmark of the Smith experience, and I encourage everyone to study abroad. I think everyone should study abroad for the whole year. I understand that’s not practical, but everyone should. Yeah, it’s totally amazing and still amazing. A couple of years ago, I saw my host family in Barcelona, so we still meet

up there, because they're awesome. I'll name my first-born after those girls, my Italian sis— probably not, but who knows. (laughs)

LEVY: Did you feel like being at a woman's college was a unique experience because of that single gender factor?

WILSON-HILL: I'd like to say no, just because maybe I was just so oblivious, and Smith just had its effect on me without me not even knowing it, but obviously, it did. I don't know if I would have tried — some of the things I would have tried. I think I was always very vocal, so it wasn't like, "OK, now that there are no guys around, I'm not speaking — now, I'm speaking up in class." But I think in very subtle ways — and the relationships you talked about — house community and questions about that, and my experience in Italy — and I think it was important that it was among women and with women. And I think now that I have my own business, I don't know if I would have been bold enough to take that risk, if I hadn't been at a women's college, and I don't know how to kind of dissect that it's related, because I didn't take business courses, or — I didn't even take a math course. I think I took logic to get one of my Latin honor's requirements that way. So I totally didn't even do anything that way, but I think risk-taking and — I think I trusted myself before I came here, but I knew I trusted myself after I left Smith. And yeah, so I think communities of women do matter and are important to maintain.

LEVY: Can you tell me a little bit about where you've gone since Smith, and who you've become? (laughs)

WILSON-HILL: I'm still becoming, so — and who knows. I feel like this is — the ten-year reunion for me like a crisis year I'm going through early, post Smith crisis. So I left Smith and I worked at Cooley Dickinson Hospital. I stayed around for a couple of years. I was doing health access work. And then I went to Boston and did some healthcare work there. And then, when I decided to go back to grad school — kind of as a shift and a change — I was there in the program for a few years, and I was like, "This is not it for me." So after I finished coursework and started working — defended my thesis proposal — I was like, "Yeah, I'm leaving." (laughs) And I think that, too, like — I mean, that's the disappointing thing that, after you go to Smith, you're like, "This is not academically rigorous. You want me to do what? Like, where am I? Like, what?" So it makes everything else much more disappointing.

But — so after that, I — well, concurrently with that, I was teaching yoga to supplement my stipend, and I kept teaching yoga. And now, I'm teaching yoga full-time and have my own business, and I teach in the Boston area. I teach lots of mom and baby and prenatal yoga classes, as well as regular yoga classes and yoga for runners. So I don't think I would have taken that risk to do something that you don't need a college

degree — you don't need a high school degree — to do. I think I would have been like, "I'm supposed to be a lawyer, and I'm supposed to be a doctor." But after going to Smith, like, "If you want to do that, great. You should do that." But I like following my passion and working with people where they are. So yeah — so that's where I am now, and I don't know — I'd like to go back to graduate school, but maybe that's just — I don't know. I can just keep reading on my own, keep writing, but yeah, so that's kind of where I am right now. I feel like I'm at a turning point. I don't know what's next. My husband thinks I should start this whole center, and I'm like, "Whoa. No, no." And he's like, "You'll be great," and I'm like, "Maybe, but I'm not ready for that." So yeah, that's kind of where I am now, loving life and traveling as much as I can, and yeah.

LEVY: Awesome. So I just have a few wrap-up questions. I know it hasn't been super long since you've been away from Smith, but what sort of things do you think have changed — that you noticed have changed, coming back here.

WILSON-HILL: Well, the engineering program's accredited. There's a building — that's huge and awesome. And I hear it's like a very popular major now, which is also incredible. I was just saying earlier, maybe — I wouldn't want to be an engineer, but before I came to Smith, I didn't know what an engineer did. My uncle's an engineer. I have a cousin who's an engineer, but I didn't know what engineers did. And so I hope my children know — my girls — know what engineering is. And there's like a whole other campus, right, like up and away?

LEVY: Oh, yeah.

WILSON-HILL: That's awesome. And the center — it used to be the Poetry Center. Can't na- Wright Hall? I don't know.

LEVY: McConnell?

WILSON-HILL: McConnell? Yes, McConnell. That's exactly what I'm thinking about. There's like all these different centers and things and concentrations, right, and these very cool things. That has changed. It hasn't changed that you walk around and people are happy and excited and kind, and everyone has an opinion. That's the thing about Smithies — we all have opinions. We don't always agree, but we always have opinions. So that hasn't changed. But the campus looks great. It's great to be back. I got married here two years ago, so I'm back as frequently as I can be, because it's a great place. It's still that warm fuzzy feeling.

LEVY: All right, so last question is, what sort of hopes do you have for Smith's future?

WILSON-HILL: That's — I don't know. Gosh, I hope Smith continues to be the place that it is today. I hope it remains an all-women's college. I just hope they're quicker about changing certain policies, like trans students being admitted to Smith — transwomen — at Smith. Yeah, I was like, "You know, Mount Holyoke shouldn't have won. They shouldn't have done that first. We should have been there." (laughs) Gosh, for so many reasons. I think — I mean, trans issues were a hot topic when I was here, too. And personally, I know I'm recorded saying this, but I think there were really difficult discussions to have then, and I think I was also saying like, "Why are we open to allowing folks who identify as white men to be on campus?" So I'm glad the conversation has developed, and I'm glad things are changing.

So I hope Smith is a place where great conversations continue to happen, where people disagree and learn. I hope Smith's a place where people always struggle. I think that's a big part of learning and evolving. I hope people challenge their professors constantly, because that's a good thing to do. So yeah, I hope Smith just continues to be awesome.

LEVY: Awesome. Is there anything that you wanted to touch on that we didn't get to?

WILSON-HILL: Yeah, no. Thank you, Izzy.

LEVY: Well, thank you so much.

__: Do you have time for one more?

WILSON-HILL: Yeah.

LEVY: Yeah. I think so.

__: I think it's pretty cool that you're in a place right now kind of figuring out — "What's my next move?" How does Smith figure into that? Like, when you come back to a place that was formative for you, and you get to be here and think about things in kind of a bigger-picture way — what's helpful about that? And what do you — if you noticed anything, this weekend, just being here, that's helping you think about what you want to do next.

WILSON-HILL: Definitely. The reason I like to come back to campus and for reunions is that being around Smithies and that energy always helps me energize. And you know, my husband is like, "OK, you should open this business," right? Or — "Open this model, blah-blah-blah." So when I was just — just before I came here, I was sitting with some people who I haven't seen since graduation, and one of them was like, "So I'm doing this thing in public health in California, and we just wrote this

grant for yoga, and I had no idea you were a yoga teacher.” And we started talking about yoga in schools and yoga in prisons and yoga with at-risk populations, and she’s written this grant. So OK, so now, I need to get a copy of that grant, so that I can see how to do that where I am and so — and then, I think it also validates. Like I was sometimes in this place like, “OK, like — yeah, I’m a business owner, and yeah, I’m doing my own thing.” But when five-year-olds ask me what I do — “I’m a yoga teacher” — and that sounds like, “What are you doing with your life, Devon?” I mean, — and I do think I’m doing great things, but I constantly have this conflict like — am I really making the impact and difference that I want to be making?

And so, when I come back to Smith, and I connect with my peers — but also different alumni years and current students — I do feel like I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing. I feel like, “OK, I haven’t thought of this in a new light,” and I respect their opinion. I don’t think there are many other tables I go to where I’m like, “You have something beautiful to bring to the conversation, and I’m going to really hear you out, even when I don’t agree.” It’s a reflection of me, but sometimes, at home, I’m sitting at a table with other people, and I’m listening, and I’m like, “All right, you’re a moron,” or, “All right, you don’t really — you don’t know what you’re talking about.” Or, “You’re telling me what I already know, but you haven’t listened to what I have to say.”

But that doesn’t happen at Smith, and that doesn’t happen with my friends or just — people I just met, people from my class that I didn’t know. So maybe I’ll go back to grad school, maybe I won’t. But listening to what other people are doing and their ideas — so it’s good to have this place to reconnect and kind of — I know I’m going to go home and journal about lots of things. And it is going to take me to what’s next in my life, and so — the activities and programming that happen here. And when I go and meet with the professors in the Italian department after this, like, no one — maybe they do with some people — but I haven’t felt that my professors and advisors ever look at me and be like, “Really, Devon? That’s all?” And even when they want to encourage me to do more, they find a way to spin it, and I’m receptive to it. I forgot what your question was, so I hope I touched on it. So yeah, no problem, thank you.

LEVY: Awesome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Ann-Marie Strazzullo, 6/10/15