

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Heather Neal, Ada Comstock Scholar, Class of 2005

Interviewed by
Tanya Pearson, Class of 2015

May 23, 2015

Abstract

In this interview Heather Neal, recounts her dissatisfaction with her work in advertising, subsequent career change and return to community college where she learned about the Ada Comstock Scholars program at Smith. She recalls navigating campus life as a non-traditional student and her involvement in the Ada cabinet and extracurricular activities. Neal also describes finding feminism when she came out and how her Smith experience expanded on that prior knowledge and how higher education fosters female autonomy at any age.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

Transcript

Transcribed by Kelly Hourihan, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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

Transcript

Bibliography: Neal, Heather. Interview by Tanya Pearson. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Heather Neal, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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

Transcript of interview conducted May 23, 2015, with:

HEATHER NEAL
Canaan, New York

by: TANYA PEARSON

PEARSON: This is Tanya Pearson, and I'm conducting an interview with Heather Neal, Ada Comstock Scholar, Class of 2005, on May 23, 2015, for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. Thank you very much for participating. Yeah, so the Ada questions are a little bit different than the traditional (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) student questions—

NEAL: (laughs) I bet they are.

PEARSON: —(overlapping dialogue; inaudible) their stories are a little different. So I'd like to just ask a little bit about when you decided to return to school, or why.

NEAL: I was working in advertising in Manhattan and I was working 28-hour days and living on adrenaline. And I wanted to go to school. And I tried to take some courses at Hunter, and it was a struggle. And then I realized I couldn't do both. I got sick of advertising, and I left to become a massage therapist. And the program that I wanted to go to was recently pushed into Greenfield Community College. So I ended up at GCC in the massage program, and then when I got done with my certificate I stayed on and got an associate's, and then one of the teachers said, "You should meet Syd." And—

PEARSON: So that's how you heard about the Ada program.

NEAL: Yeah, through GCC. But I used to walk my dog. I lived in Northampton — I used to walk my dog along the Mill River, so.

PEARSON: Oh, OK.

NEAL: Yeah.

PEARSON: Did you apply anywhere else, any similar programs, or was it just Smith?

NEAL: It was just a, OK, sure. (laughter) And it just kept going, yeah.

PEARSON: And how did you — well, I mean, if you can remember back to, you know, when you first got here, how did you feel those first couple of months?

NEAL: Deer in headlights. I didn't grow up in this country, and my parents both left school at early ages, and my parents were — they got married during World War II, so they were a totally different generation. So I had no sense of what college was supposed to be, as far as, like, a college campus. You know, taking classes in New York is nothing, but standing on the campus going, Oh, OK, and then sort of getting a grasp of what that was like was really mind-blowing in many ways. And I was working three jobs, too, so I was trying to get it all together. So I was a deer in head—I was just basically one foot in front of the other as much as I could.

PEARSON: Did you live on campus or off campus?

NEAL: I lived off campus.

PEARSON: Oh, OK. So did you find it difficult — I mean, did you get involved in the Smith community at all, or —?

NEAL: Yes. When I came, there was an Ada named Helen Lee, and she graduated in '03. And she said to me, "You've got to get involved. You've got to do sophomore push, junior usher, and get involved." So I did. (laughs) I did everything she said, and sophomore push was amazing, and junior usher was just fabulous. And I got involved with the Ada Cabinet, and then the Ada office closed the second year that I was in school. So we had an Ada office, that's where I was interviewed, and then the next fall I came in and there was no office, and I didn't get a letter in the mail or anything. It was also when Carol {Chris?} had just started. And so I actually emailed back and forth with her and said we were going to protest at convocation, because the way she handled it was ridiculous. And she responded to me, and we had a couple of back-and-forths over email about it, and—

PEARSON: What was her response like?

NEAL: To understand that, like, you know, stuff had to be cut, and I worked in a department where I had to fire people all the time and make things work financially and do things I didn't want to do. And I understood where she came from, but I just said, "I'm still friends with the people I fired, so there's a way to do things, you know?" The fact that it was just done over the summer and not very well communicated to everybody — if everybody had known and sort of had the chance to understand the situation, I think it could have been more successful. But because it was

just done, it created a huge chasm that I think is still here today. And we're filling it in slowly, with rainbow sand. (laughter)

PEARSON: Rainbow sand. (laughter) That's funny. I know everyone's experience is very different, but what was your experience as a woman of non-traditional age, in and out of the classroom?

NEAL: In the classroom, I kind of liked — in some of the bigger classes where there were five college students there, you'd have the UMass men and the Hampshire men enter, and then a week later it would just be the Hampshire men would stay, because they were the only ones who could stay with the conversation. The UMass men would be like, What, we're not the center? You know? And I loved that, because the older women in the class, we also had this unwritten sort of — as soon as we saw the little jockeying for position, we sort of somehow all mind-melded and were able to make the conversation not go their direction. And we challenged teachers, and they liked it, especially the younger ones. And one of the things I really liked was a student came up to me one time and she said, "I'm so happy that you're in the class, because you ask all the questions I want to ask but I'm too scared to." And I'm like, Well, I'm too old to care. (laughs) I need to know the answer. I'm not embarrassed by it. And so that was good, because we were almost treated with a little bit more respect, because we did ask those dumb questions, right? So that was in class and out of class?

PEARSON: Yeah.

NEAL: Like, just generally on campus?

PEARSON: Yeah.

NEAL: I had a great experience. The traditional students were just really awesome. I really got along well with them. And I was welcomed into houses, and —

PEARSON: Oh, you were?

NEAL: Yeah, yeah, I was snuck in a couple times. (laughs) For monkey bread.

PEARSON: You were involved in Cabinet, too, so did you go to the Senate meetings? Or how did you feel at how, like, Ada representation —?

NEAL: When I was there, it wasn't that great. We were still trying to feel our own, because we had the office at first, and they sort of handled everything. So we were just sort of paddling in the deep end (laughs) when I was there. So we were trying to figure out how to replace the office, and I think we were very focused on that, more than anything else, to sort of really get a grasp of — or at least I was, anyway — grasp

of how Senate was going in relation to us. It was more about us trying to keep our needs met.

PEARSON: And then just in general, when did you start? Were you here for — you graduated in '05?

NEAL: 'Oh-two.

PEARSON: 'Oh-two?

NEAL: Yeah.

PEARSON: How would you describe the political climate on campus at that time? It was still pretty, you know, post-9/11. What issues were most prevalent? Were you affected by them? Were there any demonstrations?

NEAL: No, I had three jobs, so I wasn't as involved on campus. I do remember there was something about the student — “the student” versus “she” — I remember that was a big debate. And I was all about “the student,” because there was somebody in my graduating class in 2005, and I think his name is Sean, but there was someone in transition. And so there was a whole debate about that. And it was a debate, much like the transition debate now. So I remember that, and there was a couple of chalkings about that. But as far as politically, I don't remember any demonstrations. But I wasn't on campus as much.

PEARSON: OK, yeah. With three jobs and schoolwork — I don't know. What were your academic interests? Major, minor?

NEAL: I majored in psych, and my area of interest was in touch research. I was a massage therapist, so I wanted to be able to — I would get people on the table and they'd start telling me their life story, and so psych seemed like a natural. And when I found out that you couldn't touch people and talk to them, or talk to people and touch them, in both disciplines, that — I was like, OK, I can't combine those, so how can I combine them? So it was actually Erica Laquer and Patty DiBartolo who helped me figure out to do a praxis with the Touch Research Institute in Miami. And so I was able to combine behavioral psych with touch work. And yeah.

PEARSON: That answers one of the next questions.

NEAL: (laughs)

PEARSON: Did you take advantage of any of the academic opportunities, like study abroad or the praxis (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) —

NEAL: Yeah, the praxis.

PEARSON: — internships, or anything memorable?

NEAL: I did a work-study at the Botanical Gardens. I worked with Madelaine Zadik, putting up the exhibitions. And I remember we did an exhibition on Fibonacci, on the Fibonacci Sequence, and it was all photographs of spirals in nature. And that was — actually got me interested in math. Not that I'm still interested, but it was — you know, it was a fun project to be able to work with art and be in the Botanical Gardens.

PEARSON: Was it a conscious decision on your part to attend a women's college rather than a coed institution, and do you think that attending a women's college gave you a unique educational experience?

NEAL: So it wasn't a conscious decision to continue my education, but once I was offered it, women's education, yes. If I'd been given a choice, I would have chosen Smith. In my early years, growing up in Ireland, our classes were separate, so it was a boys' school and a girls' school. And then when we were in secondary school, some of our classes were mixed. And I didn't like the change in the environment when the boys were in the classroom. I felt it was very disruptive for our learning process, and they got all the attention. And so the idea that I could be in a learning environment with just women, where we could all focus the same way and think in and around a subject and converse about the subject in the same way and not have it be a battle of egos or volume, I want to send my daughter to an all-women's school for that reason. I think it gives you the opportunity to grow and be who you are without getting crushed by somebody else, or having to really fight or become someone else in the process. You get to be you, and you get to be a stronger, more confident you, as opposed to if you were in a coed school, I think you are you in a man's world, trying to sort of fight your way to the front, or at least parallel. And I don't think women get to excel on their own in a coed environment, if that makes sense.

PEARSON: It makes a lot of sense.

NEAL: OK.

PEARSON: Had you encountered feminism before attending Smith, or did your Smith experience affect your perception of feminism in any way?

NEAL: I found feminism when I came out, hanging out with lesbians and doing sort of social justice work and gay rights activism.

PEARSON: Can I ask when that was?

NEAL: That was in the, let's see, early '80s.

PEARSON: Oh, OK.

NEAL: Yeah. And so, yeah, you know, I went through my man-hating stage and my long armpits, (inaudible) pants, long earrings, short hair stage, and — (laughter) you know all those stages. You've seen everybody look like that. And so there is that empowerment. And then I was with the — I used to get involved in gay pride in New York, and then there was the Lesbian Avenger the night before, the illegal march. And so there's nothing more empowering than walking topless down Fifth Avenue in a throng and nobody can touch you, and you're protected. It's really empowering. So yeah, that's where I discovered feminism. But I think growing up, my — our parents, and especially our dad, basically said, "You can do whatever you want. You know, you can always do whatever you want. You just have to do it." So.

PEARSON: And, I mean, did Smith kind of... did it influence any of those ideas that you'd had about feminism, either positively or negatively or any way at all?

NEAL: You know, I think, yeah. I think I was all, you know, empowered, and then I started working. And then — met a few glass ceilings and realized that life is — that we make 77 cents on the dollar, and, you know, sort of got caught up in that despondency. And then when I came here, my feminism got reawakened. I remember another Ada, Georgia Barwick; she and I, she was — you want to talk feminism, she's the one. But she and I would talk a lot about women's rights and about how empowering it is to be on campus, and how it sort of reawakened something in us to make us more, you know, more powerful in our own voice, you know. Even — and I think it wasn't some — you know, maybe it was from a feminist point, but it was more from an older students' point, but really it's from an older women's point, so.

PEARSON: (inaudible) (laughter)

NEAL: (laughter) Not that we're that old, but you know.

PEARSON: OK. We have about five or six minutes. I would like to talk about after graduation, how has your Smith education influenced you since graduation, personally and professionally?

NEAL: Professionally. I — there was a connection between GCC and Smith College, and they were highlighting how GCC students end up at Smith and what they do with everything. And I ended up being highlighted — I didn't know it. But they talked about my praxis and how I did touch research, where I had done massage at GCC and then done this praxis. And sitting in that meeting was the director of the massage program. And she said, "I'm looking for a new teacher." And so she called me up,

and I was, that fall, put on the faculty of the massage program. So I got a job. (laughs)

PEARSON: Right after graduation?

NEAL: I think it was that year, yeah.

PEARSON: Wow.

NEAL: Yeah, I think it was that year. It might have been the year after. But yeah, yeah.

PEARSON: That's pretty amazing.

NEAL: It was pretty amazing. And personally — you know, I feel like sometimes I'll say to somebody that I went to Smith, and it's like there's this drop-down, roll-out, Ta-da, Smith!, you know, where there's like this army behind you or something happens, because people go, Oh. And then when you say you were an Ada at Smith, it's like that just doubled, or somehow, you know, raised to a third power or something. Because people look at you and they go, Oh, because they go, Wow, you made it through Smith, and wow, you were an Ada and you made it through Smith, meaning, you know, you — it's more challenging. So I feel like it's given me this, like, extra card, you know, of recognition.

PEARSON: And just — what advice would you give to someone who is just starting out in the Ada program, and then what would you — what advice would you give to someone who is graduating?

NEAL: Who is in their last year, or graduating? You know, like, just graduating?

PEARSON: Like, just graduating. And you're going to start the rest of it. (laughs)

NEAL: Ah. You are a different person than the person who walked in. Doesn't matter what you do. If you serve hot dogs for the rest of your life, the person handing those hot dogs over is going to look the person receiving the hot dogs in the eye with a sense of confidence and achievement and empowerment that you didn't have when you started. So it doesn't matter what you do; you're a different person. The enrichment that you get at Smith is just so phenomenal, and I think almost every Ada I met, bar one, would repeat — would go back to school today to redo classes. Not redo them, but take more classes, the classes they couldn't take because it didn't fit into their little model. So that's somebody graduating. What was the other one?

PEARSON: Like, someone who's just starting.

NEAL: Oh. Exhale. Get involved at Smith. Do sophomore push. Do junior usher. Get involved in Cabinet. Get involved in an activity of some sort. If you can do crew, if you can make crew happen, do it. If you can do rugby, do it. Just get as involved on campus as possible. Connect with traditional students. Take in the experience, because when you're sitting in the quad on Ivy Day, you're going to be running through all those things in your head that you missed. And you're going to be stunned, because the pomp and circumstance is just so overwhelming. But take in as much as you can, and sit on that swing and look at Paradise Pond, and know that you're going to make it through, because you made it into the program.

PEARSON: That's a really good ending. (laughter) Thank you very much for doing this.

NEAL: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Kelly Hourihan, June 2015.