

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Ja'Milla Lomas, Class of 2000

Interviewed by
Hana Sarfan
May 22, 2015

Abstract

Ja'Milla Lomas begins her interview recounting her accidental introduction to Smith by way of Ruth Simmons, who visited her high school in Houston, Texas. She details her involvement in student government, close relationships with staff and faculty and how her close knit house community was interrupted by a racist incident during her first semester. Lomas explains how the incident affected the remainder of her Smith experience and compares and contrasts this with her Junior Year Away experience at Howard University. She describes the benefits and opportunities afforded her by her Smith network, after college, particularly during the 2007-2008 recession, and credits them with encouraging her to pursue her passion.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

Transcript

Transcribed by Judith Jacobs, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Lomas, Ja'Milla. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Video recording, May 22, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ja'Milla Lomas, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Lomas, Ja'Milla. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Ja'Milla Lomas, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 22, 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 22, 2015, with:

JA'MILLA LOMAS
Northampton, MA

by: HANA SARFAN

SARFAN: OK. This is Hana Sarfan and I'm conducting an interview with Ja'Milla Lomas, Class of 2000 on May 22nd, 2015 for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. Thank you, JaMilla, for agreeing to meet with me.

LOMAS: Thank you for having me.

SARFAN: So we'll just start with what made you choose to attend Smith.

LOMAS: What made me choose to attend Smith. I initially was trying to get out of class in high school. I'm from Houston and I went to the High School for Health Professions, a very competitive, very — a great school. But I wanted to get out of class. And our school librarian told us if we, she said this great woman, the first African American female put to be a president of a college like Smith was coming back to Houston, she has roots in Houston and she she'd be coming to speak and if we wanted to go hear her speak, which I heard, Get out of class, we needed to apply to Smith. And so I applied and I went to the speech and it was Dr. Ruth Simmons, who was a fantastic woman, who was a great president to us, and she heard that I applied. I was the only one of the 15 girls who went who actually (laughs) took my librarian seriously and applied.

So she and I had a nice chat, a great talk and she said, "OK, well, I'd love for you to see the school," so I was flown up here for a discovery weekend and fell in love with the school. Had one of those Heidi, the hills are alive moment on the athletic, on the track out there and of course, there was a concert that weekend, so that kind of swayed me a little bit, but the women that I met here were reminding me of my mother and my aunt and my grandmother — very strong, very independent, very lively women and I wanted to be around people who were like that.

And I also wanted to go to a school that was relatively small. Because I come from a small high school, fairly big middle school and in high school I started learn my leadership abilities and I wanted to continue that. I knew that I would get lost at a school like University of Texas or OU, even I never applied to schools like that. I would say

Boston University, I applied there or Harvard or something like that but I just — it was like meeting the person of your dreams and you just know, I just knew, so that's why I came to Smith.

SARFAN: And what was it like in the first few months here? Was it what you expected? Were you surprised by anything?

LOMAS: My first few months, the first month was wonderful. I came for Bridge, so I was here for pre-orientations classes, or pre-orientation program and that was great because I got to meet friends, so I had friends on day one on coming to Smith and so the first month was wonderful. It wasn't as hot as Houston so it was a nice temperature and it's college in Massachusetts. My mother had always given me, told me stories about her time at Brandeis and I was just excited for snow. Real snow and not the fake, the fake flakes that stop traffic in Houston. (laughs) And it was, you know, I had just turned 17 and I was free.

The second month I was taken aback by, by the close-mindedness of certain students who maybe weren't as used to having a diverse population around them, and that did color my experiences here. But through that not great time a lot of things happened on campus. We learned a lot about each other — a lot about our assumptions, a lot about how to teach against assumptions and how to open other people's minds. And I learned a new style of leadership through that not great thing that happened. And then I was also pushed to positions of leadership, probably sooner than I would have been, which was good for me. So it was, it wasn't what I expected.

You know, coming from a big city and I'm pretty used to most things and big city/small town, because Houston is the big country town, (laughs) but overall it was good. Even with the bad it was really good, so, yeah.

SARFAN: Do you want to share like the details of that incident?

LOMAS: It was during an all-college barbecue. And I came back to my house, I live in Wilson, the greatest house in, I'm sorry, guys, Wilson is the greatest house. (laughter) Even though I left senior year, I was in Becket my senior year and I regretted it every single day. But my friends and I were going back to, coming back from the field, going back to my room for something, who knows, and I saw that someone had drawn a tree with someone hanging from that tree on my dry erase board in my room.

SARFAN: Wow.

LOMAS: And at first I didn't know what I was looking at. But I realized soon enough, Wait a minute, that's somebody — oh, I'm from the South, but I had never experienced something like that in all my years. Going back and forth between Houston and Tuskegee, Alabama, which you'd just

expect things to happen in Alabama. So that was jarring, it was jarring and because of that we had — we had campus debates about people's assumptions and people's ideas of what their identity was compared to other people's and there were class discussions and there were race discussions and it was a very good dialogue that we needed to have.

Much more open and truthful than I think we have now, when people are shouting each other down. And not listening. You know, we were, our voices were raised. I remember we had this big discussion in King/Scales Dining Room and it was — it was the first conversation, the first of eight and we had a lot of the BSA, the Black Student Alliance had a lot of demystifying the BSA kind of thing, so you asked the questions that you want to ask of someone that you might not have ever been exposed to before — no matter how — I don't want to say dumb, but no matter how nonsensical the question you might think is, you know, there's no such thing as a stupid question — it might be insensitive, but it's not stupid.

So we had a lot of those and we had quite a few rallies, quite a few rallies, I think, were documented in the *New Hampshire Gazette* and so then so fine and that kind of thing, a lot of vigils and third, all of the campus I know goes through different cycles of misunderstandings — more than misunderstandings, actually. But different people coming together, trying to learn about each other. And so that was our cycle. And it started with that drawing on my dry erase board. That day in October. In 1996. (laughs) But yeah you know, came out and — I got to stay at the president's house for one, one week, when everyone left campus and I couldn't go home and that was nice, so then I'd known her already so it wasn't a big, big deal. It was a big deal for me, so I'm like I get to stay at the president's house, awesome. Which is really nice inside. (laughs)

And of course, it meant that the deans all knew my name, so if something happened, you know, if I messed up, which I really didn't, they would still know, "Hey, JaMilla, do you need, you know, pick me up," and like I said, I was put into the — I was not put, because you have to be voted on, but, Hey, don't you want to, if you want to effect change, which I know you do, because you did it at your high school, you should look into this position on the SGA [Student Government Association] or look into being a senator, look into being on the right council because you like planning stuff, which I do, I love planning things. I'm an event planner now and a marketer, so being creative and making things pretty.

So it was, it was hard the first year to meet my — I was a pre-med, biochem major, double major. I had not officially declared because you just don't. But I was still going through the process of doing my biochem stuff and that, it made it harder. It did make it harder. But I came out OK, came out OK, yeah.

SARFAN:

Did you, wow, I had so many questions, (laughter) you've done half that. First of all, by the end of your time at Smith did you feel pretty at

home here and pretty comfortable, despite those incidents? Or did, did you feel like it was a safe place, I guess?

LOMAS: I would say I was mixed. I feel safer now. In my senior year, I went away for JYA [Junior Year Abroad], I went to Howard University for my JYA and I think in doing that I became more grounded. Going to D.C., going to Howard I was able to get my mix of which was what I struggled with as a senior in high school, Do I go to the HCPU route? Do I follow that? Or do I go to another type of school like Smith or, or Tufts or something like that? Because there really is going to be a difference in the way your life goes and the circles that you're in. Kind of like going between I guess at a state school like UT, which is huge (laughs) in Texas, or going to University of Houston, you know, which circles are you going to be in? And I got that nice, I was able to compromise and mix by going to Howard.

And so through that I was able to settle myself again and become more grounded and not like I had to look out over my shoulder or feel like people were — no, I don't want to say Judging, but people were looking at me differently. So that did ground me, so by the time I came back my senior year I think I was better. I was probably my bucket meets my (unclear) probably be the angry woman, I don't know why, (laughter) but I'm a little bossy. (laughs) It might come from being an oldest child, I don't know, or being a Gemini, but I'm a little bossy and I'm actually very proud of it. I don't think it's a bad thing. Because I know what I want and I go after it, for the most part.

But I felt better coming back senior year. And I was still empowered. Because I had been empowered by — I think I got through my sadness by the end of my first year, going into the second year, for the most part. So junior year I was like, Oh, I'm going to just relax and cut loose, you don't cut loose at Howard, it's just a, a little more intense. Actually, I'm like, Oh God, you guys really study over here, jeez.

SARFAN: Academically more intense?

LOMAS: I — not academically more intense. I think it was just different. I guess because I expected to be able to just relax and not have to study as hard as Smith. But I think it's a different environment. It's called the Black Harvard. It's the same amount of studying, but I think because my mindset was different, it felt like I was studying harder. The professors expected a lot out of us. It was — so it was — although it was still as personal, the student/professor relationship there, it was, it felt like we had more to prove. But it was still a tremendous amount of studying, oh my, golly, I really expected to relax. It's like coming — it would be the akin to coming from Houston and it being 60 degrees there and I'm freezing, versus coming to Massachusetts and 60 degrees, Oh, this is heaven. You know, I'm acclimating differently. I expected it to be 80 degrees, therefore 60 is cold down there. Up here I'm expecting it to be 40 and therefore 60 is just like, this is awesome, this is heat to me.

So I think it was something like that. So I was, I was fairly comfortable senior year. I knew what I wanted to do. I knew I didn't want to leave. I needed like three more years of college experience. I was still 20 years old my senior year, so — I didn't want to have to go into the real world necessarily, though I was preparing myself for that. And I wanted more time at Smith. You know, because technically I'd only been there for three years. I hadn't done the full four. And by the time I graduated I was like, Oh my God. Where am I going? (unclear)

I'm going to law school, I'm going to Houston, but I really wanted to stay, you know, and get more of an experience here. Because I just loved it. I loved New England. I love college, I'd grown up on a college campus as a professor's daughter, so, you know, I'm greedy. I just don't want to go. (laughter) So I was comfortable, but probably not as comfortable, not as safe as I am now as a graduate, as an alum who has had this experience, has had other experiences to fortify me and to test me. And where I'm comfortable in, you know, 35 going on 36 in a couple of weeks, like, kind of like one of those 80-year-old women who, I don't care, I know who I am, I know what I want, I know what I don't want, I know what I'm not going to waste my time on, so I'm just going to keep it moving and I'm a snippy so, therefore I can do that.

So I don't, I hope that answers your question.

SARFAN: Yeah.

LOMAS: It did? OK, good. (laughs)

SARFAN: Well, we don't have too much time left and I want to know a little bit about where your career and just your life in general took you after Smith and how Smith may have influenced that or if you don't see Smith in that, that's OK, too.

LOMAS: Oh God, I see Smith everywhere in it. Like I said, I went to law school right after college. And I discovered the first day I did not want to do it, it was not where I should be, but for my mother's sake I stayed. I left after the first year. I finished the first year and actually registered for second year classes and I said, "Nope, I'm not doing this, this is a waste of my time, I'm going to do something else," so as I was trying to find myself, I was talking to some of my friends who had graduated and one of them was doing, was an event planner at, at a hotel out in San Diego. And I was like, You can do that? That's a real job? She was on [Rep?] Council with me and I should have known, but I had no clue.

And so I, I smartly stumbled into event marketing and eventually into experiential marketing, where you're basically doing what I do best — talking to people, random people, getting their consumer insights on different consumer goods and services and things like that. It combines things that I love, talking, socializing and shopping.

So (laughter) I got into that and I just, I ended up getting my master's because I saw where I wanted to go, experiential marketing and

I was moving up and up and up in the universe. You know, I both worked for an ad agency in Buffalo for a little bit, as the event manager there. I loved that. It was this creating tours and all kinds of things for different products around the country. I'd already been traveling and then the recession hits. And I come home, because my company, half of it was gone.

I came home and I fell back to my graduate school roots, my law school roots and I was working in law firms and just trying to basically pull myself back up and rebuild my career in Houston because I had taken it away from Houston a little bit, which was fairly easy, because I hadn't been gone very long, so I was going back and forth between marketing and law and eventually I came back up.

And then the second recession, well, I was working, ended up working at an oil and gas company a few years ago, which somehow I had escaped in Houston, which is almost impossible to do. The major industries are energy and oil and gas, medicine, sciences and then NASA and then of course, is everybody else and I was everybody else. And I was in the oil and gas industry and then of course, this actually, yesterday, last year I was laid off because we started having that slump. I won't go into all that, the details of that, but we had that slump, and the day after I lost my job, which would be today this year, I came back to Smith as a shadow for class of '99's 15-year reunion, because I'm the 2000 reunion chair.

And so I was coming off of being shocked and What am I going to do? Oh my God, I don't have a job. But the same day I lost my job I called old bosses, Hey, I'm no longer with this company. What do you have? And so I had a job lined up so when I got back to Houston I started working immediately, but still I was at this point in my life where I wasn't happy at oil and gas. I'd missed my life in marketing because they're crazy people and they have my kind of personality, because I'm not all buttoned up and talking about hunting all the time, we're just kind of like (laughter) dressing in whatever and being creative and kind of being out there, you know.

And so I started asking the '99 Smithies, Hey, this is what happened. What do I do? You know, should I go back to the safe? Because I'd kind of retreated into safety oil and gas. Or should I do what I've always wanted to do and really push my own event planning company out there and I got a lot of great advice, because I was kind of in that point where I'm still strong, but I'm a little lost and I'm 33, I'm just like, I'm looking at the rest of my life like I don't want to be unhappy doing what it is that I'm doing. I really want to be happy and to pursue my dreams.

And Smith — got me back to where I needed to be. (crying) And it was — it was the best weekend I think I've had in a long time because I was able to find myself again after being, thinking I was on the right track, but really being on somebody else's track and not truly being happy but kind of status quo, I was surviving, I'm here. I'm making good money. I was miserable. And coming back here last year, between the Career Center and the Alumni Association and just the Smithies who

saw that I'd gone through the same thing and talking to the other alums and remembering what it was that I wanted to when I came here because I kept thinking, What did I want to do when I was at Smith? Who was I when I was here? Who was JaMilla? And suddenly I started to remember who I was and who I, no, I remembered who I am. And —

I'm so much better now. I got my event planning company back off the ground, after being kind of in the corner, gathering dust, you know, I was able to do that, although I was still working in oil and gas, it was temporary work. And it allowed me to concentrate, to not really have to think about that and to concentrate on what it was that I wanted to do and what I was doing with my company and my partners and still being able to reach out to those Smithies who I'd lost touch with who were helping me and putting me back on the right path, in the right direction and I'm now working as a, back in marketing, which is great because I was in HR at the oil and gas company, which is nice, you're getting the jobs, recruiting, I love hiring people, it's great, but it wasn't my joy.

And so now I'm working for a nonprofit that touches on one of my other passions, is lifting people out of poverty, so you're helping people. You're trying to effect change in the world and I'm doing marketing, so I'm creating stuff. I'm actually working on an event right now over there. (laughs) Smith is in everything.

Smith is in everything that I do. I've been an Alumni Admissions Coordinator since I graduated. So for the past 15, no, that's a lie, for the past 13 years, almost since I graduated, for the past 13 years I've been an AAC, so I've been helping to find and cultivate and mold the new Smithies who are coming up and every class that comes in I go, Oh, 2018, I'm helping to do that, 2019, I'm helping to do that, you know, 2020, oh my God, 2020, I'll be 22. (laughs) I'm helping to do that, so I am always connected to Smith in everything that I do. I'm a Smithee and I would try, I have tried to help continue our legacy, at the same time building my own and being myself. So it helped me find myself back then and it helped me again today.

SARFAN: That's wonderful.

LOMAS: Thank you. Didn't mean to cry. (laughs)

END OF PART 1/BEGIN PART 2

SARFAN: Oh, I was just going to see if there was anything else you wanted to add that we didn't get to.

LOMAS: What else do I want to add? I think that every single alum should come back to the school, if not once a year, every couple of years. Because even if you think that you know exactly where you should be in life and in the world, it's always good to come back to your roots, to see where you started or continued. To see how beautifully this campus has developed and grown, even as some of the buildings — not all (unclear)

to my liking, but I love them all. (laughter) The Campus Center took something, took me a little bit to get used to because I don't recall that being the design that we voted on my senior year, but that's OK, I forgive you guys, it's gorgeous. But I do think that everyone should come back, to show their children their, their significant others, their family members, their friends, strangers, you know, and let them know that this school does do something for everyone — that there still is a use for women's colleges and this is the Alumni Admissions Coordinator and there's still a use for women's colleges, there's still a need for us to be here, to help each other along during times that we just see all these ups and downs of various rights being given and taken away.

You know, we still need a place where we can be ourselves. Where we can be bigger than ourselves and hopefully be bigger than the world and show other people that it's OK to be different and it's OK to be a good person, you know, and I think this is the place to do it and to — find peace. So I think that would be how it end.

SARFAN: Yeah. Thank you so much.

LOMAS: Oh, you're welcome. This is fun.

SARFAN: OK.

LOMAS: And oddly emotional. (laughs)

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Judith Jacobs, June 2015.