

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Jessie Taylor, Class of 2010*

Interviewed by  
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 23, 2015

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Jessie Taylor describes her Smith experience as ‘coming home’ and details the sense of community and diversity found on campus upon her arrival in 2005. She also discusses political division among students during the Bush administration and Iraq War as well as the growing presence of trans and genderqueer students on campus. She discusses being raised as an atheist and majoring in religion as well as how her major applies to her present career in IT.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Kristofer Jenson, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Taylor, Jessie. Interview by Izzy Levy. Video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Jessie Taylor, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Taylor, Jessie. Interview by Izzy Levy. Transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Jessie Taylor, interview by Izzy Levy, 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:

JESSIE TAYLOR  
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: All right. Awesome. So this is Izzy Levy. I'm conducting an interview with Jessie Taylor, class of 2010 on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. Thank you for being here, participating.

TAYLOR: I'm really happy to be here. (laughs)

LEVY: Awesome. So my first question is just for you to bring me back to when you first got here at Smith. What were you feeling? What were you expecting?

TAYLOR: I remember getting back to Smith so strongly. Like, for one thing, you know, it was only nine years ago. But I remember coming here on my first tour, and, like, it felt like home. Like, it felt like coming more than any place I'd ever lived. And that feeling stayed with me, like, through, you know, getting accepted and being here and being here all four years. It was, like, instantly felt like home. It was really awesome. (laughs)

LEVY: And you told me before that you lived in Tyler. Do you want to talk a little bit more about the house community, what it was like?

TAYLOR: Yeah. Oh man. I mean, I have a lot of Smith College feels, but I have also a lot of Tyler House feels. Like, I lived there all four years, other than the semester I spent abroad. And we had a really tight house community. And I love how Smith does housing, because, you know, it's intergenerational. So I was friends with seniors my first year who graduated, but then it's like you become friends with the first years who come after you. And we had so much house community and, you know, first snow party, and we had big sib-little sib, and we had, you know, all the regular parties. And then also having a dining hall in the house is great, because that was just, you know, we spent so many late-night study parties in the dining hall, and sitting on the tables, and, like, I don't know, we completely took over the space. And, like, so many of — so much of house community is so tied to that space for me.

LEVY: Were there any other communities, larger communities that you felt like you were a part of?

TAYLOR: I was really — Tyler was kind of a little insular. I think that was the only bad thing. (laughs) But I was in — I was in the glee club, which was fun. I did that for three years. And I loved singing. It was an alto, too, so it was good times. So it was good times. And I had — I really loved my major, even though it was a small major, and we didn't socialize too much. Like, we didn't socialize too much. Like, we weren't, like, a bonded. I was a religion major, which was, you know, tiny, but intense. But I was actually the religion department liaison my junior year, which was fun. So I got to help, like, organize events, and I got to help, like, major our little bags that said, you know, religion department on them. So I think those were kind of the — I was also on rugby for a semester, and that was really intense. (laughs)

LEVY: So what was sort of the political climate like on campus at the time? We were sort of in the midst of the Iraq War. Did that affect campus life at all?

TAYLOR: I mean, there were a lot of snarky comments about Bush all the time, because that's life. (laughs) It's very, you know, liberal at the time, very, like, Democrat at the time, if not more left politically. We did have our — there were kind of the small minority of, like, Smith Republicans, I remember, and they were — you know, they were very nice people, but it was funny, because we were always like, how must it feel to be on such a campus that's so overwhelmingly liberal, and so antiwar, and so — I feel like we weren't — or at least maybe my social group wasn't as, like, politically active, because Smith, like, eats your life. Like, your whole life is Smith, and it's hard to be as politically engaged, especially since when the TV was on in our living room, we were watching, like, *What Not to Wear*, or (laughs) watching silly things, and less about the politics. But I do remember watching — I forget what election it was. I definitely remember watching election results in my living room in Tyler, and just being, like, staring at the TV and waiting and hoping and hoping. And so —

LEVY: Yeah. We also sort of saw that — in our research, anyway — that there was an increasing presence of transgender and genderqueer students. Was that something that you guys felt on campus at the time?

TAYLOR: Definitely. So actually, my HR my first year was trans, for my house. So that was kind of like, "Welcome to Smith. Here's your most responsible person in your house. Oh, and he's trans." And so I feel like that was a really good way for most people to, like, be introduced to, like, not everyone here is a woman. Which is cool. A lot of my community was trans at the time, and my partner who I was dating at the time at Smith was one of the trans guys on campus. And there was

definitely an awareness of that. And I remember at that point, we were all really starting to think about how language was being used at Smith, because we talk about sisterhood, and we always use she/her pronouns for everything, and we talk about Smith women. And I remember being this kind of tension and discomfort that was felt by a lot of the genderqueer, or trans or non-binary individuals, being like, “Well, this language doesn’t really fit us, but we’re here and we feel a lot like Smithies. But, you know?” So I remember, we had our language was slightly — like, we didn’t have big sis-little sis, for example. We had big sib-little sib. And so we were kind of starting to have that evolution of language to make our trans population more accepted.

LEVY: Did you ever feel that there was sort of a typical Smithie?

TAYLOR: I mean, there are definitely — I don’t know. I don’t know. I feel like one of the best things about Smith is that there are just so many kinds of Smithies. I think everyone had jokes about, like, having the type A girl in your class, the “that girl.” I think, oh yeah, “that girl.” I think, “Oh yeah, that girl,” that was the phrase, who would always be raising her hand and talking when she wasn’t supposed to. Or, you know, not when she wasn’t supposed to, but, like, kind of dominating the conversation in class. And sometimes, people were like, “Ah, Smithies.” You know, they’re so type A in that way. And of course now, I work in a male dominated field, so I’m like, oh man, women who want to spend all their time talking over everyone else, do it. I’m going to encourage and validate you. But I feel like that was kind of a stereotype, was that Smithies ran the conversation.

LEVY: Do you think that Smith being a women’s college has sort of prepared you for going out into a more male dominated field? Or do you feel like it has had some other sort of effect?

TAYLOR: I think it was amazing. I think the effect it had on me was amazing. Growing up, I had mostly male friends, like in high school, and I was, like, one of the only girls, because, you know, I would hang out with a lot of gamers and a bunch of nerd dudes, and I’m a giant nerd. So mostly, I was hanging out with guys. And I was kind of scared of women. I was like, I don’t know how they work. Like, they talk about boys and, like, makeup and clothes, and, like, I had this, you know, internalized misogyny idea of what women were like, and how I was different from them. And then I came to Smith, and I realized that that was a lie. It was a complete lie. And that there are so many kinds of women, and they are so different. And they all have different strengths and different weaknesses, and they care about the same things I do, and they don’t care about the same things I do. And I think that was where I really started unlearning all of the internalized misogyny that kind of society breaks down, or, like, society shapes you into. And I don’t know if I — if I hadn’t gone to Smith, I might never have done that. And, like,

now being in a male dominated field and a male dominated workspace, I would probably still think like that if I hadn't gone to Smith, be like, oh, I'm not like those other girls. Where now, I feel like I'm so aware that women have so much to give. And I want to, like, raise them up and support and validate them in every way that I can.

LEVY: Where have you, sort of, gone since Smith?

TAYLOR: Well, so, like I said, I majored in religion, focusing in biblical literature. And now I do IT support, because they have a lot to do with one another. But yeah, so I work at MIT doing IT support there, which is really fun. And I maintain a lot of connections with Smith friends. I live with two Smithies, in addition to, like, five other people, in a big house in Somerville, like you do. And, like, a lot of my closest friend groups are still Smithies. And even coming here, like, all of the friendships I had at Smith are back, like, instantly. It's like, oh yeah, we never even left. So, like, in my life, I still have a lot of Smith pride and Smith awareness of how it has kind of shaped me, which is cool, and I appreciate so much.

LEVY: What sort of things got people the most excited while you were at Smith? What kind of issues or events?

TAYLOR: OK. So I was really into a cappella. I cared so much about a cappella, even though I did not — was not a part of anything. And I remember there was a lot of, like, a cappella drama, and, like, you really liked this group over this group, and you want to go to this concert. And because there are so many groups, there are lots of concerts, because they each do it, like, twice a year or three times a year sometimes. So I remember going to a lot of a cappella concerts. I remember — what else did we get really excited about? I remember there being, like, big — there were, like, the big parties that would often be hosted in the quad. And I think I went to, like, two of them, and then was, like, this is just not, kind of, what I'm into. I remember in my house, we did a lot of, like, hanging out and doing a *Doctor Who* marathon. Or, like, I remember hosting a birthday party that was, like, Harry Potter themed, and was great. So I think we got really excited making our own fun, kind of, in a way. And just, I hung out with a bunch of nerds, so we spent all of our time talking about how great our classes were, and having, like, really intense conversations about, like, intersectionality, and how the art in the sciences and science in the arts. And, like, all of the classes that we wanted to take, because, you know, you could take any class. So...

LEVY: Was there a particular class that really stuck with you?

TAYLOR: Oh, so many. I remember the first class I took in my major was kind of a one-off, and it was wisdom literature with Joel Kaminsky. Joel Kaminsky, oh my goodness, of my heart. And it — up until that point

— I mean, I am still an atheist, but I was raised fairly atheist, and I was kind of — all I knew about religion was that it was something that made people do violence, for the most, part, which is kind of what you see on TV, is people saying hateful things often in the name of religion. And I took that class, and I realized how cool religion is, and how cool the bible, is because it's a historical document, and it can be analyzed from a literature standpoint, a history standpoint, and sociological standpoint, a psychological standpoint. Like, you can approach studying religion by architecture, by, like, anything. Anything is influenced and shaped by religion. And that was the first class that made me realize how much value and depth there was to the study of religion. And I just remember after that class, every time, just reeling, and being like, everything is awesome! And it's funny, because it's just, like, a textual analysis class, but for some reason, it just blew my mind in how deep you could get into this, and how important it was.

LEVY: Where did you go abroad?

TAYLOR: I went abroad. I did the unusual senior semester abroad my first senior year, and I went abroad to Israel. I studied in Jerusalem for a semester, and was there for about six months, because I was there over the summer.

LEVY: Did coming back after that sort of — was that a different experience than your time before you had gone abroad?

TAYLOR: Kind of. I mean, I feel like because I was only abroad a semester, it might not have been — like, Smith was still fresh in my mind, and I was really happy. Like, I had a wonderful time there, but I was also really happy to come back. I was like, oh, Smith, my home. I was so happy to come home, and so aware that I only had a semester left. And I think I came back wanting to experience everything. I was like, OK, I've been here for three years, I had some time, and now I need to come back and, like, rock Smith really hard. So (laughs) I'm not sure how successful I was, but I felt like I just, you know, committed so much more to my friends and to my studies, and to life, because being apart from Smith makes you realize how great it is. So... (laughs)

LEVY: What did you feel like — or did you feel like there were expectations of your class as you were graduating?

TAYLOR: I mean, I went to a lot of graduations, because my first year, I had a lot of senior friends. So I went to — my first year, I illegally stayed in an upperclassman's — like, on their futon, which was great, and stayed through reunion, and watched Gloria Steinem, which was, like, awesome. Like, welcome to Smith, here's Gloria Steinem talking at you. And I was like, yes. Then I had Rachel Maddow, so, you know, I was spoiled. But I think that kind of gave me the context for how — I

feel like almost all the graduations I went to had that very similar, like, feeling of, like, we've worked really hard, we've had really meaningful experiences, and now we are prepared to go out into the world and kick ass, basically. And I feel like I felt very much the same when it was my class graduating. Of course, like, most of us were terrified because we were, like, jobs, how to get jobs, how to be an adult. Like, so that was intimidating, but kind of having Smith being like, You can do it, we've prepared you! was both a comfort and also kind of a fear, because, you know, there are a lot of Smithies who do a lot of really great things. And you wonder if you are up to that challenge, and can compare to that. But, I don't know. So that's kind of, it's both good and intimidating.

LEVY: How do you think Smith has changed since you've been here? I mean it's only been five years.

TAYLOR: (laughs) It's only been five years. I just actually went on an architectural walking tour, and I was excited to see the new ramp in Sealy. I was like, yay, accessibility. And also, I had to push a lot of ramps full of computers into Sealy, so I was really happy. I'm sure they're having a much better time of it now. So I'm not sure how much it's changed. I mean, a little bit, I think, you know, physically, it's a little different. And I still know some people who are undergrads. And it's funny, because hearing the things they say about Smith, like the dramas that they have, like, with, you know, their professors, or what they have with their housemates or their HRs or things like that, feels very similar. I'm like, oh yeah, I remember that. (laughs) So I'm not sure if I've noticed much of a difference. One thing that I am really excited about, and I'm sure a lot of people are, is how much more of awareness of the recent admissions change, and the push to have transwomen on campus, which I was super into as far as — like, every time for the past year that Smith has called me, being like, "Hey, would you like to donate?" I was like, "I'm not going to donate. I would like to, but I'm not going to, and you should write down why and tell your supervisors about it." And it was because transwomen weren't allowed. And I feel like among my alum group, we were all doing that. And I feel like there was also a real push internally on campus, and I heard a lot of work coming out, and a lot of activism, and a lot of really eloquent writing, and a lot of, like, campaigning to have that be a part of Smith. So I think that is the most — a little bit of activism that I was so excited to see from the undergrads.

LEVY: So my last question for you is if you have any sort of advice for incoming future Smithies?

TAYLOR: I don't know. I mean, I feel like Smith is so different for everyone, because, like — I don't know, I feel like, you know, the stereotypical advice would be, you know, focus really hard on your work, or really value your time here because it's very special. And, like, that's true. Of



course that's true. But, like, it's so different for everyone. I mean, I guess I would just say that, like, make it your home, because Smith is such a unique experience, and whether it's wonderful and life changing, or stressful and frustrating, you kind of have to make it your own. And it can be so good if it all lines up. So I don't know. I just want to hug baby Smithies, and be like, "Oh, you're so good! I'm so excited for you!" (laughs)

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

TAYLOR: This project is so cool. I just want to say that. Like, this is so cool. Be I remember, one of my favorite things about Smith is the greater Smith community is not just, you know, the people who are here right now. So that's awesome. But, like, all the Smithies who have come before me, and all, like, the tough old broads who are, like, making changes in their fields and in their politics. And just trailblazing. And I feel like the more connections that we have to that as a Smith community, the richer our lives are, and the richer our connections are. And there are just so many good stories, and I'm so excited that, like, you guys are recording these stories so that, you know, in 20 years' time, people who, you know, show up like us and are like, man, I want to know how Smithies felt 25 years ago. Like, you have that. And that's amazing. So good work, you guys. (laughs) This is awesome.

LEVY: Thank you! Well, thank you for joining up for this collective memory tube of information.

TAYLOR: Collective memory tube of wonder and Smith feels. Yeah. (laughs)

LEVY: All right, awesome. Tha-

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Kristofer Jenson, June 2015.*