

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Jud Clymer Welles, Class of 1965

Interviewed by
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 15, 2015

Abstract

In this interview, Judy Clymer Welles discusses poignant experiences as a freshman at Smith, student activism and political climate on campus during the Civil Rights movement. She speaks candidly about the house communities, rules and regulations during that time period, the strict honor code as well as social life and extracurricular activities. In closing Welles comments on the physical changes on campus as well the evolution of academics and class offerings.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

Transcript

Transcribed by Kate Geis, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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

Transcript

Bibliography: Welles, Judy Clymer. Interview by Izzy Levy. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Footnote: Judy Clymer Welles, 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 15, 2015, with:

JUDY WELLES
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

GEIS: I'm ready whenever you are.

LEVY: So this is Izzy Levy. I'm interviewing Judy –

GEIS: Looking at her.

LEVY: I'm sorry?

GEIS: You'll be looking at her and not at me.

WELLES: Oh, not at the camera? OK.

LEVY: So this is Izzy Levy. I'm interviewing Judy Clymer Welles for the Smith Alumni Oral History Project. It is May 15, 2015 and we're in the archives at Smith College. So my first question, I guess, is I want you to take me back to when you first arrived at Smith. You're a freshman, you just got on campus, what was your first impression of the college?

WELLES: Oh my, that's something I haven't really thought about much. I was with my parents, and my mother had gone to Smith, and it was a huge deal to her that I was at Smith. So I'm sure a part of what I was feeling was, "Thank God I'm finally here. I don't have to worry about disappointing my mother any longer." I remember that we got here first before my roommate did whom I, of course, had never met. She was from Kansas City and I was from the Boston area. And I guess what I remember is running around town, looking for bedspreads and window curtains and stuff like that and although actually I think we waited until my roommate got here because it was going to be her room too. But then, I don't know if I'm making this up but it seems to make sense that probably when my parents left I would have been really relieved, like, "Now I can do this, just me."

LEVY: And what was your expectation for that year to come? Did you have anything that you thought was definitely going to happen? Were you –

WELLES: Well I knew I was going to be working hard academically, but I had gone to a high school I went to Wellesley High School, in Wellesley, Massachusetts, which was a rigorous school. So I was prepared to work hard academically, and I already had been in order to get in. And I'm sure that I also had lots of expectations of those kind of scenes from college out of novels, you know, where everybody sits around and has meaningful conversations in the middle of the night, and you're all in your pajamas and, you know, all that kind of stuff. Which sort of happened, sort of, probably not exactly the way I imagined it. But I don't think I had really big expectations. To me, one of the biggest goals was to get here. And then once I got here then the next four years were actually sort of vague in my imagination. And then after college I would get married and live happily ever after.

LEVY: So what was your house community like? And which house –

WELLES: Oh it was a great community. I was in Wilder House, and I don't know if they still do this here, but at that time there was a freshman parade at the very beginning of the year and the class houses marched. And we were the Wilder wenches. And Wilder wenches had already existed before we got there, and we were stepping into a tradition. And we had purple T-shirts with orange lettering on them, they were simply hideous. And they said Wilder wenches. And I still have mine, and I brought it with me to my reunion. I've not dared try it on yet. But I do remember marching in this parade and shouting and chanting together, "Some are wild, but we are wilder." I can't really talk about my Smith experience without talking about my mother because they were so intertwined. My mother was class of '37. And she was in Martha Wilson house with a very tight group of friends, very tight. And these were her closest friends all through her entire life. They were all in each other's weddings, and at one of the weddings the bride introduced the bridesmaids to the assembled guests. And then she said, "And these are the men that they married." And so the men thought, "We'd better do something to organize in the face of these strong women, who have such a tight community already." So the couples together formed what was called SPOSH, the Society for the Protection Of Smith Husbands. And so I grew up always hearing about SPOSH. Most of them lived in the New England area, Connecticut, outside New York City, Massachusetts. And they got together at least once a year for a SPOSH. weekend. Which I know involved a lot of game playing and quizzes and charades and stuff like that. And probably also a lot of drinking, I can't imagine that there wouldn't have been. But anyway, so fast forward to my time of arrival here, there was another woman in my house, in my class, who's mother, who's parents had been part of SPOSH. And I had met her before, when we were about ten years old. And I'm not sure I even knew she had gone to Smith, but here she was, she turned up in my house, in my freshman class. And we've stayed in close touch, she's here now for her 50th reunion. But I think because there were two of us

in that class who had grown up with a SPOSH. experience, and with mothers for whom Smith had meant so much, we were predisposed to want to organize and keep our class group together as a tight group. And I don't think we can actually take the credit for this, but the reality is that the Wilder house Class of '65 class has always had the highest percentage of alums returning for reunions. Somebody from our house is in charge of our reunion this year. Almost all of us are here, two have died, but almost all of us are here. So the culture of Class of '65 Wilder house, I think was pretty clearly defined and strong. And we've really stayed together all this time. Not quite in the same way that my mother's class did, but we've stayed in touch perhaps more than some other classes have. And I think it's helped by the fact that it's a big house, so it was a big class. I think that there were probably around 20 of us, where some of the houses might have only had three or four. So it's easier to keep the percentages up if your numbers are larger.

LEVY: So what sort of clubs or organizations were you a part of when you were at Smith?

WELLES: Well I started by singing. I was in freshman choir Alpha. And I had sung in high school, even in junior high, and I really loved singing. And I knew that Smith had a good program for singing. So that was probably the biggest, outside of academics, the biggest thing I did, freshman and sophomore year. I went to Germany for my junior year abroad. And when I came back my senior year I got into the glee club, you had to audition for it, and I got into the glee club but when I heard what the schedule was going to be, I just thought, "There's no way I can do this." Because having been away for my junior year, I had some making up of required classes in my major to do, and I knew it was going to be a really intense year academically, so I didn't do glee club. So it was really only freshman and sophomore years that I was in choir. Gosh, other clubs and activities? You know, I really don't remember. And therefore probably not much because otherwise I would remember.

LEVY: Were you sorry were you a part of any other communities, just maybe not necessarily a house community, but any other general community, maybe an academic community that you felt really strongly about?

WELLES: No, I have more to say about that in a minute, but I recently had reason to look at my transcript from Smith. We were moving and downsizing, and I was going through papers and trying to figure out what to keep. And I was kind of appalled to see how I had barely squeaked through. I did not have great grades. And so the academic life, we're sort of high (??) level academic life here, was not part of my life here. I was just holding on my fingernails trying to graduate. (cough)

GEIS: Would you like some water?

WELLES: In a minute, yeah, I want to finish this thought before I forget what I was going to say. And sort of stepping back again, in my high school years, I had been a very active member of my youth group in church, which was the Unitarian Church which was, and still is, a very liberal orientation. And so when I arrived at Smith I was very willing to be identified as, and very soon became identified as, sort of, the house liberal, the class liberal. And so that wasn't exactly an organization, you know I'm sure there might have even at that time been clubs in campus. There probably are now, I'm looking at the bulletin boards around here and seeing all the things that people are interested in. But it was kind of an identity for me. And I remember, for instance, sophomore year we were given a little sister, we were assigned to a little sister in the freshman class. And the person that I was assigned to was a woman who lived in Africa, she was actually Indian, but her family had migrated from India to Africa. And I was assigned to be her big sister because she had dark skin, and I was the liberal, you know, so that was probably going to be a good combination. We didn't have anywhere near as many foreign students then as the school has now. So that was kind of noteworthy for the house that this woman was coming into Wilder house from Africa, who was Indian, different culture, "We better make Judy her big sister."

LEVY: How did that affect the house at large?

WELLES: I'm not aware that it had much of an effect. Although I have to say, I mean take everything I'm saying sort of through the lens of I was really unconscious then. There was so much I didn't understand. I have daughters now who are in their forties and they're ever so much wiser, and more aware of the world than I was when I was their age, and even they were a lot younger. So me saying that having this woman in our house who was from Africa didn't have much of an effect, I don't whether that's really true or not, that's my perception.

LEVY: So what was sort of the political climate like on campus, given that the early '60s were sort of this transitional period toward –

WELLES: Major '60s.

LEVY: Yeah.

WELLES: Well the civil rights movement is what I remember the most. That was huge, huge, huge, and of course we've just been through the 50th anniversary of Selma, you know it's on everybody's minds. And it's funny because I'm realizing that the older you get, the more you kind of conflate things in your memory, and things which couldn't have possibly happened at that time, you're pretty well clear that they happened at that time. So my recollection is that I desperately wanted to go to the march on Washington, when Martin Luther King gave his "I

Have a Dream” speech which I thought was in the spring of 1963, in fact I’ve learned it was in August. And I couldn’t have possibly been even interested in going because I was on a ship for Germany by then. Because I was going to Hamburg for my junior year. But there was something, I do remember, there was something that had to do with civil rights that happened in the spring of ’63, that was a gathering of some kind and I remember making the mistake of asking my parents if it was OK if I went. And of course, they said “No way. You may not go.” And I, being a good girl brought up not to contradict my elders, didn’t go. And I remember wearing a black armband that day, sort of in solitary with whatever it was that was happening, but it turns out it wasn’t the march on Washington.

LEVY: Was –

WELLES: You asked sort of about the general political climate?

LEVY: Yeah.

WELLES: One thing I remember pretty clearly was that when I came back for my senior year, that was the fall of ’64 which was a presidential election year. And Goldwater was running. And it was the first year I could vote for one thing, but it was also the first year that I started to be aware, within my own class of about 20 women, that there were political differences between us as evidenced by the stickers on our doors. And one of my classmates, who has continued to be a very close friend, in her essay for our 50th reunion book she writes about how ashamed she feels now about having removed the Goldwater sticker from somebody else’s door, back in 1964. And that person is also here and she said, “Oh, it was you.” (laughter) She remembers that too. So that was the first year I was really aware — I mean I knew of course I knew there was such a thing as political parties. My parents weren’t really politically active, so it wasn’t an environment that I had, you know in terms of state and federal politics that wasn’t something that I had really paid a lot of attention to. I was aware of issues, mostly because my friends were Unitarian youth from around New England, and they were pretty smart and savvy and very aware of what was going on. And believe me in the ‘60s it was hard not to be aware of the civil rights movement if you were — unless you were totally clueless.

LEVY: Were you at Smith or were you abroad when Governor Wallace came to speak?

WELLES: I must’ve been abroad. I don’t remember that.

LEVY: I think it was in ’63.

WELLES: Yeah, it was the academic year '63-'64. So of course the huge thing that happened was Kennedy's assassination. And I was out of the country, I was in Germany. And that's a piece of recent American history that almost everybody experienced but I didn't, I mean I did in a way, but not as though I had actually been here. And when we had our 45th reunion five years ago, there was a gathering of people who had been on junior year abroad. It turned out I was the only one from the Germany group. It was mostly women from the Paris and Geneva groups. But when we got together to reminisce about our year all we talked about was what it had felt like to not be in the country when President Kennedy was killed. That was huge.

LEVY: Wow. We also learned, sort of, in our research that Smith's social life was very structured during the '60s. Do you think that's fair to say in terms of like academic and social honor codes, curfews, things like that?

WELLES: Oh, well curfew was definitely a reality. You got locked out, we didn't have keys to the dorms. So you had to be back by curfew, or you know knock on somebody's window and hope they'd come and let you in. I think I was on the house council one year which was sort of the first step, in terms of an honor code. If there'd been a breach of the honor code, they had to meet with the house council, and then – you know, this was a long time ago. But I vaguely recall that somebody got brought before the house council with alleged cheating or something – I don't really remember what it was. So if that's what you mean by the strictness of an honor code, yeah, I do remember that. It wasn't front and center for me, in terms of what I was deeply involved in, or anything like that. Socially, no men above the first floor. Well that may not be exactly true because I do also remember the call, "Man on the floor." If somebody's date was coming upstairs, so you could close your door or get dressed, you know whatever. It's funny because, having grown up with my mother, who was a Smith graduate from the 1930s, it seemed to me that things were so much more relaxed than what my mother had talked about, in her experience at Smith. There were many stories about my mother, she was quite a pistol. And one of the stories about her is that she got in big trouble because, whoever he was, her date was there at the house to pick her up or something, and he needed to use the bathroom. And there were no men's bathrooms of course. And so she let him into the house mother's suite, so that he could use her bathroom and he left the seat up. Whoa, a sure sign that a man's been around. And somehow the housemother found out that it was Mom who had let him in, and she was in deep trouble. So simply the fact that there were even bathrooms in the entry area at Wilder House that men could use, to me was like, "Wow, this is really loosened up around here."

LEVY: What was dating culture like at the time? Did people sort of go off to Amherst?

WELLES: People usually went away somewhere. I didn't date really a lot when I was here. My high school boyfriend was a year behind me in school, so my freshman year he was still in high school. And we stayed in touch sort of but kind of drifted apart a little bit. Sophomore year I was really working hard to get accepted to go to Germany my junior year. And then junior year I was away, and, I don't know if this is still the case, but for many of us when we came back from our junior year abroad, we'd been living in Europe for a year. We were very sophisticated. We were sort of above it all. And once again there was a lot of academic work to do just to make sure that I met the requirements of my major and graduated. So I do remember that. I did lose my virginity as a freshman at Smith, in the backseat of the car. I don't know are people talking about that?

LEVY: Yeah.

WELLES: Why not? I have no secrets. Freshman year we gave a joint choir concert. I was in Alpha freshman choir, and we gave a joint choir concert with the Harvard freshman glee club. And they came – the concert was on Sunday afternoon, they came on Saturday. We rehearsed on Saturday afternoon, I think there was some kind of a party Saturday night. The men were assigned to different houses to have dinner and then I guess we rehearsed on Sunday morning and then we had the concert Sunday afternoon. So I met this guy he was assigned to our house. He was drop dead handsome. And we got together and that was in the spring of freshman year. And then we dated for the rest of the spring and I was divested of my virginity by the end of the freshman year.

LEVY: So what do you think were for you and your peers upon graduation? What did you think –

WELLES: Who's expectations?

LEVY: It could be just the general social expectations, it could be family expectations, or other expectations of the college. And anyway you want to go with that question.

WELLES: Well I think there was a wide range of expectations. I think the college's expectations probably, and this is kind of abstract because the college thought of us as the class of '65, a group. I imagine their expectations were that we would go on and do wonderful things and be powerful women in the world and make changes, you know cure cancer or whatever. I think my family's expectations, my parent's expectations, and mine were similar which were I would meet a nice man and get married. Because that's what my mother had done. So I say this with some chagrin I guess, because I've changed really a lot since I

graduated from college. But I will say that at the time, I was so done with school. I had gone through a public school system which was rigorous. And I had worked very hard in school, and I was smart so I was in advance placement classes and all of that through high school. Then I came to Smith, worked my buns off. And when I graduated from Smith I was done with school, "I never want to see a school again." I went back to graduate school at age forty-seven, but that's a different story. So really I think my expectations really were just that I would find a job doing something or other, who knows what. I was a history major, that's kind of generalist. And get married and have children, and you know live behind a white picket fence and all that stuff.

LEVY: So Smith is a place that's sort of both steeped in tradition, but is also constantly evolving. How do you think that Smith had changed since you were a student here? This is a big question so you can –

WELLES: Wow, oh so many ways. Well for one thing, three of us were walking over here together this morning and we said, "Gosh, there's not much open space left on the campus anymore. There are buildings everywhere." So that's one way that things have changed. There's much more plant, you know, physical plant than there used to be. I think the openness to lesbians was not the case when I was here. There were some women who would go into somebody's room and close the door, and sounds would come out. And so the rest of us were kind of like, "Whoa." But wasn't ever openly discussed. And I think that changed pretty soon after I graduated, and to me that was great, that was totally fine. I have a lot of lesbian friends. This was just absolutely a good thing. And the fact that Smith has gone through this whole thing with admissions now with transgendered women, I think that's wonderful. I also have transgender friends. And I'm thrilled that this has happened. And I'm sure it wasn't easy, and I'm sure it's still really controversial but I think it's very important. I think this culture, American culture, at this time has a lot to learn, a lot to learn, about sexuality and the varieties of human experience, and all of that stuff. And I'm very happy to see Smith, kind of out there on the cutting edge, not totally leading the way, because other women's colleges have already made these decisions, but kind of out there on the edges, breaking new ground. That's very, very important.

LEVY: So I think we're running out of time, so I'm going to ask one more question. And what hopes do you think you would have for Smith's future?

WELLES: I hope it stays an all-women's college. I think that's really important. That's probably, that's the biggest one. With the perspective of my age I tend to see things in a very long time span, and I have great confidence that whatever is going on that's controversial now, Smith will withstand it and soldier through and will be on to the next challenge. I would

hope, and I've seen this happening already with Smith, that the emphasis on engineering and science and sort of nontraditional — I mean it's becoming more traditional now, but back in my day it was very much nontraditional — professional avenues for women, they'll continue to break ground there. I'm very proud to have gone to Smith. It hasn't been a huge part of my life since graduation, and I haven't come to a lot of reunions, but more recently I've come to more reunions because it feels like it's getting to be more important to stay in touch with these people.

LEVY: All right. Thank you so much.

WELLES: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Corey R. Selhorst, June 2015.