

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Kathy Boulton, Ada Comstock Scholar, Class of 1990*

Interviewed by  
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 23, 2015

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Kathy Boulton discusses her introduction to Smith College, the Ada Comstock Scholars program and subsequent admission. She talks about her experience as a non-traditional student in and out of the classroom and details specific incidences where age a life experience benefited and hindered her experience within the Smith community. She credits Jill Ker Conway and Eli Rothman with providing women an opportunity to continue their education and stresses how important her Smith education has been in furthering her career, increasing her earning capacity and ability to think both critically and analytically.

## **Restrictions**

None.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Corey R. Selhorst, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

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

### *Transcript*

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

KATHY BOULTON  
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: All right. This is Izzy Levy, I'm conducting the interview with Kathryn Boulton, Ada Comstock Scholar, class of 1990 on May 23, 2015 for the Smith College alumni oral history project. Thanks for participating.

BOULTON: I appreciate it Izzy, it's great to be here. Thank you.

LEVY: So I guess my first question is can you just give me an idea when you decided that you wanted to return to the college?

BOULTON: Sure, well it's sort of accidental. I had actually seen the segment on "CBS Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt", I saw that there was an upcoming segment on it about Smith College. And that peaked my interest because my niece, Kathryn Rollins was going to be a traditional age student at Smith. So I thought it was merely going to be a segment about Smith College, which would be inherently interesting. Unbeknownst to me, there was this problem called the Ada Comstock Scholar Program and that's what that particular was all about and it was particularly moving. There were stories of welfare women who are now working on Wall Street and how it had really transformed Women's lives and it was incredibly moving. I immediately — after the show — called a good friend of mine, a woman with whom I'd been friends for many years who was about my age. We were in our early thirties at the time. And she lived in New Jersey, and I called her up, "Mary Jane, did you see that segment?" And she said yes and we talked about how moving it was. And she decided to actually call Smith College and apply for herself. I did not think doing so for myself at the time. When Mary Jane called and started the application process — and then ultimately decided to go to Rutgers where she was from. She had an infant daughter. And but, she's such a good woman friend — the beginning of all these women's friendships and support from women — that she called me every other day long distance from New Jersey to New Hampshire, "Have you called Smith yet? Why not? Have you called Smith yet? Why not?" So basically to get Mary Jane off my back I called Smith College. The — just the admission process got rolling and everything came to fruition and I ended up coming.

- LEVY: Awesome. Were you considering any other of the sort of similar programs at other schools?
- BOULTON: No. When I learned about the profile of the Adas, I kind of thought it had a lot of resonance with me and my background and it seemed like the perfect opportunity in a very supportive environment and something that would really help me — not having been in school for a long time. And I just thought it sounded like a great program and of course, my niece was going to be here as well.
- LEVY: So when you got to — when you first got to Smith, what were you expecting?
- BOULTON: Well, I was frightened to death. I thought, “Oh my God, they’re going to say that I made a computer error.” But so — well first thing I was asking my niece, “What was it going to be like to live in the dorm?” Because I rented out the condo I owned in Nashua, New Hampshire and planned to live in the dorm for four years. And I felt very privileged. I think I’m one of the few Adas who actually got to be here for four years — I had so few transferrable credits that I had got to be here four years like a traditional age student, which was quite an honor and quite an experience. So I was trying to acclimate myself as a 32 year old to what it’s going to be like to live in a dorm after being an adult on my own for so many years. What’s it going to be like to be in class with traditionally aged women who probably went to prep school and they are very articulate, and — so it was a bit daunting, but it was exciting at the same time.
- LEVY: What dorm did you live in?
- BOULTON: Initially, I lived in Dewey House, which I think that was the first year that they made that into an Ada dorm. So we had some traditional age seniors who had resided in that — in Dewey House during their tenure here and they let them stay as traditional age seniors. But there were about 19 Adas who moved into the house as well. That was fun, but I had a couple of friends who moved over to Gillette House, and I followed suit. And we thought that was a nicer blend. There was about a dozen of us — Adas — in Gillette House, so we had a peer group, but there were about 60 traditional age students, so you got to mix in with everyone and be with all different class — you know, the four different classes and have that experience. And it also was a little de-stressing because we’d come back from class and the traditional students would be in the living room watching soaps, and we were like, “Well, maybe it’s not so bad. Maybe I don’t have to do all the reserve reading.” It helped to just chill out a bit. So it was nice.
- LEVY: What was the Gillette House community like?

BOULTON: Well, it was very congenial, everyone was very welcoming. It was the kind of thing when you were at dinner — or Thursday night candlelight dinner, which we loved — and you would want to linger. You'd linger over coffee, you're having great conversations, people are doing interesting things, they are going abroad, they're designing their own classes and doing all these wonderful things, you regretted having to get up from your last cup of coffee and go back to your room and do your homework because you were having such a wonderful time talking to everyone, so it was great.

LEVY: So what do you think your relationship was to the larger Smith community?

BOULTON: Well, I felt it was really good. I felt that most of the students were very welcoming to the Adas. I think the teachers really respected us and appreciated us having a mature — people who have had some real life experience in their classes and they always make us feel really welcome. I was fortunate that I did have my niece here. So I got to see her on the debating team and do other things as well, so that was really fun.

LEVY: All right. What — can you talk a little bit more about that sort of classroom experience, being mixed with the traditional age students?

BOULTON: Well I remember at admissions being very intimidated. And I actually was a psych major and one of my first psych classes, I was told by my psych major that we had to write a journal and he said it was one of the best-written journals he's ever read. He said, "But regretfully, you never really spoke up in class." So I explained to him what was my family dynamics at home with a very domineering father and then having gotten married at 19 to an Iranian gentleman who was ten years older than I. In my past life, no one had actually wanted or appreciated or asked for or allowed me to have an opinion. Now I have to do this complete paradigm shift where not only am I expected to have an opinion, but to express it as well in public. So that was a huge thing for me to learn how to do here.

LEVY: Yeah. So did you have any sort of perspective — being that you have a little more life experience than most of the students, did you have a specific sort of perspective looking in at some of the student activism or some of the controversies on campus at the time?

BOULTON: Well, it was funny because one of the difficulties we had at Dewey house was a lot of political give and take. I thought it was kind of odd that, you know, I had been out in the real world, I understood what it was like to interact with people of diverse backgrounds and different sexual orientation. So sometimes the implication that we had to be taught what was politically correct seemed a little bit odd. Because hey,

we had been up there, we know, we don't have to be taught, it's OK, we're OK with it. So that was a little bit challenging sometimes.

LEVY: What sort of debates were happening at the time?

BOULTON: Well, in our house it seemed to be a lot of political activism and it was like you would be lectured like, "Oh, you shouldn't wear lipstick because this is the historical reference for wearing lipstick." Or, "Why are you wearing high heels?" And it's like, you know, we are from the real world, we are women. I understand that historical perspective is interesting but we wouldn't be allowed to say, "Why are you wearing combat boots?" We would probably be taken before the judicial board. Equally, maybe you could give us the same respect that we have a right to wear what we want and do what we want as well. So it's just kind of an interesting tug and pull.

LEVY: Yeah, it seems like that sort of femininity—

BOULTON: And it was, you know, we accept you, perhaps you can think of accepting some of the things we feel comfortable with as well.

LEVY: Yeah. And what sort of opportunities did you have at Smith that maybe you feel like you wouldn't have had at another institution or had you not come back to college?

BOULTON: Well I think one of the obvious, inherent advantages to a woman's college is that a woman has to take every leadership role that's available. And again, with my background, I wouldn't have taken on a leadership role historically or typically. But for example, my work study job was at the career development office and ultimately, I became the Ada liaison to the CDO. Things like that I wouldn't have done in normal life if I hadn't been at Smith. I wasn't one to take on leadership roles and do things like that, so that was really good.

LEVY: And how was balancing your work and study — how did you strike a balance between—

BOULTON: I didn't (laughter). Or maybe work and leisure, study and leisure. Because, again, I didn't understand how my niece and her peers could go to Harvard for the weekend and go to Dartmouth and be on debate team and be in student government and do this and do that when I was in the library doing all the reserve reading because I thought I had to do that. So for me, striking a balance probably didn't happen until senior year when I finally made dean's list and I felt like, "Oh, I've got it now. And now I have to go." So it took quite a while to learn to really relax and how to do homework and how to prioritize and you don't have to do everything. That was, like, really challenging.

LEVY: What did you major in? What kind of things did you study?

BOULTON: I studied psychology and I majored in psychology. I took ultimately so many anthropology classes, I almost could have minored in anthropology. So I loved my intro to cultural anthropology class, so subsequently took medical anthropology, psychological anthropology, and that was really fun. And of course, I didn't allow myself to graduate without taking art 100, I was so glad. I don't think they even have it anymore. It was a real tradition and something I was really pleased that I took as well.

LEVY: So have you encountered sort of — I know that Smith at this point has sort of had a reputation for being this feminist institution. Have you encountered really the level of — or maybe the type of feminist discourse that was happening at Smith outside of Smith? Or was it a new lens?

BOULTON: It was a new lens, certainly the intensity, but that the exciting part of it as well.

LEVY: Can you talk a little bit more about that?

BOULTON: For example, my first year I took a psychology of women class. And I don't know if you've ever seen that old V8 commercial from the past, but it was like, "Could've had a V8." "Could've had self-esteem." And subsequently, after I graduated — two years after I graduated, my sister and I actually assisted my mom, who had been married to my dad for — right before their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we got her separated from my dad. And my mom and I always thought that we were the first two women, perhaps, who benefited from one Smith College class. So that, you know, was really eye-opening.

LEVY: What expectations did you have for yourself after you graduated?

BOULTON: Well, as I was sharing with you earlier, it was 1990, it was the middle of the recession. So I had been a secretarial supervisor at Hewlett-Packard before applying to Smith. And the odd thing about HP was you couldn't become a secretarial supervisor without a degree. And I was approaching 30 and I was like, "I'm really tired of being a secretary," so I come to Smith and have all these wonderful experiences. But basically, my whole life experience was been either being married twice or being a secretary. So we're exhorted to go and save the planet, we have 10 years left to save the planet, and I'm like, "Well, maybe I just need to get a job that will equal one year's tuition at Smith." And I temped for a year, I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my psych degree. Actually, I ended up taking a job with an IT staffing firm as a recruiter, and I've just fallen into the recruiting field for the last twenty years and now I'm a recruiting manager at a company outside of

D.C. So it sort of uses my psych degree in that I interview people and do things like that. But it vastly increased my income, my income capacity, my ability to negotiate, and think analytically and critically. All those things that I learned at Smith helped me to elevate my career subsequent to my experience.

LEVY: A lot of alumni sort of talk about Smith as a transformative experience. To what degree was that your experience?

BOULTON: It was life changing. It's so trite, but you can't even — that's the only word. It was totally transformational as a person, as an individual. The fact that at that age I took on something and completed it, I've never done that in my life before — or taking on a challenge. Freshman year I took the baby math — the baby Ada math class, which I felt like I really shouldn't graduate and say I have a bachelor's degree if I haven't taken math, even though there's no core curriculum. It was torture. It was horrible. I got my two worst grades. I didn't know about the pass fail option from my past academic experience growing up, so I got two C-. But I think that was one of the best classes I took in that it was a challenge, I had never done anything like that before that was difficult for me. And having gotten through it really changed me as an individual.

LEVY: Awesome. So how do you think Smith as an institution has changed since you left?

BOULTON: Well I really admire how they're encouraging women to do more in the sciences, of course. And it seems like — I get the impression that they do more with women as an individual. Like how to prepare for life after Smith, whether it's how to take care of yourself financially and do things like that. I think all of those things that they do now just enhance what was offered to us at the time. So it's exciting. It just seems like women are doing more in the world and travelling and making their own curriculum and doing things, so it seems pretty exciting when you read all the women of the world videos and things like that. It's pretty impressive what these young women are doing.

LEVY: What kind of hopes do you have for Smith's future?

BOULTON: I hope it stays a women's college. I think there's going to be a need for the foreseeable future for an institution like this for women. And I want them to keep attracting the brightest women from all over the world, giving women the full opportunity to reach their full potential and their dreams.

LEVY: And what sort of advice would you have for incoming Smith students and also for incoming Adas?



BOULTON: Keep an open mind, be open to trying new things and trying courses that you might not think of taking. So many people have come in thinking they're going to do one thing, then do another. Join groups, interact with everybody, and just have a good time and relax. Don't take it all so seriously. Enjoy the experience. I wish I had unveiled myself more of the archives and other things that I didn't do because I was studying all the time.

LEVY: Do you have anything else you would like to touch on?

BOULTON: No, it was a real pleasure having this opportunity. Again, this was just a life changing opportunity. I appreciate the Ada program and all the support that Jill Conway and Ellie Rothman gave to us. They can be proud that they have changed the lives of over 2,000 women and subsequent generations that — this would not have happened without the program.

LEVY: Awesome.

BOULTON: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Corey R. Selhorst, June 2015.*