

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

*Kathleen Banks Nutter, Ada Comstock Scholar, Class of
1990*

Interviewed by
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 22, 2015

Abstract

In this interview, Kathleen Banks Nutter discusses how marriage and motherhood delayed her college education until her early 30s. She details her unique undergrad experience as a mother of young children, commuting to campus and scheduling classes around her husband's work schedule. Nutter also talks about beneficial connections and opportunities she made at Smith and her 25 year association with the Sophia Smith Collection.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janice King, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Nutter, Kathleen Banks. Interview by Izzy Levy. Video recording, May 22, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Kathleen Banks Nutter, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 22, 2015, with:

KATHLEEN BANKS NUTTER
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: Thank you so much.

BANKS NUTTER: Oh, you're welcome. Thank you for doing this.

LEVY: I guess first off, just how did you get here to Smith? What was the process?

BANKS NUTTER: I often joke that I took ten years off between my sophomore and junior year of college, and that I did custom yardage weaving and I had a flock of colored sheep and I had three kids. When I turned 30, I got rid of the sheep and the looms and kept the kids, and went back to school at a local community college, Greenfield Community College.

By then I was working for a caterer who was Smith Class of '45, and we did a lot of gigs on campus. One of my two professors at the community college, his wife was director of the Alumnae Association here, and he was like the big Ada booster at GCC and he was just -- he was like, don't even apply to UMass, just go, just go.

Back then there wasn't an interview process or anything -- a paper application. I lost some credits. I'd been a BU a couple times. So this was, as Dianne [Weiland noted in her Capstone exhibition] this is the second chance, this was like third or fourth, but, you know. It worked.

LEVY: How did you feel about Smith when you got here? What were you expecting?

BANKS NUTTER: I really didn't know what to expect. When I think about it now, how the application process and prospective Adas come to campus and visit. It's much more involved than it was then.

I knew it was -- I would say I knew it was a women's college. I had never had that experience before in any of my undergraduate experiences or even in high school or grade school or anything. I'd always been in a co-ed setting and I'd always been the "Chatty-Cathy" in the classroom, the one who was like, Call on me, I know the answer. The teacher would be like, I can't always call on you. I wasn't inhibited as I've seen some -- because I've taught both here and in a co-ed classroom and I realize as an

instructor there can be a real difference dynamic in the classroom. Somehow as a student that didn't stop me.

It wasn't that, it was more – I remember at the time when I found out I was accepted and I told my mom who was work- and I grew up working class and she was very working class. A child of immigrants and hadn't finished high school. She said, "Why do you want to go to that school with the girls in pearls?" This was in 1987. I was like, Well, Ma, I don't think many of them wear pearls anymore, Ma."

My most – most of the experience I had of the campus before I started classes before I was admitted, was working for that caterer and doing functions. We did a lot of them in the Alumnae House or in the Boat House or Davis – we did reunions. I'd see students, current students, around and I knew the library was really phenomenal, and that it would be a very different experience from UMass, which seemed my other alternative at the time to finish up.

LEVY: Did you live on or off campus?

BANKS NUTTER: Oh, no. There was no on-campus then. Not until just maybe a decade or so ago. No, I lived in Northfield, Massachusetts. It was 35 miles each way. Put a lot of miles on the car.

My kids were very small when I started. They were two, four and seven when I came back, when I started at Smith. They were one, three and six when I went back to school at GCC and I did just one year there because I already had too many credits from BU, my two trips to BU.

Actually, I never lived – I never had a dorm or a house experience because, it's kind of crazy, but I was – we were living together, but we got married before my 18th birthday. So when I started at BU and when I would have gone out of high school anyway, in the fall of '74, I was already married. We had our own apartment. I never had that experience.

Yes, I commuted. The first year I just came two days a week because my now ex-husband was a railroad engineer and then he had days off during the week. He worked commuter rail out of Boston. He had an even longer commute than I. That meant we only had to figure out one day of day care. That was how I picked my classes was OK, Walter's days off are Tuesday and Wednesday, so I'll take Tuesday – Thursday classes or Monday – Wednesday classes.

Then the second year I was here was when – so that first year was a blur. I didn't know – I figured a railroad engineer makes pretty good money. We won't qualify for – I won't even bother applying for financial aid. Nobody told me that I could or should. Then the second year I was here I had the first – they started the CDO internship program during the school year and the SSC/CA had one, and I applied because in my second time at BU I'd had an archival internship in Boston, so I actually had experience. That year I worked here and then I worked in the summer of '89 here 15 hours a week. Again, the childcare thing. It was here that I

really had – this became my home on campus because I was about the same age then as Amy and Maida were (laughs). It's a long time ago. It was just – I'd come and hang out in between classes if I wasn't working. It was actually the college archivist – the then college archivist – who said, “Kathleen, you should apply for financial aid. You know, you don't have to take out all the loans to cover it. You'll get merit-based scholarship, ” and I did actually. So for my last year I did that. It was like I've been in the archives forever. It's a good place, though.

LEVY: What was your relationship with sort of the Smith community at large?

BANKS NUTTER: You know I thought about this when I was thinking about, Oh, should I offer myself up to do one of these? I really didn't have much of one because I had – there were faculty that I became close to that I'm still close to. Dan and Helen Horowitz were – they're now both emeritus, but they were incredibly started. I actually met them – they were to start – they came on the faculty in 1988. Like so many, the first year they were on sabbatical.

I met them again working for that caterer. I was working there – it was their 25th wedding anniversary in August of 1988, so we were at the house. There were some other Smith faculty there, but that was the first time I met Dan and Helen. They were both just – and they still are – lovely, gracious, supportive. They've given me – they were the reason when I graduated in 1990 I had applied.

Dan was kind of my unofficial advisor and he had encouraged me to apply to some big shot graduate programs, but I had to stay within a driving radius, Boston or New Haven, you know, whatever. I got wait listed. I didn't even get into Yale because I used the wrong color ink. I got wait-listed at Brandeis and Harvard, and I got into BU, but they didn't give me any money. I was like, all right, I'll apply to UMass, which is where I went and got my PhD and I got full tuition forgiveness and a TA and a great education, and it was a closer drive.

So then I was at odds and I was kind of like, Oh, I might as well get a job, but what am I going to do for six months? One night the phone rings and it's Helen saying do I know who Caroline Heilbrun is. It's like, Yeah, she's Amanda Cross. She wrote all those fiction novels and then writing *A Woman's Life*. Of course I know who she is. Well, she needs a research assistant and the Gloria Steinem papers, which at that point were unprocessed. There were 77 record cartons.

So, I got to work with Caroline Heilbrun, which was an experience of a life time, and she paid me New York City research assistant rates, which was like \$20 an hour. In 1990-91 was like, Whoa, big money! I could afford the babysitter. It was cool. I made a life-long friend out of Caroline as well until her sad death.

It was probably about ten years ago now. I was at a conference and Dan was there and we had lunch together. Yet again, I was asking him for

a letter of reference for something, I don't know. I said to him, "Dan, how long are you going to – do you have to write letters for me?" He said, "Forever." I said, "Awww, gosh." Dan the Man is what my friend, Jane Bowers, calls him. There were a couple other folks. I mean, the connection I had here was really key.

LEVY: It sounds like that was sort of was a gateway, sort of. Is that-

BANKS NUTTER: Oh, yeah. It was – I've been like a history geek since fourth grade when we read, what is it? The Lois Lenski book about Ocean Born Mary. I just thought that was – and then we went to Strawberry Banke in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Ocean Born Mary is kind of a myth. I was like, I thought that was the most – it was like so cool!

I just always loved history. I was like 14 or 15 and decided when I grow up I want to be a history professor. I just thought, you know, I want to read history, I want to write history, I want to teach history, and obviously took quite a detour here and there, which began actually in high school.

I went from being somewhat precociously, politically involved as a 12-13-,14-year-old in anti-war protests and fought the school administration to – in my autobiography class in ninth grade I wanted – I insisted – on reading the *Diary of Che Guevara* and it was not cool in Concord, New Hampshire in 1970.

Then in high school I was kind of a hippy waste. By the time I should have been a senior – the fall of my senior year I was told that I would – I had – I'd showed up and gotten A's in all my English and Social Studies classes, but I had flunked all of my math and science mostly because I didn't go. I was told I had three years of math and science to do and that's sort of like not my thing. I'd rather have taken gym class.

So I left and that's when I moved to Boston and started living with the man who I married and actually got my GED before my class graduated. I got special permission. I had a friend's mom grease some wheels for me because I didn't want to get married as a high school dropout.

Then I started at BU in the fall of '74 when I would have anyway had I – I think it's definitely – my experience at Smith was what made it possible for me. This is where I get choked up. Sorry.

LEVY: That's OK.

BANKS NUTTER: To go from GED to PhD and be part of community of historians and archivists. We do really cool stuff here. Sorry. Let me gather myself. Do you edit these things at all? I've watched a few online.

LEVY: I'm not sure. I'm just sort of a (inaudible).

BANKS NUTTER: Yeah, that's all right. You don't do the film part. That's what Wendy does and she's leaving. Oh, no. OK, I'm gathered. Thank you.

LEVY: OK. You said that you were really sort of politically active when you were younger. Did that sort of give you a different perspective looking at the student activism that was happening at Smith while you were here?

BANKS NUTTER: I was always cheered by it. I still am. When I was here from '87 to '90 there was some activism around divestiture, you know, in South Africa. There was also continued concerns about El Salvador and such and just the Reagan policies in general. More often it would be something that was really immediate on campus that would get the most student attention I felt.

Obviously, I was in classes with – and generally I tended to be the only Ada in most of the classes I took. I don't know why that was. I had so many credits I didn't have a lot of wiggle room and I knew I wanted to take a language because I was going to go on to graduate school and even as an American historian you have to pass a foreign language exam. So I took Italian because I was already – I'd always been interested in – I went from history geek to then women's history became my specific – my, you know, I kept narrowing it down.

Then by the time I started here in 1987 I was pretty committed to being – to doing working-class women's history and US, but given – and that would involve immigrant populations. So that was my justifica- because I had already taken in all my starts of like from in junior high – high school in New Hampshire I'd done Latin – two years of Latin, a year and a half of German. Then I'd briefly attended high school in Boston. It was the year before the desegregation of the Boston school system and it was crazy and insane and just – it inspired my most recent research, but that's another story. I took French there. She said I spoke it with a German accent. Then one of the times I was at BU – the second time, I guess – I took Spanish and she said I spoke it with a French accent. Languages are definitely not my thing.

But here – that's the kind of thing, the difference. Maybe it's the attitude of the instructors. I'm sure there's some who aren't all – but my first year Italian instructor, Professora Lella Gandini who's married to – I'm going to forget his name. He's in the history department. He's a lovely man. He did European history, so I never took any classes with him.

She was just lovely. She was just – and so supportive and like so many professors, they would take you aside and go, "Love the Adas. You know, they're always prepared." She was like – you know, and I was the only Ada in the class.

By the second year of Italian it was – everybody in the class was going to do their junior year abroad. And this was a different instructor whose name I don't remember, and that's probably just as well – I think he left here, or whatever, the next year – because he incensed several of my

classmates by telling them in spring – every day he'd be like, "You know, it's very culturally different in Italy, you can't be getting upset if men are grabbing you or gawking at you at the very least." I guess a couple students complained. He claimed he was trying to prepare them for the experience in Florence and it's like, there could be a different way to maybe go about that because he did it in this really like, "They're entitled to do that, so get over yourself." It didn't fly well in a Smith classroom. I was sitting there going he's going to get in trouble, and I think he did.

He was – all my other classes, it prepared me in a way for graduate school. I'm not saying anything bad about UMass. I obviously did my graduate work there, but I was a TA in undergraduate classes and you could work hard and if you did all the reading, but it's a very different atmosphere. It's a different culture.

In a big school like that – even at BU you have to – if you have a mentor then – and as I did here, but I had several mentors – but it was just the classroom experience was so different and pushes people and prepares people. But in this – I mean I know there's times – there were times I was like, oh, man. It was like, I'm not – I can't do this. I'm not going to live through this semester. I had bronchitis every other week. I've got small children with germs so I'm getting sick because I'm staying up until four in the morning doing work. Got to wait until the kids go to bed. Thank God I was younger. I could never do that now.

I don't know – I guess the Adas who are in their forties and fifties, their kids are older. But I look at somebody like Dianne. Her son was sick today. She said, "He hasn't been sick all year and I have to do this presentation and he's sick." I don't what she did with him. I'm sure she made the arrangements, but it's the stuff you juggle.

The only time I was ever absent from class, I missed one class in the three years I was at Smith. It was Lella Gandini's Italian class or the day of because I probably had another class that day, but they didn't seem to care. Especially with a language, you can't miss classes. I explained to her the next class that I had stayed home because my youngest child had chicken pox, and I couldn't send her to daycare even though that's where she got them because there were still kids who weren't infected yet. She said, "Well, I will excuse your absence if you write me a note explaining." So I learned the word in Italian for chickenpox. I had to look it up in the dictionary of course. It was that kind of thing that just – OK, I can do that, and that's a good lesson.

LEVY: Did Smith, being a women's college, give you sort of a unique experience since all your previous educational experience?

BANKS NUTTER: And there after (laughs). Oh, yeah. Like I said, I really noticed – and I guess I was already because six months after I left here I was a teaching assistant at UMass. So I was in a classroom again but on the other side of the desk, so to speak, and have been there pretty much ever since then.

Like I said, for me – I don't know. Maybe because I was just that way. I never felt in high school or when I first went to BU as an 18-year-old, I never felt inhibited from speaking and I do remember the second time I was at BU I took this women's studies class – Feminist Theory or Feminist Philosophy or something and it was pretty heavy stuff – this was the '82 to '83 school year. It was the spring semester because I was by then grossly pregnant with my second child so that I couldn't even sit in the desk. I had to sit sideways. We had just read this article that even the boys in the baseball caps in the back had apparently read or at least were following the discussion in class. It was about trying to take a feminist approach to making the birth experience equal to implant a fertilized embryo in a man's abdomen. They didn't need a womb. It could just grow there. I remember these three guys sitting in the back. I thought it was hysterical. They were staring at me while they were talking about it like, Oh, my God. That's what I'd look like. Oh, ish! I'm like, you know. It didn't stop me.

It definitely prepared me for the rigors of graduate school. I think I was probably on that track anyway, but Smith only reinforced it that yes, I'm a woman. Yes, I'm really smart and that's OK. It shouldn't be intimidating to you, but if it is, oh well. I think that helped immeasurably in getting – because graduate school can be really icky. I don't want to scare you. There the pressure is even more intense to always be smart, always impress the professor. I mean, it's like a Smith classroom five times over. And there's even more reading, but you learn quickly how to do the graduate school read, which if I'd known that at Smith, I would have gotten more sleep (laughs).

I have three kids, two daughters. My oldest daughter, there was no consideration of Smith. She wanted to go to the big city and she went to New York. She went to Fordham and went to law school there. She's someone who I think it would have been a great experience for her, but if she doesn't want it, she doesn't want it, fine.

My younger daughter did apply to – I don't know why it came down to – she was accepted and got about the same scholarship offers at BU and Smith. But then just decided she wanted having grown up near here and Northampton was a familiar place – and she, too, I think would have.

I would never have chosen Smith when I was 18 in 1974. I would have been like my mother. I chose BU because my knowledge of it – but this was from the late '60s that it was this hot bed of student activism and radicalism and had one of the biggest SDS chapters. That had all imploded by the time I got there and it was the rise of the yuppie thing. When I was there in '82 to '83 it was like *Bonfire of the Vanities*. It was like *Wall Street*; greed is good, kids in training.

Not all of them, obviously, but I would never have thought of Smith – first of all I would have thought oh, it's an elite ivy league school that I probably couldn't get into and again, that's to the credit of Herb Steeper pounding it into me. And the fortuitousness of working with that caterer

and we did all these Smith gigs and I saw the place and there were a couple Adas who sometimes worked in the Alumnae House. I'm like, I'm as smart as they are. I can do this. I'll be all right. Although you can't constantly – I think all Adas share this – you'll be walking across campus and you always have that feeling like someone's going to come up and tap you on the shoulder and say, "Oh, we made a mistake. You can go home now." But nobody did. It's a good thing. I still remember that feeling of walking out of Seeley taking my last exam and I'm going, wow, I did this!

LEVY: Are there any other things that you wanted to add or (inaudible)?

BANKS NUTTER: It's one anecdote, and I tell the story a lot, but to preserve it for the archives. Like I said, I didn't have an interview. I didn't have the pre-admission tour. I didn't go around and visit campus. I knew where the Alumnae House was. I knew where the Boat House was because I worked for the caterer there. I had no idea the Sophia Smith Collection and College Archives were here. The professor at GCC who was pushing me to go here, knew I was interested in history, women's history. He never mentioned it.

Orientation day September, 1987. They broke us up into groups because that was when there were larger numbers of Adas coming in. I was in a group of about 30–35. We were led – our tour was to tour the library for the most part. The tour was led – and I was beside myself, but no one else seemed to really care – but the tour was led by then a senior Ada Leah Kunkel, whose sister was Mama Cass and she looked just like Mama Cass. I'm like, That's Leah Kunkel, because she was in a band, too, with her ex-husband Russ and blah, blah, blah. And I'm going, That's Mama Cass' sister, and everybody's like, Shhh!

I'm such a goof ball. I'm a history geek and a star-struck fan girl of all things pop culture. So, I'm trying to get over that. It's Mama Cass in a flannel shirt because it's 1987, but she was cool and she was doing the backwards walking thing. We were coming down that long hallway and we're coming over that glass connector and she's doing the walking backward thing and she says, "And now I'm going to take you in to what's called the Alumni Gym. It's the home of the Smith College Archives and the Sophia Smith Collection, a women's history archive. I'd just died and went to heaven right there.

I'm like ahh – because I'd worked in this archive in Boston. Very Boston, New England Historical Genealogical Society or HISGEN as they call it, and processed the papers of the second lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, Luke Baldwin. Here I am, this budding neophyte, women's labor historian, and I've just walked into – and this place I'm going to finish my undergraduate degree has this? Who knew? Obviously not me. That was like my first day at Smith. It was like, whoa, good day! Too bad the parking sucks. Parking was always terrible. That's my classic Smith story that sort of encapsulates what was a really positive experience

and has still to this day obviously, not just because I'm still working here, has been a big part of my life.

LEVY: Awesome. Thank you.

BANKS NUTTER: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janice King, June, 2015.