

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Kathy Rodgers, Class of 1970

Interviewed by
Hana Sarfan, Class of 2016

May 22, 2015

Abstract

In this interview, Kathy Rodgers recalls her decision to apply to Smith and desire for a college rather than university experience. She discusses her transition from a public high school and the challenges she faced, academically. Rodgers details her house community, including the chores and household duties that students were expected to carry out. She also describes the internal changes that were occurring on campus in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War.

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: Rodgers, Kathy. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Video recording, May 22, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Kathy Rodgers, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Rodgers, Kathy. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Kathy Rodgers, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 22, 2015, with:

KATHY RODGERS
Northampton, MA

by: HANA SARFAN

SARFAN: Thank you, Kathy, for participating.

RODGERS: I'm delighted to be here.

SARFAN: So let's start with why you decided to come to Smith.

RODGERS: Well, I wanted to go to the best possible college I could, and that of course eliminated many colleges because they were all male. I wanted to go to some place far away from my home, or relatively far away. That eliminated Douglas.

When I looked at the colleges, I wanted a college experience, not the university experience. Smith was the largest of the women's colleges in the northeast and I had met alumni who were some of the most interesting women, some of the most helpful women, and my sister had picked Smith and was a senior there and I said, "Well, I can go. And I'm going to go despite the fact that my sister is there."

SARFAN: What was your first reaction over the first couple of months there?

RODGERS: I was overwhelmed. It was a big challenge for me. I had gone to a public school in New Jersey and when I got here during orientation I had indicated that I was interested in chemistry. I got a note that said I was supposed to report somewhere and take a test, a placement test. I thought, My goodness. What's going on here?

In my high school we had no AP courses. I didn't even know what an AP course was. So they plucked me out and gave me an exam here during orientation and I advanced placed in chemistry. It was just wonderful. We had a brand new science building. We all had our own laboratory spot. Nobody else had facilities like that. It happened even though I came without the advantage of that kind of preparation and understanding that this could happen at college. They plucked me out and said, "Try for it."

SARFAN: So you started out feeling kind of overwhelmed?

RODGERS: Well, it was hard. That course was hard. In my house – this is funny however it happened – virtually all the other, at that time, freshmen were from private school, and I felt like they were miles ahead of me in terms of English and history and all that kind of stuff. I felt OK in science, but in these other topics – so, the academics was a real challenge for me at the beginning.

I suspect the other things that were a challenge were the same for me as everybody else. The social life, the getting to know new people. All of that stuff, which is – it's a big thing when you start college. It's very different from high school.

SARFAN: So how was your house community? Where did you live?

RODGERS: I lived in a great house. Everyone probably says that. I was in Talbot House, which was one of the big houses. We had about 80 students in the house and at that time we had all four classes. There were no senior houses. Every house has its own traditions. We had some very funny ones where we would have a night of doing museum pieces. Everybody would dress up as some famous painting or some sculpture or some dumb thing like that. We had just a beautiful dining room and it was kind of downstairs. It wasn't on the same floor as everything else. The house was a little different than some of the others. I loved that. We were also located right across from the daycare center. I used to love the fact that there were all these little kids around, too. It wasn't just all college students. You'd hear them playing and screaming and laughing and you know, I just liked that.

SARFAN: Were you part of any other groups on campus that were important to you?

RODGERS: I was one of those student government types. So I did get involved in various clubs and activities. Early on I got involved in student government. Then I got involved in house governance. That was the sort of thing I did throughout my college career. I was on Gold Key. That was fun taking people around and introducing them to the campus. Those were the sorts of things I did.

SARFAN: How about academic interest?

RODGERS: Interestingly, I didn't continue with the science. I had the opportunity to work in an industrial research and development chemistry lab for a couple of summers, and I discovered that women were really at the bottom of the totem pole. That was not acceptable to me. I thought no matter what I do, if I go on the academic track I won't get tenure, I won't be able to do what I want to do, but even here on the industrial side women PhD's don't get the same opportunities.

The fact of the matter is I also loved history. So this kind of made the decision for me as to which way to go. As you know, the late '60s were a very active time politically; civil rights, women's rights on campus. So I went the history route and then went on to law school because I was going to change the world as a lawyer. That didn't happen, but I did become a lawyer (laughter).

SARFAN: Can you talk a little bit more about that political climate that you were talking about? How did that play out on campus?

RODGERS: It was very interesting because there was internal change happening on campus as well as the campus participating in the external events. I was probably more involved in the internal change. Remember, I was this serious student government type, but sort of believed you could make change from the inside. So when I started my first year at Smith, we had men in the rooms three times a year. No parietals. First year students had to have their parents' permission to go away for a weekend. Everybody had to wear a skirt to dinner. Everybody had to sit down at lunch and dinner at exactly the same time.

We had jobs in the houses. Somebody took care of getting the sheets ready to go out to the laundry. Somebody else had to wait tables. Somebody else – you had to sit watch on the certain schedule every day in order to have the door open and we said, Why? Why do we have these rules? Everybody's coming to dinner in a filthy, dirty skirt which they never change or wash for the entire semester. Wouldn't it be better to wear their clean jeans (laughs)? It would be a little more civilized. It was just – why? What's the point? People liked different kinds of food and were getting into eating different kinds of food and healthier food. Why can't we have more choices?

The first thing that we did – and it happened in my house, my sophomore year when I was president of the house – we had the first buffet lunch so that you had a span of time, like an hour and a half, and you could come in any time and sit down and have your lunch and choose what you wanted. That was huge. That was absolutely huge.

Then, of course, all the rules about parietals changed. All the rules about overnights changed. The difference between my first year and my senior year was night and day in terms of basic social daily life on campus and the rules and regulations, of which there were many when we started and maybe fewer when we left. So that was one thing that was happening on a very local, personal level.

But we were part of the world and the late 1960s was the period of the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Rights Movement. Probably biggest for us, the Antiwar Movement because our boyfriends and brothers and friends were being sent off to a war that, to many of us, didn't make sense. I was not one of the big activists in that, although I became more active in it by my senior year. But it was going on. There

were groups here. There were groups in the valley and Amherst, U Mass that were very active. I'm sure you'll talk to people who were very much part of that.

Another interesting piece was Julie Nixon was in my class. Her father was the President of the United States who was conducting the war. The college really did very well by her, but it was tough. And once in a while here father would come and the towns people were very much behind his administration and behind the war effort and so on, but the campus wasn't on the whole. The majority was not for it. So, there would always be a demonstration outside her apartment. So finally, the President just said it's really not worth it. So that was just an interesting little tidbit in there.

We had 1968. We had the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, which were just devastating. Then move forward in '69, I think, was when they had the big riots at Columbia. Then 1970 and the shootings at Kent State and that the most appalling thing that ever happened in our experience. It was totally incomprehensible and totally unacceptable.

So we, like many other colleges, said we have to do something. That was the spring of the strike. The famous 1970 strike, and students struck at colleges all over the country, but not in every college.

It was an amazing experience. We really galvanized with teach-ins and marches and we took busloads of people down to Washington and we lobbied people in Washington. All this while school was supposed to be going on, right?

It was very effective. I think it changed people, even people like me who hadn't been as active. Who were sympathetic but hadn't been so active. It kind of put us over the line and say that you can't just not do anything. You can't just say, "Oh, I think you're right." You have to do something, and there were many different kinds of things to do. You pick and choose which one works for you.

So it was – then we had – that's politics. What about the Sexual Revolution? When I came to college abortions were illegal. Roe v. Wade wasn't until 1972. But there were ways that you could find, and there were certain people that you could contact. How strange is that that you have to be so under the surface that you can't just do what you believe in?

What else did we have? Pot was popular then. I can remember at graduation I was part of a panel for parents and somebody asked the question, Well how many students at Smith do you think use pot? I had no clue, but I knew it was a lot. I said, "I don't know, maybe 50%?" It might have been more, it might have been less. The president sitting next to me gasped. The audience loved it, though, because it was an honest answer. I said, "I don't know, but it's a big number." (laughter)

So, we did all that and then we had our courses and our classes. Smith was interesting because many schools said you don't have to take exams. You can just graduate. The strike, we just won't count it. Smith didn't do that. Even at the time, I really respected this decision. They said, We'll

give you time and you can have until October to take your exams, to submit that last paper, to do whatever. But you must complete your work.

I was going on to law school and the admissions letter said, Subject to satisfactory completion of your degree requirements. It stands out in your mind. So I pulled an all-nighter and wrote the best paper of my career and I did graduate on time. But that was because I was under the pressure of keeping my acceptance at law school. Lots of people took the option to take the extension of time and they did it. They earned their degrees.

But I have to say I did respect that decision because to me that kind of preserved the integrity of the academic experience and the degree and it really did not interfere with our ability to participate in something that was – it's hard to describe how big and how important that was, particularly being triggered by the Kent State assassinations.

SARFAN: We only have a little bit of time left. I'd like to hear a little bit about what you did after Smith and how Smith may have influenced that, if at all.

RODGERS: Well, I suppose that Smith influences everything that you do. It influences you in ways of giving you a certain confidence that you can do things like go to law school. It really didn't occur to me that I couldn't go into the kind of law that I wanted to go into. When I was discouraged from doing that – what I wanted to do was litigation, particularly in the labor law field, which was kind of a rough and tumble field, but very fun. They wanted women lawyers to go into trusts and estates, which at that time was kind of the back office kind of practice. Women weren't out front doing the big deals or the big commercial deals.

So, I went my own path. I went to law school. I did go into a small firm that specialized in labor law litigation. I never had a life plan. Opportunities came along and I went with the flow. So I ended up working at Barnard College and became the first general counsel there and then I also was an administrator and I taught a civil rights seminar. Barnard is a women's college. They're very flexible. They use people well. I was acting president at Barnard for a year. Then I went on to become the head of the now legal defense and education fund today called Legal Momentum, which is the oldest women's legal rights advocacy organization in the country. That kind of combined my interests in the law and civil rights and helping to change the world and women – and equal rights for women. So it all kind of came together with that job. I'm now retired and I own a used book shop.

SARFAN: Wow, that sounds amazing! Well, OK. My final question is with all of that experience in leadership and women's rights and civil rights, what do you think now is the relevance of a women's college?

RODGERS: That's a great question because I've just come from listening to the dean talk about her plans for developing leadership skills. There's so much

available here at Smith and how to galvanize those things that are here and really help students with specific leadership training and development and self-awareness.

We need that. Everybody needs it. But women still need it in a special way because things are still not equal for women, whether you're talking about jobs and salaries and pay, what kinds of jobs women can get into.

The numbers still don't add up properly. Women you can find everywhere. We may have a female president of the United States soon. But we don't have enough women in the Senate and we don't have enough women in the House of Representatives. We have to go out there and make it happen. That's really the key to me. It's not going to change. We're not going to get women in leadership. We're not going to get a system where we really take care of children and provide child care so families can survive better and women can carry on with all kinds of opportunities as well as men until women change the system. Smith should be a leader in that.

SARFAN: OK, thank you so much.

RODGERS: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janice King, June, 2015