

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Kimberly Roberts, Class of 1975

Interviewed by
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 15, 2015

Abstract

In this interview, Kimberly Roberts discusses how she came to Smith and the changes that were occurring on campus at the time, specifically the removal of house mothers from the dorms which offered students more freedom and greatly impacted social life. She discusses her political activism, the climate on campus at the end of the Vietnam War as well as the racial divide on campus during the Civil Rights Movement. Roberts also details her life and career after Smith and the benefits her Smith education has afforded her.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Janice King, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted May 15, 2015, with:

KIM ROBERTS
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: To start, if you could kind of take me back to when you first arrived at Smith. What were your feelings? What were your expectations? What was going through your mind?

ROBERTS: I was scared. I grew up in Spokane, Washington, which is a larger town in Washington, but it's in the middle of nowhere. Even though I went to high school in the '60s and '70s, my high school experience was much like the film American Graffiti, about how people acted and did things in the '50s.

I went to a public high school where they did not have AP classes. That's another whole story about my placement exams or not, the first time at Smith. But I just hadn't had the same experience and I had a school counselor that actively tried to discourage me from coming to Smith and instead go to a college in the region and had told me ahead of time how I wouldn't fit in, I didn't have the money, I didn't have the prep school background, I didn't have this.

To top it off, to get here my parents drove me out in a tent trailer from Washington and they had to be back to get my brothers to school so they dropped me off with a fifth cousin in the Boston area and I took a Peter Pan bus to Smith for the first time and showed up not knowing what to expect. Literally, the first thing I saw was a returning sophomore bringing in a double bed. It was just so far apart from my experience. I could not imagine doing that and having the nerve to do that so that everybody knew what was going on as she and her boyfriend moved this double bed mattress in.

That was my first day at Smith. I mean, it was a surprise. Actually, I did end up fitting in. It wasn't as awful, but I was petrified. I was literally petrified.

LEVY: What was your house community like and which house?

ROBERTS: I was in Hopkins and my first year I was in Hopkins A, which even in 1971 in the fall smelled funny and was run down. And basically discovered that nobody was in Hopkins because had been their first choice. Everybody was in Hopkins and that worked – the good way it worked – was that people really banded together. So half the people stayed

there all four years – as I did – between the three Hopkins houses and half the people just couldn't wait to get their names on a transfer list to get out of there. So, on one hand it was close, but on the other hand it was like half the house was close and the other half was always transitory and people trying to get out.

LEVY: What sort of clubs or organizations were you a part of?

ROBERTS: I ended up being a double major, one was in theater. So after the middle of my sophomore year I hung out a lot at the theater at all hours. I was a house officer in my first year. I did some writing for the Sophian and I worked with the Smith Service Organization.

In '72 was the election between McGovern and Nixon and one of the things that happened at Smith is I became for the Spokane area an ultra, ultra, ultra liberal, and I was ashamed to admit it, but that year I was just 18 and a half. It was the first time 18-year-olds could vote. The head of the campus Republicans was in Hopkins House. So that fall I spent a lot of time knocking on doors to convince people to vote for Nixon. I cannot believe in the only state – as I was continually reminded at the time – and the only state in the nation that went democratic for McGovern . I was knocking on doors in Northampton, Massachusetts to try and encourage people to vote for Nixon. So, that's kind of what – and really past the early years I just lived, breathed and ate at the theater building.

LEVY: What was the political climate on campus in general like at the time?

ROBERTS: I think a lot of people – it was an exciting time because Vietnam had just officially ended, but there were students when I showed up that had been jailed for demonstrating and trespassing at Westover Air Force Base against the war. They were seniors when I was a freshman, but they were still around.

There was a lot of – I can't call it unrest, it wasn't that – but there was a lot of discontent on campus about the African-American students and it was really unclear at the time whether the fact that they were congregated in Franklin-King – mostly in Franklin-King House and that area of the quad – whether that was a self-choice or whether that was some kind of artificial segregation or cultural segregation at work.

I truly think that the first couple of times they taught African-American centered courses was, if not while I was there, it was just the year before only. There wasn't a department. There wasn't a major, but the race part of things – at least on Smith was bigger than it was nationwide because the Civil Rights Movement had happened in the '60s and this already the early '70s, but it had just kind of reached the reality of next door of – and there was lot of feeling good and bad about – there was some demonstrations from the students at that corner of the quad. I remember sometimes people were sympathetic and sometimes they

weren't sympathetic. They thought they were demanding a lot and acting separatists as opposed to being part of a larger college. So that was pretty ambivalent.

Women's studies wasn't official yet, although the courses had started and I would obviously be here – I mean, people at Smith characterized themselves as feminists and proudly so. There was no backslider or backlash against that at all. That was just taken as a given (laughter). That was a given. And that was a healthy time, too, for that.

LEVY: Was there a lot of cooperation between Smith groups and sort of Northampton women's movement?

ROBERTS: No. I'm not even aware of Northampton having moved that way. I know after the fact, in the first few years I was out, some of the people that became the heart of the Northampton arts community and the Northampton women's community and women's movement had all been students a year or two older than I. But when I was actually at Smith, those things didn't exist to my knowledge. And if they did, there was certainly no cooperation or coordination or conjunction at all.

LEVY: So what kind of issues were feminist groups at Smith tackling? I mean, any specific hot-button issues that got people excited?

ROBERTS: Yes and no. There had been a big campus-wide referendum the year before I arrived as to whether Smith would remain co-ed or would go co-ed or not. So many schools did in the late '60s and early '70s. In fact, Amherst had just gone co-ed.

I think the first year I arrived was the first year Amherst accepted women. There were not just one, but several women I can think of that left Smith our sophomore year when Dartmouth went co-ed. So schools were just going co-ed and even though that's not a larger political movement, that really was – we all knew that even though it had been voted down in 1970 that there was another vote likely to come in the next few years and so that was a real issue as to whether women's education was viable in 1970s or whether that was an elitist (segragist?) – you know, type of thing.

Smith was active in the initial environmental movement. I can remember WMPIRG, Western Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group, had a – actually, I belonged to that for awhile – had an arm on campus, and so it was kind of the very nascent of environmental issues and green issues. I guess that's it. I don't remember much more because the war was over and Nixon was gone and the environment and the co-ed issue.

LEVY: Were you much involved in any of the movements in any activist around that or were you just sort of taking it in as part of (inaudible) of the school?

ROBERTS: I was officially a WMPIRG member because I came from the west coast and people somehow thought we more – and we were – into conservation and land and the environment, but I don't remember doing anything more than attending a few meetings or paying my dues or what not. I don't remember marching or sitting in or – I probably signed some petitions.

My biggie was the horrendous entry into presidential politics in that election. At the time I didn't think it was a mistake. I thought I was being young and different and vocal. You know, standing up for something that everybody else was going the other way on. It didn't take me long to realize, though, that I picked the wrong side in that one.

LEVY: What was the expectations of your class as it was leaving Smith when you were graduating? I mean, you were the centennial class, right?

ROBERTS: Yes and our slogan, which has still stuck on, the century of women on top, came out of my class. We regarded ourselves that way. There was – when I showed up in the fall was the first year that they did not have house mothers. So all those house rules when I talked about seeing a double bed mattress move in, the school had not yet refined what their rules would be about overnight guests or how long they could stay. So all that was developing.

But all the expectations about going to college to meet a husband were there to the extent we had all been raised with that Cinderella theory, but all of us knew – and I do mean all – disregarded that. That's not what our expectations were even though that may be other people in our families even that had that expectation. I think there was just – it was taken for granted that you would leave here and on to either a meaningful profession or go to continue on with graduate school and get a degree to go on with a meaningful profession.

It's probably no surprise that eventually I think – it always seems to me like half my class ended up going to law school, which I did when I graduated; however, to tell you the time being changed, although I went to Smith and had gone to a women's college. I went to law school at UVA, University of Virginia, as a state school had only gone co-ed – the undergraduate school – two years before, and although the law school had technically been co-ed always. They probably had a woman who came through in the teens or 20s. The reality was my law school class was 8% female. So when they divided us into small classes as they did with 20 to 22 in a group that you kind of staid with, there were only one or two females in any given group. But that was the expectation. When we came back for my five year reunion, I think for the most part it was true.

Obviously some people had gotten married but not very many during those five years. A lot of people really did go to school and get their masters degree or their MBAs or law school or med school.

LEVY: How did you feel that Smith being a women's institution affected the way that you were able to operate in those very male dominated environments? Did you feel like it was helpful to have had Smith as a background or did you feel like Smith maybe didn't give you enough experience dealing with more male dominated environments?

ROBERTS: Career-wise, professionally-wise there is no doubt that Smith was a plus, plus, plus, plus, plus. When you came to Smith you were expected to fill all the student government positions. What had to be done you were expected to do. The professors called on you. You were able to speak and able to speak your mind regardless of what some guy thought or even what some other girl thought. I mean, I think Smith was great for that.

For me, personally, because I had not been a social butterfly with the dating mores in high school, when I came to Smith there's no doubt that by being all female I probably didn't develop as mature or sophisticated relationships with guys as I would have. Everything was always tense filled dating or I see my daughter's generation now and it's much easier for them to have groups of friends that are male and female or to make friends. I think my inability at that time to deal with men except as bosses or potential romantic interests, but there wasn't a lot in between. They were either older and authority figures or every relationship, at least initially, was some kind of potential romantic thing. I just didn't have the training or background and I didn't learn about that while I was at Smith.

LEVY: Where have you gone since then? Who have you become since you graduated?

ROBERTS: I went to law school. I practiced in a an old-line Yankee law firm in New Haven, Connecticut for five years and then when my dad retired, I moved back to Spokane, Washington, which was probably the best thing I could have done. I always had a good relationship with my family and parents, but it gave me some time to deal with my parents as adults, not as child-parent, but to get to know them as parents.

I had had it with the practice of law, or so I thought. I was tired of spending a day at the end of each month filling out billing things. The firm I was with worked on a bunch of asbestos cases and there was this whole consortium of clients, and every month it was up to me to figure out who was going to get billed what percentage.

So, when I showed up back in Spokane I taught folk dancing for a year. Then I answered a want ad in the paper for a position at the prosecutor's office because my savings were running thin, and it turns out the prosecutor's office didn't want me. That's a story in of itself, but the

public defender's office, who ran out of the same county, was looking and I was hired at the public defender's office. It's not anything I had envisioned myself doing. I didn't see myself there, but it was the niche that I needed to be in.

So I am a proud public defender, now retired, that was happy to use my skills not for billing but for making the system work by providing people with a defense; people who needed it.

LEVY: Awesome. So I just have a few more questions before we wrap it up. So Smith is a place that's really steeped in tradition but is always constantly evolving and I'm curious to know what you see as some of the major ways that Smith has changed since you were here?

ROBERTS: Interestingly enough, some of the biggest changes are establishing traditions that were done away with during the time I went here. During the time I was there they cancelled rally day for most of – now I know it's become this big thing. Because it wasn't cool.

They had just done away with – I don't know if they have them now or what they call them – general university courses or distribution requirements. So people came and could take whatever you wanted.

So, one of the biggest changes of course are things like the engineering school and the emphasis on science, but only in quantity not in quality. One of the reasons I had applied to Smith and come here as opposed to Wellesley or Mount Holyoke or some of the places at the time, was because Smith had a reputation for being good in science and math. So that's more of an outgrowth in that.

I think the biggest change is these traditions. I still regret not going to the first freshman day or orientation or whatever it was because it wasn't considered cool. I'd known these women for all of two days and we all went downtown and – I don't know – did whatever during the time we were supposed to be at our freshman orientation gathering. That we were supposed to go as house with a theme in a parade and the cool thing – and it wasn't just me – we all just didn't show up for things like that.

So that's a change, probably to the detriment – and I'm not unique in this for sure – is the loss of the house dining system, especially coming from a small house or group of houses like Hopkins. The Thursday evening dinners, the teas, the meals right in your own house. That really was something that set Smith aside. So that's been a change. I don't know what else. I think –

LEVY: Yeah, that's great. So what do you think, what hopes do you have for Smith's future?

ROBERTS: Well, I hope for sure that they can continue as a women's college and as a women's college doing relevant and far-sighted things, like the engineering school. I just guess continue their legacy. There are a lot of

really tremendous women that went here before and after and the time I went and are now here now. I'm proud of every single one of them. I'm hoping some of it still rubs off. I just want them to go on and not have to bow to whether it's economic pressures or concerns about politic things. I want them to be a brave independent institution, I guess.

LEVY: Do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

ROBERTS: Stay in touch with your college and your college friends. It's so easy when people go out in the world and do all these new and exciting things with expanded horizons. To lose touch with people you were really close to and coming to reunion every five years or ten years or twenty years isn't enough to replace – I mean, I used to tell people one of the best things about Smith was instead of spending a Saturday night coming in drunk and worrying about whether I'd made an impression on a date, was being able to come into the living room and talk about politics as it compared with some incident in Russian or French history with women who were freshmen and seniors and we would all just sit there and have a good time talking and sharing intellectual ideas and opinions with each other. And the idea that I've lost touch – and I know other people have – with that part of their lives and so many of those people. So as maudlin or sentimental as it sounds, my biggest advice is stay in touch with the friends you make during your time here.

LEVY: All right. Thank you so much.

ROBERTS: Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janice King, June, 2015.