

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Laura Scandalis, Ada Comstock Scholar, Class of 2006

Interviewed by
Hana Sarfan, Class of 2016

May 22, 2015

Abstract

In this interview, Laura Scandalis describes her introduction to Smith as a young mother and paralegal and how she was able to navigate student life and balance her academics while parenting a young child. She talks about the support system that exists among Adas and her struggle to find her place within the larger student body. Scandalis details the importance of networking and how her Smith connections have continued to benefit her post-graduation.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

Transcript

Transcribed by Terri Pease, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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

Transcript

Bibliography: Scandalis, Laura. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Laura Scandalis, 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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Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 22, 2015 with:

LAURA SCANDALIS
Northampton, MA

By: HANA SARFAN

SARFAN: This is Hanna Sarfan and I'm conducting an interview with Laura Scandalis, Ada Comstock scholar, class of 2006?

SCANDALIS: Yes, that's right.

SARFAN: May 22, 2015 for the Smith College Alumni Oral History project. Thank you for agreeing to participate. I really appreciate it. My first question is when did you decide to return to school and what did that process look like?

SCANDALIS: I had always wanted to — I had always wanted an education like this — since middle school. I decided to come back and the process basically looked like — a public defender in New Hampshire who I worked with — a couple of them encouraging me to go back to school. I had a baby at the time and was newly on my own and you know I balked at that and said, "That's fantastic, but how will I pay the bills?" So someone came and said Smith College — this attorney that I worked for, Mark Larson — who I'm still very close to — had helped at Legal Aid a girl like me, a single mother like me back in the '70s. She ended up going to Harvard and then Harvard Law School and now had some Texas school of domestic violence, and they basically printed out the Smith Ada (inaudible) page and said, "Put it on my desk," and I said, "That's really realistic." So they said, "You don't understand." So I went home that night and essentially I Googled it — or if it was Google at the time, I don't know — and when I was reading and I'm looking at it and this smile just came across my face like, That's what I want. That's what I always wanted; this is possible. So I decided, and I applied, and actually one of the public defenders drove me around to four different schools, Smith being my first choice, and Smith is what I got. I wrote my essay for Smith and modeled the other three — tweaked it, you know (laughs) — and went through the motions with them. Actually I don't think I even applied to them; I think I told them I did (laughs). So that's how it started. It started where I had started my education in criminal justice because I thought it was interesting and then when I realized it was for becoming a police officer I ditched that because

it wasn't college like I always envisioned it since I was 12 years old. I got a nudge; that's how I got here, that's how I got to understand that I could actually go to college the way I wanted to — even under those circumstances, which I thought was a done deal, you know.

SARFAN: And how did you feel about Smith when you first arrived?

SCANDALIS: Love. You know when I first got here I remember — I think it was the interview — and I was walking across campus — mind you I had already visited Wellesley — I had already visited Simmons, I think, and I can't even remember what the other one is; it's terrible. That I, on this campus — Wellesley felt cold — and this campus — I think this the first one that I just felt like, This is it. I remember seeing chalkings at the time on the ground, you know, chalk writings about — I can't even remember what it was about — but I felt like — I guess like I did at public defender, like this is where I belong. This is it. This is what I want. You know you can feel it. Like a good house. Like a good house has a feel, a comfort feel. Like that. And so I just didn't want any other school.

SARFAN: And how did you feel when you first enrolled and actually started taking classes and spending time here?

SCANDALIS: Oh, God. Orientation sticks out, and I remember someone saying — I think it was Sid Dolby — someone saying, "No, it's not a mistake. You're not here as a mistake. You have been admitted." And I think just looking at the ivy. It felt fantastic; I was high on life. I mean preparing myself to come here, I think I had my entire apartment packed and taped up with a razor, shampoo, everything ready to go, all stacked neatly in my bedroom for a few weeks before I actually moved. I was ready to go. I used my next rent money to pay for my deposit on something. I told the landlord, "I'll get you later, I'm going to Smith." (laughs) Sorry. It's just a feeling of unbelievable; I made it. I can't believe I made it. I kept thinking of myself as — I kept thinking of myself in 6th grade looking at the Petersons Guide to Prep Schools in my room, dog-earring and highlighting and going through the states — I would do that — I did that. Summer program at St. Paul's, that was my first try, and I just got off track. So it was an amazing feeling and reminding myself every day when I would and see Seely and the vines — looking up at the vines and remembering it wasn't a mistake; I belong here. I did it. I beat the odds, I did this. It was pretty amazing.

SARFAN: So where did you live when you moved here? Did you live with your child?

SCANDALIS: I did. I lived in a second floor apartment in Concord, New Hampshire — there's not much going on there. I worked for the public defender program. She was two years old and I remember she was having a hard

time falling asleep on her own and I remembered knowing that I was coming here I would have to get that under control. So I focused on working on getting her to go to sleep in her own bed — that kind of thing. That's what sticks in my mind the most. But it was just a big adventure. I remember I moved everything without her and then went back to New Hampshire to get her and then we came out here and I remember there was construction in front of Bedford Terrace at the time that big — with the turrets — across from Serios that's where I lived.

SARFAN: So you lived on Bedford Terrace?

SCANDALIS: Yes. I remember having to lift her over the big ditch of construction and walking up three flights of stairs to our apartment, but I was all in. I didn't have any fear; it was fantastic. We made a lot of friends; she made a lot of friends. She went to school in Northampton.

SARFAN: OK. How old was she at that point?

SCANDALIS: She was just two when I first got here so she went to Sunnyside which, that place is great. I remember people in town — she got into little ballet lessons at one point and other mothers in the dance place going, How did you get in there? How did you get her to Sunnyside? I go there. Oh. I just worked real hard to make it line up and it lined up. It really worked.

SARFAN: What was it like having a child and also going to school and how did you manage that?

SCANDALIS: It's hard to say because it's like having a child and working full time, although sometimes you can leave your work at work. My work doesn't get left at work, though, I'm always accessible. You don't have the papers looming, which is nice. I was also younger at the time, so I had more energy so it wasn't bad. You know how your life is your life and you're just doing it in a different place, with different work. More personal work, working for you, and your future — so I didn't — I don't feel like it was hard. I know it was; I know there were hard times, but we actually had a pretty good community. The girl I'm staying with here was my friend at the time and we've stayed friends over the years. Like yesterday, when you get back together with people and her kids are grown-up now. I don't know. I just did it. I just did everything I could possibly do to make it seamless and we had a great life; she had a great childhood here.

SARFAN: And what was that Ada community like — can you tell me more about the friendships or the people you lived with?

SCANDALIS: There were about 20 apartments at Bedford Terrace and there were a fair amount of Adas that were single women that lived with their boyfriends

and didn't have children. There were plenty of them that didn't have children — varying ages in their early twenties all the way up to fifties — so you had a very eclectic mix of people living under one roof which sometimes you would get someone banging on their floor to shut up essentially — but we had each other so, for example, I came with a car. I came with my car because with a child you want a car. I wanted a car. So I came with my car, but we had limited money. As a student you have precious little, so if my car wasn't running and had to be in the shop over on King Street then my friends and I would — OK you take my car until yours is fixed — so we would lend and borrow money, lend and borrow food, lend and borrow car. Have to go to an evening class so feed the kids, so we would trade off and just do everything for each other and it was just a given. You need it, I do it. I'm going to need it tomorrow and you'll do it. That kind of thing. Or your child is sick at school and so — we couldn't text at the time, I guess there wasn't texting — but it would be, Oh my God, Jen, Emma needs to be picked up and I can't miss this class or for whatever reason — I'll go get her. I don't have a class until 2:00 so OK you bring her to campus; I'll grab her and I'll go home. In the winter time I would pull her on a sled. It was hard so you felt different. I'm not going to lie. I would also look at Adas that didn't have children and even though I was young, I was like 25, so that's young, sorry, it is — and I would think, You know if I didn't have kids — it's not that I wished I didn't have her — but if I didn't have her, I would just blend and nobody would know. People would just assume I was just here like everybody else, which you are, but you do feel different. There's a separation.

SARFAN: How did that play out? Did you feel that traditional students acted differently with you or with professors, or was it just kind of a feeling you had?

SCANDALIS: I don't think any of the students or professors definitely didn't act differently with me but I think we learned somehow there was an assumption that — there was a rumor in some parts — the assumption was that the admissions guidelines were more lenient for Adas, which isn't true. It's the same. If you're not good enough to be here, you're not coming (laughs). That's the way it goes. And we thought, My God, what can we do about that? And so a couple of Ada organizations sort of started at the time in hopes to dispel that kind of myth — or the assumption was you're here on complete financial aid. No, that one upstairs actually paid in cash. She's here because she wanted to do this — she was a lawyer somewhere — or whatever the case, not lawyer, but had some life and now you had the trust fund baby people just like you have — and the traditional student body but only maybe these women — something happened in their early years and they went a different way and didn't go to college. So it really was a serious different mix of people. So as a class you share — I guess what we share the most — is the experience of being

an Ada on campus — which is what keeps us pretty close. But, it's different, especially if you're a younger Ada, and there would be older Adas and they'd be like, I've been through this and I raised a family and — OK. You know how there's just student competition? It's everywhere.

SARFAN: And what about your academic interests?

SCANDALIS: Oh, God. When I walked in I thought, I blame my sort of crummy public high school that I went to — or did at the time — I was psyched to take calculus — I just love math — so I never got to take a proper calculus in high school; I'm doing it now. I have friends back home — public defenders as a matter of fact going, Don't take calculus, don't do that, nobody does that for fun. And I'm like, I love math (laughs). My initial thoughts were that I wanted to be a veterinarian, honestly, so I started off in the sciences but because I had been removed from high school for several years and because I didn't really have a solid calculus-y and chemistry background at say — Northampton High School or a private school or something like that I didn't — I'm sorry-

SARFAN: You're fine — did it hurt you?

SCANDALIS: No. I'm sorry I messed it up. Is this all recording?

SARFAN: Yes, but this will be good. There we go.

SCANDALIS: Thanks. So, what was the question?

SARFAN: You were talking about taking calculus and not having the background.

SCANDALIS: Oh my God. It was a rough first semester because I realized that once I got into those classes and I became familiar through learning, through here, the term of “weed out classes.” I guess I didn't even understand that part; I did not even know that that happened. So I was not having a good time in those classes, let me tell you, and I remember getting a mid-term warning in the mail, and I'm bawling — what am I doing? What have I done? I thought I was smart, but it was too much of a gap and plus the high school prep I had was nothing like for this, so it was really — and so I decided the next semester I decided I'm going to take a couple other things — I took Introduction to Political Science and I was just in love. Now we're talking about Plato and Socrates; this is fantastic. So I just chose Political Science for my major and that's what I did. I interned in between though, for a veterinarian and so forth and talked to her and realized that — and she had a daughter — and she said it would be near impossible. You could try, but it would be near impossible to go through that schooling with a child. She said, “I don't think I could have — I couldn't have done it.” So it was kind of hard — trying to find my way at first and you don't want to

tank your GPA so I had to make a pretty quick decision, but I did and then I was surprised to see some people struggle with papers and I was like, How is that possible? How did you — in my own mind — How did you get a C? Like how? You've been here two years and you know the format by now — how does that even happen (laughs)? I could see that but I guess for some people that didn't work and for me, it worked.

SARFAN: That's great. Well, I'm curious about where you went after Smith and how Smith might have influenced your path later on.

SCANDALIS: I went to Harvard after Smith. At this point I spent a full four years here. Honestly on the road and I mentioned high school prep before and all along these years I'm thinking about how in my high school — I remember when we were supposed to go meet with our guidance counselor, you know, in 11th grade or something. And I remember it was my turn to go meet with him and I had absolutely no clue how to go to college — zero clue how to go to college. I just figured that's what you do and this is what's going to happen and I'm 16 years old, so I'm pretending like I know what's going on because he's talking to me as though I should. So I didn't want to embarrass myself, so I was like, Yeah. And I remember he said, "So, are you going to college?" and I'm like, Yeah, great. "Where are you thinking, UNH?" "No, I don't want to go to UNH. I don't want to be here." I was thinking maybe California because at the time I had heard that it was cheaper tuition. Anyway I had these thoughts, but had no direction whatsoever and he didn't offer it, so I ended up walking out of the office going, Great. I'm number 11 in my class. Thanks. My options are what UNH or the technical school? That's it? No one came to our high school, so the exposure was just nothing, so there was no way of knowing. And because my parents hadn't gone to college so they didn't know how to direct me. I got into Saint Anselms College, which is in Manchester, New Hampshire, but when I got the financial aid letter it said that my family portion would be \$8,000 a year and I never showed it to my parents because I thought that meant they had to write a check for \$8,000 and give it to the school. I didn't even understand financial aid. I'm only bringing this up because that's what drove me to the education program at Harvard because there was nobody in that high school directing kids that excelled, or anybody, in any way, shape or form. I didn't show them I got accepted and I wanted to go there but I let it go and I just threw it out because my parents can't write a check for \$8,000. Little did I realize that was financial aid (laughs). So I decided I wanted to go into education and be a guidance counselor and I worked with kids for several years in the upward bound program, and I went to Harvard Graduate School of Education right after Smith, but ultimately I decided I didn't want to pay for a third year at Harvard to be certified as a guidance counselor when I could just — I was tired at this point — it was six years of straight school and my daughter is getting older and I decided I would

just — I knew which classes I needed to take — Department of Education — I could just get myself certified. But unfortunately that was in the middle of the recession, so that was a bad time because that was like 2007-2008. It wasn't good. That's what happened to me after Smith and that's where I went, but it was funny — getting the acceptance from Harvard was like — it's probably because I'm here. That's why. I'm one of the lucky ones — thanks for the golden ticket (laughs). Here I go. But it wasn't as exciting as getting into Smith. It was like, Yeah, OK. Here we go. And I had safety schools — UMASS, Amherst lost my application — so that was fantastic. Wisconsin had a fantastic psychology program in adolescents; they rejected me. So I got into Columbia and Harvard. And I figured I should go to Harvard because it's closer to home and it's Harvard. And that I wouldn't have to move my daughter to Manhattan and try to navigate New York City with a first grader so that was that.

SARFAN: And then you ended up going into doing the guidance counselor work that you wanted to?

SCANDALIS: I actually ended up having my second daughter, and I did counseling work but then I had life changes that forced me into single parenthood again and so I decided this is where I'll remain. It's fine. I'm good with it. I'm good at it. I left Northampton and went back to New Hampshire to be near family and at that time I was trying to get a job but it didn't matter. In 2008 it did not matter. People were losing their homes; you still see the repercussions of people losing their homes. I didn't understand the affect of the economy at the time, but I'm telling you right now you'd be lucky if you got a phone interview. When you did get a phone interview, they would warn you, We have over 500 applicants. And so Harvard, Smith, it didn't matter anymore. Everyone else was from the same schools looking in Cambridge, looking around here, it was just — it was impossible — so unfortunately I started back at square one once I got back to New Hampshire and started back up with a Master's Degree as a legal secretary at the public defender.

SARFAN: Wow. Full circle.

SCANDALIS: Full circle. It was hard, but it was — at that time it was a bad time. I was navigating it on my own, so, but now I run our biggest office, so it's not so bad (laughs).

SARFAN: Well, my last question is — with all of this wealth of experiences and your two degrees and your parenthood experience, what advice would you offer the Smith students — or Adas specifically — just like what would you hope they get out of their Smith experience?

SCANDALIS: Community. Solid friendships. You need to connect with people. No matter what happens, and even having to go back to that position at the time was really hard to swallow, but nonetheless, you realize the education that you got here is just — well, and Harvard I guess, but — the education that you walk away with that is more than just the book education for any student here — is that you take with you for the rest of your life. It changes your perspective on the world when you get out. It's really amazing. Your perspective on people. Your ability to read people. Your understanding of where they came from. Your political views, everything has changed. It's a tool that you'll never lose, no matter what you end up doing with it. Maybe nothing. Maybe you end up staying home and having five children and your husband is a surgeon and you're a wife or whatever — you never lose that so — and when it gets hard you should go watch commencement because it really grounds you and brings you back and reminds you of why you are here. And that it will be you — because it's pretty powerful — go to commencement. Go to commencement.

SARFAN: Thank you so much.

SCANDALIS: Thank you.

Transcribed by: Terri Pease, June 14, 2015