

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Lisa Abrams, Class of 1990

Interviewed by
Izzy Levy, Class of 1990

May 22, 2015

Abstract

In this interview, Lisa Abrams discusses her introduction to Smith via a Mt. Holyoke graduate, her tight knit house community and the lasting relationships that resulted. Abrams also talks about her study abroad experience and how it impacted her return to campus, as well as her work study experience in the dean's office. She details her post Smith educational career and how invaluable her Smith education was in helping her to achieve her goals.

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: Abrams, Lisa. Interview by Izzy Levy. Video recording, May 22, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Lisa Abrams, 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:

LISA ABRAMS
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: Thank you for being here.

ABRAMS: Thank you for inviting me.

LEVY: So, I guess my first question for you is just to bring me back to when you first arrived at Smith. What were you feeling? What were you expecting?

ABRAMS: I had not visited campus, so I came sight unseen all the way from Tucson, Arizona. My mother brought me to campus. It was dark and dreary and rainy and she made us stop at the overlook off the highway. You know, where there's an historic overlook? I'll never forget that every time I drive by I think, oh my gosh, there's that overlook. I never ever would have stopped there except for that one time.

So it was a little bit overwhelming. I didn't know what to expect. I lived in Morris House so it was wonderful with a big sign outside and people greeting us and helping us move in. My roommate my first and second year happened to also be my best friend from seventh grade. So we requested each other as roommates and so it was great seeing her. I hadn't seen her for years, and everyone thought we would be – we wouldn't like each other, we wouldn't get along and she's still one of my closest friends.

LEVY: Excellent. What was your house community like?

ABRAMS: It was wonderful. I lived in the same house all four years. My junior year I was at Pomona for a semester. The exchange program used to be a year, but they reduced it to a semester because of the demand. So I was there my junior year, fall semester at Pomona, and then back at Smith my spring semester.

LEVY: How was that?

ABRAMS: Pomona?

LEVY: Yeah.

ABRAMS: Oh, it was totally different. I don't think I appreciated Smith until I left. It was at Pomona that I realized that there was a huge difference in the level of work that we were doing. At Pomona there was a lot of busy work, a lot of two-page papers that just kind of inundated your daily schedule. Whereas at Smith we did a lot more substantial work I felt.

The other issue was that at Smith if there was an option of going out with John, you would always consult with Jane first because Jane may be having something far more fun to do than going out with John. And at Pomona no one did that. There wasn't necessarily the same value that we placed on female friendships. So that was a huge eye opener for me. That was a turning point for me in terms of my love of the college.

LEVY: Cool. Were you in any clubs or organizations while you were at Smith?

ABRAMS: I was. I was in SOS, which I don't know if that's still around. And I can't remember – Service Organizations of Smith – and I played rugby my senior year – no, junior year and senior year. Let me think of other organizations. I was involved in the St. John's Episcopal Church so I was head of the Episcopalian fellowship for the college at St. John's. I can't remember what else. I worked. I worked in the dean's office. I worked my whole time here. So I worked in the kitchen my first year. Then I worked in the office of college relations, and then for the dean of multicultural affairs both my junior and senior year.

LEVY: How was it to sort of balance that work and school work and social – all of those components?

ABRAMS: I loved it. I loved the working. I loved having a paycheck. It was really nice to have some independence. It allowed me to pay for my own flights to and from Tucson to help my mom out because she was divorced my freshman year here and things were financially very, very difficult. So I liked to not feeling like I was a burden on her. So I didn't have to rely on her. I could make my own funds.

My senior year in the office I worked for, the dean's assistant was fired or quit so I ended up picking up many hours. I mean, I was probably working close to 25 to 30 hours a week in the dean's office. I think it helped me to learn to budget my time and manage it. It helped me learn how to manage my time really efficiently.

LEVY: Excellent. Do you feel like you were part of sort of any larger communities at Smith?

ABRAMS: My community at Smith really focused on my house. That was my home. Those women are still my closest friends today and even if we haven't seen each other in years, we can pick up as if it was yesterday. They are

the ones I can share my most intimate woes with and rely on in good times and bad times. They're amazing people. When you live with people for four years, you develop a connection that's not easily duplicated.

LEVY: How did Smith, do you think, change as you were here throughout the four years you were here?

ABRAMS: I don't know that I could identify in that short a period a change. I mean campus-wide a building went up. The Bass Hall went up my junior and senior year and I lived in Morris and so there was construction. All of sudden what was once an open space all of a sudden wasn't an open space. So that was a physical change. I remember that they gave us hard hats during the construction. I still have mine. It's like a Smith College hard hat. It's really funny.

There was a saying – they had all these signs that said, “As the floors go up, lower your blinds,” or something because the construction workers were sort of at eye level in our bedrooms. We never had any issues or anything, but I remember there were some funny slogans at the time to assist us with that change. But that wasn't a significant physical plant change. I don't know that I could identify a cultural or a political change of sorts when I was here.

LEVY: What was the political climate sort of like on campus at the time?

ABRAMS: I think, and I thought, that it was quite liberal. I remember there was only one republican in the house who identified herself as a republican, and that was my big sister who was also an Ada Comstock Scholar and I adored her. Even though her opinions were different than the vast majority of us, she was always able to articulate them. I think there was a sense of civility in that conversation that has been lost in some settings unfortunately.

There was some turmoil in regards to investment in South Africa that I remember. There were a lot of sit-ins. I think that was the time period when we stopped selling Coca-Cola products on campus. There were a number of really unfortunate racial incidents on campus. Horrible notes left on women's doors and no perpetrators ever found. A lot of candlelight vigils about that. It was a very sad time. It was embarrassing as a community and it got national attention and it was – I felt a deep sense, a kind of profound sense of sadness that someone would be so evil. And be in a place where we're meant to share ideas and learn and grow from one another and to want to silent someone because of the color of their skin or their ethnicity or national origin. It really was incomprehensible.

LEVY: Yeah. I know that at this point the media was starting to portray Smith as a lesbian institution?

ABRAMS: Absolutely.

LEVY: How did that play out on the ground at campus?

ABRAMS: I remember alum coming back for reunions or for whatever events, and I remember being asked on a panel, you know, did you feel you were compelled to be a lesbian or did you feel pressured? We all thought it was really funny because none of – I mean, I didn't wake up one day and choose to be heterosexual. So the way I looked at it was I assumed my friends who were lesbian didn't wake up one day and choose to be lesbian. They just were. And it wasn't an issue for us. It wasn't something that we thought about or talked about amongst ourselves. But it seemed to be a big topic for alum. Because it didn't really impact us in the classroom. No one really cared.

If someone was making out at Davis, the student center, if it was a heterosexual couple or a homosexual couple, we all felt uncomfortable because it was just inappropriate regardless of the sex or gender of the folks who were doing that. But it didn't – it never had an impact on me.

Now going back to Tucson, it certainly did. I mean, people assumed I was a lesbian. People would ask a lot of questions about that. Aren't they all lesbians there? There was also this notion – and I think it still exists today – that there are no lesbians on co-ed campuses. So, for example, the University of Arizona, obviously there are no lesbians there. Which is an absurdity. I mean Smith is just a safe place and a place where you're more likely to see two women holding hands because they know they're not going to be harassed or have things thrown at them or be assaulted, literally.

LEVY: It's funny that you said that. I have a friend who's coming to visit this weekend and she goes to the University of Arizona and she's gay. Anyway, sorry for that little divergence. So what was sort of the expectation for you and your peers as you were graduating?

ABRAMS: No one ever told us that life would be hard. No one every told us that we might fail. The expectation was that we were going to be successful professionals, marry, have children, and be able to do all of that without having a hair out of place. And no one ever talked about life's traumas. That things might always not go the way you anticipated them to go. Or your resume – something bad that happens in our life that you didn't plan may – it just may happen to you. There may be a death. There may be difficulties in your marriage. You may have a child who's born with a disability. Whatever that might be. No one ever prepared us for that.

We also didn't have the women in financial independence component. So things like mortgage or how to figure out what a car payment might be. I didn't learn any of that even though I was an economics major. So, I think when things became difficult, as life offers difficult things, that was a little bit of a shock to us. And a little bit of a setup for failure because

you felt like a failure since it wasn't meant to happen that way. And that's just the process of life, I suppose, is going through and learning that through failure you learn and you grow from it and you broaden your horizons and you become perhaps a more interesting person because you've weathered through some difficult times and used those difficult times to apply it to the future or help others. But that wasn't something that I expected at all.

I expected to be able to work full-time, have children, and it would be absolutely totally easy. A breeze. In fact, when I was pregnant with my first son, I was going to have 12 weeks off from work and I had never had 12 weeks off from work, and I intended to take tennis lessons. And I laugh and I'm like, oh my gosh. Yeah, no, I did not take tennis lessons. I didn't landscape the backyard as planned. I mostly cried. And no one told me that. No one talked about necessarily the struggles of leaving your child in daycare for the first time and going back to work. Or how you feel miserable like you're a miserable parent while you're at work and you feel like a miserable worker while you're at home. That was hard. Really hard.

LEVY: Where did you sort of end up after Smith? What was –

ABRAMS: I went straight to law school so I had no break in between Smith and graduate school and I would not recommend that for anyone. I think I would have gotten more out of graduate school had I had some life experience in terms of work experience. Although I probably had more work experience in that I'd worked at the office of college relations and the office of multiracial affairs I think it was called, or international affairs. So after law school I clerked for a judge and I worked as a public defender doing criminal defense work. I then went into in-house counsel for a very large school district in Tucson, Arizona then into private practice, then I was appointed to the bench in 2010. So I've been a judge since 2010. I've been on the family law bench, juvenile court bench and now I'm on the probate bench. I married in 1996 and had my first son in '97, my second son in 2001.

LEVY: So, I have a couple of wrap up questions as the time winds down. So Smith is sort of a place that's both very steeped in tradition and also constantly evolving. I asked you before how you thought Smith had changed during your time here. How do you think it's changed since you left?

ABRAMS: I see enormous changes. I see so many more opportunities for women with the engineering program, with the smaller – with the concentrations. And also with the shorter opportunities to go abroad or go somewhere else in the country.

The campus is far more diverse in terms of international students and one of the things that I think is so important and because I do admissions

work, I think if you do admissions work you can't represent the college as it was when you were there. You have to evolve with the college because I can't present the college as Smith in 1989 to a student and expect them to come to campus and everything I've told them about or some of the things at least aren't there.

When I was here, no one ever talked to me about the Peace Corps. I love seeing how many Smithies are involved in the Peace Corps projects. There was sort of an expectation that you either went to law school, medical school, or you went and worked for Arthur Anderson Consulting. I mean that was my impression. I don't know that that was accurate, but that was what I felt.

So as you grow older, you realize that you have all these other interests and you tap into them like cooking. Like I think I could have gone to culinary school, but no one ever talked to me about that. But I don't know that I would have known to raise it as a possibility. That's something that as you sort of evolve in your career you sort of pick up on. But what I think Smith gives you is the ability to identify that and say, if I want to do that now I can. I could try to figure out how to make that change. Or pursue that in a more – as a vocation or as a hobby.

That's what I love about my Smith education. I think Smith taught me how to write, how to speak, how to think. Those skills apply no matter what you choose to do in life. Whether you choose to be a professor in the field of medicine or an engineer or a teacher in the first grade or a judge or a stay at home parent. You have to be able to communicate effectively on all different levels. That's what Smith gave me. It's an incredibly powerful experience and something I live every single day. Truly. I do a lot of public speaking. I don't think I ever do a public speech without mentioning Smith.

LEVY: That's awesome. What sort of advice do you think you would give current or future Smithies?

ABRAMS: Just to really explore the college catalog. Look through all of the sections. I never knew that I'd be interested in peace and war studies until I came here and I took a class just because I happened to flip open the catalog.

You know, follow your heart. Push yourself. Challenge yourself. Put yourself in uncomfortable positions. Don't stick with something that you know you'll always be good at because you may limit your options.

Ask for help. It's OK to acknowledge that you're not going to be perfect at everything. And there are no perfect relationships in the world. There are no perfect marriages. You will struggle, but you will also persevere. I think Smithies are resilient. We're really a resilient group of people and we're passionate. And we ask questions. We're not afraid to put ourselves out there and take a risk. That's what I would share with the next generation.

LEVY: Great. And what sort of hopes do you have for Smith as an institution going into the future?

ABRAMS: I'm convinced that we remain committed to the mission, which is educating the finest women in the country, in the world. Being a global community, one in which we have value added for students. I know that tuition is extraordinarily high and the value added on lives on for years and years and years.

So many women have come back this weekend for a reason because this place gave them so much and that's such a powerful thing to have that network of women of all ages. I've met so many women since I've graduated who are not from my class year, but who've become very close friends and I can count on and I think that will continue. I'm absolutely convinced that that tradition of women supporting women will continue.

I'm delighted. I'm thrilled with the new admissions policy. I think that it's a fantastic step forward and I think it shows that Smith remains committed to the mission, but also is committed to evolving with not just new words and new definitions. But with acknowledging modern society. And gender and identity isn't necessarily attached to genitalia. I think that's great. I'm proud of that.

LEVY: Great. Is there anything else that you'd like to touch on that we didn't bring up or –

ABRAMS: I don't think so. I just think this a beautiful campus and it's a place where I found my voice. It really truly is. My dad went to the Naval Academy and so he offered me his sword, I remember that and I remember thinking, I don't want his sword. I want to go to Smith College. I actually only applied to women's colleges and that was because a woman from Mount Holyoke and I was so taken by her, I could probably do one of those crime scene sketches. I could probably do that years and years later who was so dynamic and who talked about her friendships and her classes and her professors and that connection that she had. I really wanted to be exactly like her. It was through Mount Holyoke that I found Smith and Wellesley and I only applied to all three and had to choose between the three.

One of the things I'll touch on, too, is your relationship with your professors. I mean, tomorrow I'm having lunch with Professor Lewis Wilson who has remained – was first my professor and is now a dear friend. That's remarkable after all these years. That's special and it's something to be cherished. I think our community is such a diverse and complex and evolving place. It's an amazing place to go. If I had a daughter, I'd be heartbroken if she didn't come to Smith. I could only hope my boys might, might marry a Smithie. But otherwise, I have a niece who I have my hopes pinned to (laughs). That's it.

LEVY: Awesome. Thank you so much.

ABRAMS: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Janice King, June 2015