

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Mary Jo Deering, Class of 1965*

Interviewed by  
Hana Sarfan, Class of 2016

May 15, 2015

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Mary Jo Deering discusses her transition from public high school and the inspiration she derived from Smith's academic community. She recalls her junior year abroad in France and her introduction to oral history as a result of that trip. Deering also recounts the first African American Studies courses offered at Smith and the resulting contestation. She credits her Smith education in fostering a set of critical thinking skills that remain with her today.

## **Restrictions**

None.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Terri Pease, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Deering, Mary Jo. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Mary Jo Deering, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Deering, Mary Jo. Interview by Hana Sarfan. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Mary Jo Deering, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 15, 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 15, 2015 with:

MARY JO DEERING

By: HANA SARFAN

SARFAN: So what were your first reactions to Smith when you first got here, how did you feel about it?

DEERING: Well, I'm sure everyone says overwhelmed. I came from a public school in the Midwest; had never visited Smith; had never been to any college campus. So I'm sure I felt overwhelmed but certainly excited. I wanted to come here, I researched it. I wanted the best school I could get into and I liked Smith because even back then it emphasized turning out women who worked, women who did things, women who made a difference and that was what I wanted, so that was what I was really looking forward to with great trepidation.

SARFAN: Did you feel that expectation enforced when you were a student here?

DEERING: Yes I really did. I know it may sound a little hokey, but I really came for the education. I had loved libraries all my life. I loved reading, and I just loved Nielsen Library. I loved studying next to Paradise Pond, but also I was telling someone at lunch that probably one of the best things about my years at Smith was meeting people so much smarter than me. I thought I was smart when I came in and being around people who you knew were really going to be world class in their time was very good for me. Not just humbling, but in a very positive way.

SARFAN: What was your house community like?

DEERING: Well my first two years were in Cushing and I have to say I wasn't all that happy there. I realize in retrospect that on one hand having later taken the Myers-Briggs, I'm closer to the introvert than the extrovert side. Secondly I found some clicks of people who had come from New England or they had gone to prep schools or they knew each other and there seemed to be a lot of people who had friends already and the combination of me being a little bit more introverted and not knowing anybody – I didn't feel a real glue. I did sing in the house octet or something, and that was wonderful

because I loved music. It's not that they weren't nice, it's just that I sort of had that feeling that in retrospect I was probably the introvert in me. In junior year I went abroad for a year, which I had looked forward to as a chance to get away and went back to Dawes afterward – which was in the French house – and that was wonderful because having been away for a year, felt very grown-up and having been introduced to wine. Dawes was a small house and it was run by a little old lady who looked like she should be baking cookies but who, in fact, had been in Paris in the 1930s and who let us have wine in our rooms and who just said, “Now girls don't do anything that gets me into trouble.” And so we didn't. We were all very good with our little stash of Gallo wine up in our closets. And now actually I think I had a very good time. I had a wonderful junior year abroad which got me into oral history, actually.

SARFAN: How did you get involved in oral history?

DEERING: Well I studied under a man who is a pioneer of European unity. He had been looking at European unity way back in the 1930s and had written some important things in the '30s and throughout the war – right after the war – and he was a real visionary. This was a time when the more – by the time I was studying there – Europe had taken the more economic route. He had a cultural vision for Europe. I was very intrigued by this man who was a visionary, who was sort of fighting against what had become the dominant approach which was the economic and the financial emphasis and he still believed that there was a better way. I thought to myself, I would really like to capture him; I would really like to write about him. There ought to be a methodology available, but of course there wasn't.

It was only later, after I graduated and several years later and moved back to where I am now, in Bethesda, that I came across a little snippet of someone teaching oral history in their community. I thought, That sounds like what I want, so I took that class and ended up teaching it and then ended up going back to Geneva and doing a PhD at the University of Geneva and being able to interview this man as the subject of my dissertation and it took me a long time – I eventually went through a divorce and was a single parent – but I finally got through it and the book was actually published by the Jean Monet Foundation in Loewson, which is just up the lake from Geneva, and Jean Monet, was the founder of Europe, but they were very impressed with this book on Denny Dehoshma so they published it and gave me a 25,000 Swiss franc prize at the time, and then just three months ago, out of the blue, I get an email from the European Parliament saying that my book has been listed as one of the hundred best books on Europe. And this is a little thing – I'm sure it's totally out of print – and in the commentaries that introduced the book – several prominent people wanted to make introductions to the book – several of them sort of vaguely alluded to the fact that here I was taking this live individual and speaking with him and yet one of them even made

the point – and yet Madame Deering – everyone in France is Madame – and I guess I wasn't Madame at that point – they made a rather condescending remark, I thought, about how – sort of like – although this was oral history she did manage to use it judiciously and integrate it successfully with other more traditional sources like that, so that made me feel like quite a triumph.

SARFAN: What else interested you academically while you were at Smith?

DEERING: Well it's interesting, when I was a sophomore I took a course on African studies. Back then – which would have been probably the '62-'63 semester – there weren't area studies and a woman named Gwendolyn Carter had created the Smith College African Studies Department, and she had to fight Smith College to get it accepted because it was a new thought – there were still very siloed disciplines. So this was the first trans-disciplinary concentration and I took it and it was the time of African independence, so there was such high hopes and I made friends with some African students – there was a much smaller number back then – probably could've counted them on one hand – and really got very engrossed in Africa and it was a very promising and exhilarating time.

What's interesting is that there was a program of community service in Africa that had been founded by some New England colleges called "Crossroads Africa" sort of a pre-cursor to the Peace Corps because the Peace Corps really hadn't launched yet. This had been going on for five or maybe more years and that was a summer program where students would go and do exactly what the Peace Corps volunteers do and I got accepted to it. But I also then got accepted to junior year abroad and I always use the analogy of the road not taken, because I know if I had gone to Africa I would be a different person than having gone to Geneva, Switzerland and traveling around Europe. There's no doubt that my heart probably wanted to go to Africa more, but in all honesty I knew I had to get away from Smith. The thought of a year abroad was just too much to pass up.

I do want to get onto the record a story about one of my – two of my – most favorite professors, if I may. They were both, actually, I think they were both in my freshman year – but the first one was definitely in my freshman year – so instead of taking the general introduction to history that everyone took – the survey of western civilization – I took ancient studies because I always like mythology – and there was a man, Cohen, and he was tall and very dramatic and he always wore bow ties and he always lectured in the larger auditoriums, and I've never forgotten his closing lecture – this was, after all, about the ancient world and how are you going to wrap up the ancient world. So the final lecture he's talking about the death of Constantine's mother. Now you may recall your history enough to recall that Constantine converted to Christianity and that was what really set off the – started an awful lot of the major push – and so

when Constantine's mother died, they had come I think from North Africa or somewhere and anyway she died somewhere else – and traditionally in the culture of their upbringing you needed to be buried in your home soil, because that was the way they thought about life and death – you needed to go back there – and as he reads her words it's something like, I care not that I am not buried in my home soil because I know that my Lord God will take me to heaven and my home forever will be in heaven. And then he stands like this, And that ladies was the end of the ancient world. The lights go down and he walks off stage and that was the end of the class. It was historically a sound, even if dramatic, way of making your point, but it was.

And the other woman I wanted to mention – there was a husband and wife team who were in the Philosophy Department and they were national leaders, they were like the Presidents of the American Association of Philosophy or something and they specialized in logic, although I took the introductory philosophy course, and I took the introductory philosophy course thinking, I want to think big thoughts, I want to understand big thoughts. In a way, that was probably the single most important class I took because you did go through the various schools of philosophy one after the other and each time she made you get deeply inside them and understand what was strong about them before you could then see what left them behind. And the point that she made that is a good one intellectually, is if you want to progress beyond something that you think isn't quite right – and this is good for people in social movements – always find the strongest point in your opposition because once you can undermine the strongest point, then it will collapse or move – or there will be grounds on which to really move forward. Whereas if you take the “low hanging fruit” and you pick away at them or argue with something that is really peripheral to the core of their mission, they can live without it. It's like, Sure you can hack off my hand, I can still work – and I don't mean to get too bloody in my analogies – but really go for what is the strongest thing which every bit of their thinking and logic depends, and understand the logic yourself so that you can see why it was strong, and then find the weakness. And then find what's new or different or has to change. And that has stuck with me throughout my life.

It gets to be a little bit of a disadvantage, especially – you're going into women's studies where things are highly political and even political with a small “p” – among the different groups and factions, and I saw this is what happened with Denny Dehoshma, he always tried to understand the Nazis from the inside out, when he saw it rising up and he was viciously attacked, simply because he tried to explain – he was vehemently anti-Nazi – but he first started by trying to understand what was bringing people there and so if you take this approach which I think is intellectually the best – which is understand your opposition first – and then find why you have to move on. But just like he was, and I'm sure it will be the same in many social and political movements, there is a

conventional wisdom and the people who think they are radical have an awful lot of consensus think. It really gathers around them, especially in social history – it sort of gloms on and this is the new new thing, this is the new new idea, this is the new new cause. So it's important but dangerous I think sometimes – or risky – to take that approach.

SARFAN: That's amazing that it stuck with you after all this time, too.

DEERING: That's what I got out of Smith. I really feel that intellectually and as a character it did change me.

SARFAN: How do you feel changed by it?

DEERING: Again, I think that I genuinely do always understand the other side. It drove my kids crazy. They wanted a mom who just stood up with them and said, "Of course you're right, the teacher scolded you or the teacher sent home a nasty note," instead of saying, "Oh, I'm going to defend my child," I would always say, "Well, what did you really do?" And to this day when I hear things I can always first start by stating the other side of the argument. Again, it drives some people crazy because they think, Well why aren't you just building (inaudible) this is what I believe, why can't you just join what I believe? And I say, "No, I have to think a little bit more critically." Anyway, I think intellectually it changed me that way, plus I married someone I met junior year abroad. I went back there – I had a daughter who was born there; my son went a sophomore year to Geneva to another college, so Geneva became very much of our family DNA, I feel like.

SARFAN: Are there any big controversies that you can remember as being important while you were at Smith?

DEERING: Well we of course were coming through the beginnings of the civil rights movement. This was before the big march on Washington but the Freedom Riders were already going down. I don't think many people on campus were paying that much attention to it. I think that there were some people who were very engaged. I think there were some Smith students and Smith faculty probably did go down and participate, so it wasn't so much a controversy on campus. In terms of life at Smith, our president was – I think most people agree – tended to be rather sexist (laughs) and it was a woman who came after him finally and that was the first woman president. So I think there was, no doubt, some feeling that – although I don't recall discussing it – that perhaps in some ways Smith wasn't living up to its stated vision always. It certainly did over all the years, there's no denying it – they were wonderfully supportive in so many ways. But there would be these little small, subtle ways when it was clear that you were expected to get married when you got out and so I think ours was that generation

that perhaps first began to feel that tension rise between the older expectations of women and women creating their own new expectations, so that's what I remember.

SARFAN: Yeah, that was President Mendenhall.

DEERING: Yes it was.

SARFAN: What about him?

DEERING: He was just sort of old school. I personally didn't ever experience it but I would just say in terms of the tone and the culture, it was – perhaps it's just fair to say old school – he was just old school – and so he was not encouraging or taking the lead in supporting these newer ways of thinking about women in society that were beginning to percolate and arise on campus. I'm sure that there was some on campus – and maybe they were professors – who may have felt it more strongly. But I took a history course from him my senior year which was in his home, so he always offered us tea and cookies in his personal study and he was very rigorous in what he taught us. We had to write a five-page paper every single week on top of anything else we were doing. And in retrospect that, too, was probably one of the greatest skills I ever learned is how to write – how to write well – and how to gather your facts, get it all together and do a good job.

SARFAN: So Smith is a place that has a lot of traditions and also has been changing a lot. Are there any changes that you have thoughts about that you noticed either while you've been on campus today or just over the years?

DEERING: I think as I've watched it from afar – and it has been afar – I think I mentioned to you earlier that I only came back for my 25<sup>th</sup>, so I haven't been this closely associated with it as perhaps some others – but what several trends that I noticed certainly pleased me a lot – I think I mentioned that when I came there was still a fairly strong proportion of people who had come from private prep schools. And it was very clear over the years that Smith began to diversify in many ways – first it diversified more socio-economically and then racially and then ethnically. It already had – and I think Smith always had – some international outlook and always had international students – but again they were relatively few and they were relatively few people of color in our generation, so it pleased me no end to see that. I like the sense of socio-economic diversity because I have a granddaughter, she's 11, but my daughter and son-in-law are both just high school graduates, and they run a working farm and they are as poor as church mice because there's no money in farming but it's a life that is rich, and so I asked myself, "Would I like my granddaughter to come here and what would she think, and what would her parents think –



my own daughter, who didn't go onto college – what would they feel and how would she feel about coming to a place like Smith? Would she have a positive or negative experience?" I think five or ten years ago – certainly in my day I know people like my own granddaughter felt very much like outcasts I think here – some of them went on to do just fine and just great but the culture overall was still a little old and heavy, and closed. So I'm going to come away from this weekend, I think, because that's the way my thinking is going – my feelings, my sensations are going – that, Yes she would probably do okay here, I mean from that social and cultural perspective – I think it would be welcoming for a person like her who comes from a – I mean, all her clothes come from Goodwill, but on the other hand, she gets to run and ride her pony across 115 acres, you know, real free range – accompanied by a goat, and a dog. So, and again, I think the international outreach as I watched the Smith magazine arrive; I think that you can sense the increasing opening to the world and the emphasis on Smith people going out into the world and Smith welcoming people from the world. I had a delightful ambassador who I met here – that's what they are calling them – I'll say for the record – the young women who are assigned to each class. There's about five or so each class – these are not just the ordinary greeters – but usually rising seniors and she's from Ghana. My word – such an impressive young woman, just absolutely amazing – and it's just so nice to know that Smith is educating these people and they will go back wherever they want to go and will bring a Smith education with them, and the Smith experience and all that and will percolate out into the globe.

SARFAN: Definitely. OK, my final question because we are running out of time is – how did Smith influence your life after – how do you see – I guess either in terms of career or personally, socially?

DEERING: Well I think I sort of touched on a lot of it throughout but I wrote in our class book – which was – our reunion theme is odysseys – I honestly didn't keep a whole lot of close, personal friends from my days here and yet I feel that it shaped me. I met my husband. My graduate work was done as a direct outgrowth of my junior year abroad. Then I leaped career wise – again I was telling you that paradoxically I was able to enter health policy that I now do just because I knew how to do oral history transcripts, so I could be an editor, so I could enter as an editor at a low position and work my way up into health policy. So I would not be where I am – and I'm a very happy person. I think I've got a very balanced life – and I don't think I'd be there without Smith. Thank you.

SARFAN: Great. Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by, Terri Pease (June 14, 2015)*