

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Pamela Jeanne Akiri, Class of 1965

Interviewed by
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 15, 2015

Abstract

In this interview, Pamela Jeanne Akiri discusses her academic life at Smith, pursuing a zoology major and how her Smith career influenced her post-grad career choices. She details her first marriage, the difficulties she and her husband faced as an interracial couple in the U.S. in the late 1960s and their subsequent move to Nigeria for work.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Catherine Graham, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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

Transcript

Bibliography: Akiri, Pamela Jeanne. Interview by Izzy Levy. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Pamela Jeanne Akiri, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 15, 2015, with:

PAMELA JEANNE AKIRI
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: So this is Izzy Levy. I am interviewing Pamela Jeanne Akiri at the Sophia Smith Archives in Smith College. It is May 15th, 2015, and we're interviewing for the Alumni Oral History Project. So my first question for you is just to take me back to what it was like your very first day at Smith, when you arrived. What were you feeling? What were you expecting? What was going on in your head?

AKIRI: Well, I was very happy to be here. I was sort of like steeled for the charge ahead, which was, you know, to go all the way through, and be successful in getting a degree.

LEVI: (Technical comments, and sound file change) All right, sorry to interrupt. Just pick up — start from the beginning.

AKIRI: OK.

LEVY: So this is Izzy Levy. I'm interviewing Pamela Jeanne Akiri at the Sophia Smith Archives at Smith College. It's May 15th, 2015, and we're interviewing for the Alumni Oral History Project. So for my first question I want you to just take me back to when you first arrived at Smith. What were you feeling? What were you expecting? What was going through your head?

AKIRI: Well, I was feeling very happy that I came here, and I was steeling myself for the — for the job ahead, which was to be — to work until I was graduated, with a good standing. And I was — when we went to the first all-college meeting in John C. Greene Hall, with Mendenhall there, he was saying that one-third of the class was valedictorians. And I said to myself, What am I doing here? (laughs) I have to work like crazy. So that's basically the way it was. It was my first time away from my parents, and I didn't think it would be too much of a problem, but it felt lonely, you know, and I knew that when they first came up, around Thanksgiving. Then I broke down; I cried, you know. (laughs) But that was the only time. So it was a — it was — it was a good experience.

My parents had not gone to college. My grandmother had, but my parents were just around the time of the Depression when my dad would have been — gone to college. So as much he liked, he would have liked to, he — they didn't have the means. So I didn't know anything about what to expect, and I had gone to a simple school, Marysville High School, with only — only 43 percent of the students went to any college whatsoever, and only two of us went to what you'd call Ivy League colleges; one to Stanford, and myself to Smith.

So it was like we had never done notes from, you know, lecture. Everything had been worksheets, and multiple choice questions, and all that kind of stuff, and it was like this was baptism by fire. (laughs) Be thrown in the — in the pond, and swim or sink. So when I went to the first history lecture, I was just sitting there, and the guy is talking, and I'm thinking, What do I do with this? I have no idea. And I found out recently that they have a new program now, AEMES, that kind of helps kids who — whose parents have not been to college, and they don't have any particular, you know, knowledge of what to expect. That they have a special program for them now. So.

LEVY: So what was your house community like?

AKIRI: Well, given what I just said about my feeling about what my job here was, it was really — that was my job. And so I did not have a lot of social interaction, because I had a very strict schedule for myself. I went — I got up at seven, went to breakfast, I went to classes, I did my study, I went back to bed at ten o'clock. That was it. And I did that all four years. (laughs)

LEVY: So what did you study?

AKIRI: Zoology. In fact, I came here thinking I might be a language major, and then within the first three months I knew, Oh, man, this is what I love. I just love it. And so I would study everything else first so studying zoology could be dessert. (laughs)

LEVY: And did the fact that Smith was just a women's institution, did that have an effect on the way that you sort of interacted with your academic world?

AKIRI: Probably, because I didn't really think of it that much. I just knew it was a really good place. I hadn't come here ahead of time, but I knew it was a good place. I liked what they said about it, I liked the idea. My father was in approval, my mother said it was too expensive. And so, anyway, I did come, and the fact that it was all girls, it just meant that there was no hindrance from guys. Because, for the most part, and especially at that time, 50 years ago, if guys were in class, you were expected to, you know, let them lead. And in this case, you know, the brightest were

always girls, because that's what we had here. (laughs) So. And there was no interference. So I really — I personally liked it, yeah.

LEVY: Did you have any professors or academic mentors that you really felt a close relationship with?

AKIRI: Well, my — my mentor was Elizabeth Horner, who was here for a very long time. I'm not sure whether you ever touched bases with her, but it wasn't too long ago that she — she died, but she was here until she died. And she was in anatomy, she gave the anatomy course, comparative anatomy, and she was also my mentor after the first year. They gave me somebody who didn't know what to do with me (laughs) the first year. And so after that I never went back to — to see him. And then the next thing was that when I took anatomy I was just — I really liked her quiet precision. And so she was my mentor for the next — for the rest of the time. I took everything that you — that was offered at the time in zoology, some in botany, some in geology, meteorology, chemistry; just not physics. (laughs) I couldn't believe — I did well in organic chemistry, but I couldn't believe the panel member today, and neither could anybody else, the other alumni in the audience, when one of them, the girl from Lebanon, said her favorite course was organic chemistry. (laughs) People just laughed. (laughs) Yeah.

LEVY: Yeah, I can't believe that either. (laughs) So during our research we found that social life was very — and house life was very structured during the sixties.

AKIRI: Yes.

LEVY: What was your experience of that?

AKIRI: Well, my schedule was, as I said, pretty — pretty straight, but that was easy because the house structure was also straight. They would have the meals at 7:00 — I think it was 7:00, 12:00, and — was it 6:30, or something, or 7:00 in the evening? I think it was 6:30. It was six-something in the evening. And so you would come — you had to come down at that time. You'd stand out, you'd wait there until the doors opened. The dining room doors were closed, and then they would open, then everybody goes in. And then if you came like five, ten minutes later, you didn't go there. Do something else for breakfast, or lunch, or whatever the meal was. And then you would all sit down, and the person who was sitting in one — one seat, like if the table is like this, this seat here, they would go and get the food from the kitchen, and bring it back to the table, and then a — one person at the table would just take that, and they would serve the dish for everybody, and pass it around. And then at the end, you waited until — oh, nobody started eating until everybody was served, and nobody left until everybody was finished; and then everybody went out together. So. And we had — we had — we

had to come in by 10:00, and the house mother, there was a house mother there. And on the weekends our — boys weren't let in on the weekdays — or maybe just for an hour, or something — but on the weekends they could come in, but you had to have your door open, and three feet on the ground. (laughs) And we had Thursday inspection of the rooms, of our rooms. I don't know what you do now, but I know that most of that is not — not the case anymore.

LEVY: And what was sort of the general student opinion of that? Did people think it was too strict? Did they just not really have opinions on it?

AKIRI: Well, no, I think they thought it was too strict. I didn't care. It was fine with me. But, yeah, I think they thought it was too strict.

LEVY: So to what extent, I guess, then did students have a role in making decisions about their social life, or about the — the house life?

AKIRI: I don't know. It really wasn't my — my thing.

LEVY: Right.

AKIRI: I really didn't care much about the social life, at that time. (laughs)

LEVY: So what was the political climate like on campus at the time? It was — seems like everything was sort of ramping up in the sixties, in terms of civil rights and that.

AKIRI: Yes. Oh, I remember a lot of — a lot of talk about that in history, and in some of the other courses. They would — they would talk about a lot of injustice in that. And I remember — I remember seeing Hubert Humphrey came to the campus, and he — he gave a talk. My parents were Republicans. I didn't — I didn't have any leaning in any particular way, but I just thought being Catholic, and, you know, you're supposed to be OK with everybody, that the whole thing about racism was simply not right. So that's about what I saw. I'm sure some people who were not in zoology saw a lot more (laughs) about the political environment. Yeah.

LEVY: So where have you gone, and who have you become since Smith?

AKIRI: Well, the — probably the thing that surprises people the most is that after — when I went to Cornell, I was still doing biological sciences; did ecology, and vertebrate biology. I was there for three years. Had a Master of Science. And then I met my first husband, who was Bright Akiri. And he was Nigerian, and he was in the States for his higher degree. He was also in my class, because I was a teaching assistant at that time. And he was here, and he was going to be here until the Biafran War ended. So we got married in '68, and I had my first son in

— in '68, at the end of the year. And we — we went up to the — well, actually, the racism was very clear. The racism was very clear. If we went into a restaurant, you know, everybody would look, and scowl, and whatever; and the same thing with a store. And it was just at that point where they couldn't outwardly do something, but you saw that they wanted to.

And when — I was surprised when my husband actually went to a job that was open. He called in, and they said, "Yeah, it's open, come on in for an interview." And he opened the door, and they said, "It's taken." This was on Cornell campus. It was like, OK, well, that's surprising. And then when we went up to Rome, New York, at the apartment that we wanted to try for, I went myself so that it would — and they kept probing, you know, trying to see was I hiding something. So, anyway, we did get the apartment, and they didn't like it, but then they couldn't do anything about it. So we were there for a while. It was Ringdahl Court. And then we went to Nigeria. I taught in a school, actually, there for about a — for a year, and then the war ended. And that was January, 1970.

So then we made plans to go to Nigeria, and there were no transportation systems that went — no commercial transportation systems that were going in, because of the war zone. So we went on a cargo ship. (laughs) It was the three of us; my first son, and myself, and my husband. And there was — there were two other people: one guy, one woman. That was it. Those were all the passengers on the ship. And then just the crew, and the cargo. So it took, basically, five weeks, four or five weeks to cross. It was just — and it went to Liberia. Stayed four days out there waiting for them to — for a place to dock. So we just waited. And then we went into Monrovia; had a look around. And then we went — we went to, let's see, Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone. We just stopped there. And then Douala, Cameroon. And, again, we just stopped there, and then we went back to Lagos. And then we had to wait there. And I can remember the first time that my son had this Nigerian food. (laughs) They said, "Oh, it's not hot." Yes. It has a cup of hot pepper in it. (laughs) So, anyway, my son, after being told that a couple of times, did not trust anybody saying anything about food. He didn't want to eat it. If he didn't know what it was, he didn't want to eat it.

So, at any rate, after a couple of days we stayed with somebody that my husband knew. Then we booked — we were able to get the first ship in after the Biafran War to go to Port Harcourt. So the captain, and the — it was called the Herbert Macaulay. The captain, and the other person who was, you know, basically, in charge of the ship, were British, and there was one room that they could put somebody white. (laughs) So my husband, and I, and my son had a decent room. Everybody else was like sardines on the deck, because these were all refugees, and they were going back the first time to get back. So, anyway, we're going, and it took us a couple of days to get there. So the entire trip was about six weeks, from New York to Port Harcourt.

So, anyway, we're going up — Niger is a delta, the Niger Delta, and there's a lot of rivers going in. And there's a village, Bugama, towards the end, and you just go in past there. And it's just mangrove; it's a lot of mangrove. And you're just going, and going, and going, and going in this cargo ship. And then I said, I said to my husband, "I think this is Port Harcourt." He said, "Oh, no, this can't be Port Harcourt, because it's supposed to be very busy." It was just dead. OK. So we get there. Well, I had had a course from Margaret Bates here at Smith about Africa. So I was pretty aware of how Africa is, and he was not — he did not give me any rosy stories. He told it like it was, you know, the things to expect. So I was like, No, I think this is Port Harcourt. This is what you described. And, sure enough, it was Port Harcourt.

And so we stopped, and then we had to just simply stay there, because in Port Harcourt, at that time, there were four vehicles. (laughs) And one of them happened to belong to my husband's cousin, but he had to find someone, because you can't — you couldn't communicate. So nobody knew when he was coming, or if he was coming. So he went off; one day, two days, three days. And so on the third day we knew, Well, one way or the other our stuff has to come off here, because the ship was leaving. And so, fortunately, he found his cousin, and his cousin had a truck. And the other two, this one or — there were two cars, which you could hear coming a half mile away, and one other vehicle; a van, or something. But, at any rate, this one was just what we needed, because we hadn't brought that much, but I did have my — my — a crib for my son, and I had — we had stuff, because we knew it was the war. So we brought actually food. We brought salt, we brought, you know, our clothes, we brought — but no, not really furniture. But we brought all of that.

And so we did get off the ship, and the ship went, and we — we stayed. But it was Port Harcourt, and that's just about — it was just deserted. And people who were there, they just — they had tatters, and not much food, and whatever. So, anyway, we went to his house, and so he had a place, and it was on the top floor, so we were up there. And so I put my son's bed, and so on, and so forth. But it was hard to get something for him to eat, because he had been eating, you know, baby food, and now there was nothing. OK.

So the next thing was to get jobs; find out, you know, what we can do. And so he eventually got a job in the Ministry of Agriculture, and I got a job teaching. And they didn't even know, when I said, "Smith College," "Well, I don't know. What is that?" OK. (laughs) I was like, What do you mean, What is that? So the first time I went to the — to do the shopping, I went to this big store; it was a British store, Leventis. And I'm looking, and there's one piece of meat in the meat shelf; one. That's it. OK? And otherwise you go to the market, and you go to the market and you have to — you have to bargain. That's something new. And also: where are we going to stay? So we were there for a couple of months in his place, and then his — my husband's brother had been out scouting for a place for us.

And in that — in the delta the — the Ibos had occupied a lot of the land in the — in what is called — what was called then the River State. And so when they lost the war, and Nigeria was again one, and there wasn't a separate entity, Biafra, then all of these places that had been occupied by the Ibos were empty. So my husband's brother put his print on one of them, and that became our house. (laughs) So. So we moved out to 5 Eboquay Street, and then we started to just set things up. And my husband went to the market, and he found, you know, the spoils of war, like one pound for one dining table; that sort of thing.

And so we put a few things in the house, and — and we started. And I was actually expecting at the time; second child. And that — that was, let's see. We got there in — on July 7th, and there were four days, nonstop, of absolute buckets of rain. Buckets of rain; never stopped. And so, at any rate, I — when I got to this other place, 5 Eboquay Street, we started to set up, set up a house. And I got — he got a job that I think it paid like 65 pounds a month. It was, you know, British pound. Supposed to be something, you know. And I think I had something that was 70 pounds a month. But it's still like that's not that much money. (laughs) And you go to the market, and it's very difficult to get — to get anything, and you have to bargain.

So I was — I was pregnant. We didn't have that much to eat. And at the time, just around September or so, I — I went into labor. And I had had the first child here, in Tompkins County in Ithaca, New York, where Cornell was. No problem. But I saw stuff, and — because they put a mirror over. And then this one I just — my husband went out four times to find somebody to come, because we had no car. So he went out at night. This was about three in the morning it started, and he went out, and come back. Nobody — couldn't find anybody. Went out, come back; couldn't find anybody. So finally he came back with a midwife, but — and then at that time the baby was actually coming. And you normally have somebody like that's called a baby nurse, or a house girl. And she just took one look at the situation, and ran out, and never came back.

So what happened is that baby died. It was born gray — full term, but it was gray. It never made a noise; although both my husband and the midwife heard a noise, like a cry. So I don't know what that was, but I didn't hear it. And the baby was born — it was placenta previa, which I'm not sure if you know what that is, but you go right through the placenta, the baby goes right through the placenta. So it was three hours, and that was over. And the baby was another boy. And they just took the baby, and they buried it outside in the yard. No anything. But I — it may not be a nice thing to say, but it was the best way to just get over. You can't undo it, so you need to just go forward. My husband went to work the next day, and I — I had lost a lot of blood, so I was in bed for — for a while, for a few days, but I — I didn't start work for another like, you know, two, three weeks. And then I went to — I started teaching.

So, anyway, so that was I went — I was there in Nigeria for 17 years, and I taught at the girls school. It was called Holy Rosary girls school.

LEVY: (technical comments)

AKIRI: And do what?

LEVY: We would love to talk with you for like an hour or two, I think, actually, but our problem is we have another interview coming right behind you.

AKIRI: OK.

GEIS So let's just — I'll see if they're here.

LEVY: And then, hopefully, we can keep going because—

AKIRI: OK, if you want to—

LEVY: —this story is so interesting.

AKIRI: If you want to just ask questions, you can just ask questions.

LEVY: I have just one wrap-up question, so I guess we'll wait to see what Kate sees. So I'm just going to ask one wrap-up question, I guess, since there's somebody else—

AKIRI: OK.

LEVY: —waiting. Which is: what hopes you have for Smith's future as a school, as an institution? What hopes do you have for the students?

AKIRI: I think I don't have to hope. I think that what I see here is that the students are getting everything they need. The idea of it being a turning point is something that I think most of them seem to feel. When we were listening to the panel, certainly all of those students were — I mean, you could tell that they really — it made a big difference for them. And I can say that it certainly made a difference for me. Coming here, what I found was what I could do. And I found out that I could think as well as anybody. So I didn't have to just take somebody else's idea for something, somebody says something, I accept it. No. I can think through it; I can figure it out myself. (laughs) And I think that's what happens with the students who come here. They get a good sense that they can do what they need to do; I can do it kind of attitude.

LEVY: Awesome.

AKIRI: OK.

LEVY: Thank you so much.

AKIRI: (laughs) OK.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Catherine Graham, June 2015.