

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Shamiram Feinglass, Class of 1990*

Interviewed by  
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 22, 2015

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Shamiram Feinglass discusses her arrival at Smith, house community and rich social life. She describes an atmosphere of inclusivity and diversity but also details a number of racist incidences on campus in the late 1980s. Feinglass comments on the typical Smithie, details her post Smith career and stresses the importance of leveraging the Smith network.

## **Restrictions**

No online access.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Julia Bozer, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Feinglass, Shamiram. Interview by Izzy Levy. Video recording, May 22, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Shamiram Feinglass, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Feinglass, Shamiram. Interview by Izzy Levy. Transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Shamiram Feinglass, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 22, 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 22, 2015, with:

SHAMIRAM FEINGLASS  
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: So this is Izzy Levy. I'm conducting the interview with Shami Feinglass, Class of 1990 on May 22, 2015, for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. Thank you for agreeing to participate.

FEINGLASS: Sure.

LEVY: So I guess, my first question is sort of for you to just take me back to when you first got to Smith. What were you feeling? What were you expecting?

FEINGLASS: So I moved from San Francisco and one of the reasons I didn't stay at the California schools was I had this notion that college was brick and ivy. So I came for brick and ivy (laughs). In addition, I had danced all of my life and also liked science, so I was looking for somewhere that had science and dance. So I was anxious. I was excited. I had no clue what to expect. I had never been in New England except to look at the college, so it was both exciting and entirely too scary.

LEVY: What was your house community like?

FEINGLASS: It was great. The first year I lived in Haven, and there were a few underclasswomen, but mostly it was — it was pretty, I guess, spread out between the four classes. I think the thing we thought was the most interesting was we ate off of china and you had silver and you had napkins that were linen. And we thought, Oh, where are we? But what we really loved was afternoon tea, and it was definitely a session that would bring everybody together from the house — even if they're dashing in after sports or dashing out to rehearsals or whatnot, everybody always ran in for a cup of tea and a snickerdoodle, or whatever the cookie of the day was. So it was actually a nice place to meet.

LEVY: Were there any other communities that you felt like you were a part of, sort of like, larger communities, or organizations, or clubs?

FEINGLASS: So a running joke in my class is I pretty much know everyone, because I sort of flitted about. So I was a science major, so basically lived in Sabin-Reed. We didn't have Ford. We didn't have Bass Hall. We didn't have all of the others yet. And so people there would be sort of the nexus. And it was interesting because I was a Chemistry major, so it was that science, but also all the geologists were there. So randomly I had all these friends that were Geology majors and then had a bunch of friends that were international students. So any of the international clubs — I'd sort of go to a party here or there. And then a bunch of friends that lived in the Quad, and so they also said — half of the people thought I lived in the Quad. And I said, "No, no, no, no. I come to the Quad because you guys have parties. And then I go back to center campus to sleep because I would be a wretched wreck if I had to live and sleep where all the parties are. So it was very funny — every time I come back to the reunion, they say, You lived in Jordan, right? I say, "No, I had friends in Jordan." Or they say, You lived in Cushing, right? I said, "Nope, I had friends in Cushing." "Oh, no, no, no, you lived in Emerson." I said, "Nope, friends in Emerson, too." So, I mean, it's sort of this whole — it's just funny. So I was sort of all over campus.

LEVY: Yeah. So, sort of, in our research we found that the late '80s were really a time at Smith where there was a lot of increasing diversity, but we also found that the reactions to that differed way across the spectrum. How did that, sort of, play out for you at Smith?

FEINGLASS: So I think it depends — (laughs) — depends what you mean by diversity, I suppose. So coming from California and this — I grew up in San Francisco, and so the public school system there was predominantly Asian. In fact, I think you probably — most of my senior graduating class knew that we were 77.798 at that year, percent Asian and Pacific Islander. So for me coming here was the first time I was actually in the majority.

So though I knew Smith to be a diverse campus, and that was how it was certainly advertised, it was interesting to me, because again, I had never been in the majority. So I think that from my perspective it was fairly inclusive, but my year was the year that we had things written on the steps of College Hall. My year was the year that we had organized a sit-in for — against apartheid. So our class was probably in that tipping point nexus in the late '80s of saying this stuff is — you can't tolerate this. And it was interesting because I don't — I couldn't have told you who the intolerant students were. I'm sure they were here. I have no idea who they were. And you didn't really visibly see it. Except, you know, one night on the steps there's racial slurs written. Then other times there's notes put up on, I think, it was one of our classmates who was from Kenya. And we're thinking, Who the hell are these people? And where do they come from? And how are they at our college? And nobody will ever know who it was, if it was even anybody from our campus, or someone off-campus. But we became, sort of a

nidus for that. And I don't know that it was happening anywhere else in the Pioneer Valley as visibly as it was here. But we tended to be, sort of, the — again, the nidus for a lot of that happening.

LEVY: And at that time we also sort of saw that the media was starting to portray Smith as a lesbian institution. How did that sort of figure on campus?

FEINGLASS: Um, I think we probably always chuckled. I mean, because it was obviously a very inclusive campus. But everybody knew the statistics. And we'd say, Well, OK, that's fine. You can call us whatever you want. We know what we are, which is, an institution of higher learning for women that is quite inclusive. Doesn't matter what you are, you can be here. And the statistics on all the other campuses at the time were that there's no more or less of any one group at our college compared to any other college, but for whatever reason that's what we became known for. And to this day none of us are really sure what spun that. I'm sure someone in the media had an interesting story to tell. I don't think we were the first. I don't think we were the last to bear that. And certainly our other six sisters in the Seven Sisters population — you know, none of us are really all that different. I mean, we all will say we are very different, but there is a seven college alliance for a reason, so —

LEVY: Did you ever feel this, sort of, like a specific “Smithy” image that there was a pressure to sort of live up to?

FEINGLASS: No. I mean, if you say, What's the “Smithy” image? Coming here, especially from the West Coast, we chuckled — it's the woman who is really well educated and really very poised and wears pearls. And, in fact, I forgot my pearls this morning. I do apologize. But we all have a set of pearls somewhere. We all, along with our class rings, break those out when we come. But for us the image was really a very old-school, probably early '40s and '50s look of — very accomplished, and you're always wearing your pearls, and you're always poised. But the other thing was, we would read the Alumni Quarterly — which we always tell current students and recent graduates, Do not read the Alumni Quarterly. You will have the biggest anxiety attack and inferiority complex. And that's not what it's meant to be. But we were — you always looked to those Smithies that were ahead and said, “Wow, they're pretty amazing, and there is absolutely no way I'm going to do that.” So you create this, a bit of an inferiority complex, which is completely unnecessary. And any graduate, recent or later, will tell you that's a kind of complete and total utter crock. But those were probably the two stereotypes of the typical Smithy that we would see. But, did I feel pressure to live up to any of those? No, I really felt the only pressure was really what I put on myself to do the best that I could do with what I was doing.

LEVY: So where have you gone since Smith? Who have you become?  
(laughter) Or who are you becoming?

FEINGLASS: Well, we should grab my daughter who I brought, who runs around saying, “Mommy, Mommy, you’re famous!” I say, “What do you mean, I’m famous?” “Mommy, Mommy, you’re all over Google when I Google your name.” My friend Amanda’s daughter was telling me that, you know, “You are all over.” And I laughed. So we were literally just walking with a recent graduate who had heard me speak here a couple of years ago to her science class and said, “Wait, wait, is that Dr. Feinglass?” And I said, “Yeah, I’m here.” “Oh, you know, thanks for speaking.” And two seconds later, Imogen says, “Oh, it’s my famous — see, Mommy? You’re famous. See? See? They know you.” And she’s ten. So it’s fabulous that she thinks I’m famous, but that path has been one of using — leveraging the Smith network to get where I am now.

So literally my first job out of college I got because I wandered into a Smith alum’s office at the National Institute of Health and said I was looking in the science area. She recommended someone who then recommended someone else, who then walked me across the street to another office, and that’s how I got my job. So the gentleman that hired me has no connection to Smith, but go four back, and it came to someone who is senior at NIH who walked me over. And so that network is something that has certainly worked for me and works for many of my classmates. And part of that is, really, that — the reason Smith is pretty amazing is that you can call into that network and you can use it.

So where has that path led? Let’s see, after college I was a lobbyist a few years in DC. Then I did a Master’s in Public Health and Medial School at Emory, all the while volunteering at the Carter Center and then coming back up to DC to do some more work. And then, a residency fellowship. I worked for the government, all the while hoping to be a change agent in each place that I have worked. And then I have gone into industry. So I’m a physician by training who has always been interested in policy and politics and management. And now I find myself in an international role in a company based in DC that does a ton of stuff all over. But what’s interesting for me, and I think it’s probably why by about your 25<sup>th</sup> reunion you realize, Oh, I don’t exactly have it figured out, but I know what I want to leave. So part of what my goal has been all along is to see more women in senior leadership roles in the science and technology space and medicine. As a physician — there’s very few of us at senior leadership roles that look like us. And the same in the med-tech environment. And so, how do you do that? And what is that legacy? So part of that is finding jobs that fit into your legacy as opposed to choosing a legacy and trying to figure out how you fit that into a job. So that transition for me is, I think, what is quintessential about being a Smith grad. So my path has meandered across different states, across different sides of the country, from policy and politics to

medicine, to government, to industry. And so, who knows what I get to do next?

LEVY: Awesome. So how do you think Smith has changed since you were here? What are some of the big-

FEINGLASS: So, you know, from the typical niceties of Smith, we'd say, Wow, you guys are all missing out that you don't have Thursday night dinners. That was always fun because there was always a professor that was your house professor that was invited over. And it was really a time where your classes didn't matter. What you were doing didn't matter. Time stopped for a moment and you had a civilized dinner, as we call it. What is different now is everybody is attached to a phone. And we were laughing the other day, because we were wandering through, I think, Gardner House, or somewhere, and we were looking for the hall closet, which was the house phone. So you didn't have phones in your room at the time, so if anybody needed to call you, they called the phone. And then someone was on the door watch and phone duty and they would have to go find you in the house. And so we laughed. We're like, Where are those phones? We had those phones. So things like that have certainly changed.

You know, the — it's funny because when you come on a rainy weekend that doesn't have any students on it, you have no sense of what the culture is like on the day to day. I'm lucky enough to get to come back between reunions for different committees and whatnot, and I think it has shifted. I think there is — some groups, like when I come talk to the science students, they are hugely directed. They want as much as information as they can get and they really want to leverage their alumni network. And then when you're walking around campus, some people will notice that you're alums, and they'll do what we did, which is like, Wow, those alums are back. And then, as students we'd say, Wow, they look really good. Or, Wow, they don't look so good. Or, Wow, it's so cool that they'd come back. And so, part of that, I think, has shifted to an extent. And we wonder, Is there still a community at Smith, or is it starting to disperse just by nature of the different ways everybody is learning? And as alums, especially when you come without underclasswomen here, or really any classes here, you kind of wonder, Are the students now as connected as we were? It has nothing to do with social media when we say, "connected." It really is, Do you actually know who your classmates are? Do you value them? Will you guys stick together as you move forward? We hope that they will. It's hard for us to judge if that tightness is still there or if it matters anymore. Does it need to be a virtual university? And what's the Board going to do going forward on how we want to educate women moving forward?

I think it's certainly a time where single-sex education certainly has even more value than it did in the past, but what I hope the students don't lose is that the friendships and network that you make here are

going to last you a lifetime. And you probably don't see it as much until you start coming back for reunions. And it doesn't really probably hit you until about your tenth reunion that where you start meeting some people you didn't know in college but came back for the reunion, and you realize, Wow, I really like you. How did I not know you as a junior when we were in the same house? — or something. And it's just — people have different personal social networks. And later on, some of those change. So I'm hoping that current students understand that richness, because I think it would be a disadvantage. But more importantly, it would be really sad if people didn't have those connections. So hopefully they have them.

LEVY: Awesome. Well, I think that's about all the time we have, but-

FEINGLASS: OK.

LEVY: Thank you so much!

FEINGLASS: You're welcome.

LEVY: It's a great note to end on.

FEINGLASS: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Julia Bozer, June 2015.*