

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

*Katharine Swibold, Class of 1982 & Hannah Becker,
Class of 2015*

Interviewed by
Tanya Pearson, Class of 2016

May 15, 2015

Abstract

In this interview, Katharine Swibold and her daughter Hannah Becker recall their introductions to Smith and undergrad experiences. They tell personal stories about their study abroad experiences and compare and contrast the evolution of the campus, student body and political and social climates. Swibold discusses the importance of utilizing the Smith network after graduation and Becker discusses her plans for the future and how her Smith education has prepared her for it.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Corey R. Selhorst, Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Swibold, Katharine & Becker, Hannah. Interview by Tanya Pearson. Video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Footnote: Katharine Swibold & Hannah Becker, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

Bibliography: Swibold, Katharine & Becker, Hannah. Interview by Tanya Pearson. Transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Katharine Swibold & Hannah Becker, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 15th, 2015, with:

KATHARINE SWIBOLD &
HANNAH BECKER

by: TANYA PEARSON

SWIBOLD: My reunion, so I'm glad to be — to have this opportunity.

PEARSON: Yeah. Oh, I had one question. You're class of '82?

SWIBOLD: Yes.

PEARSON: OK. Because they had written down '83 and I was looking you up and I'm —

SWIBOLD: Eighty-two. Definitely '82.

PEARSON: Right, '82.

SWIBOLD: No, definitely not.

GEIS: OK. So we're ready whenever you are.

PEARSON: Yeah? OK. Oh my gosh, you know what? I — oh wait, yes I did. I didn't think I wrote down either one of your names, but I did. I didn't even realize how prepared I am. This is Tanya Pearson interviewing Katharine Swibold, Class of '82, and Hannah Becker, Class of 2015, on May 15th, 2015, for the alumni oral history project. Thank you both very much for being here and participating. So I guess we'll just start off with Katharine. How did you choose Smith? Because now that I just overheard that your mom is not a Smithie, how did you end up choosing this school?

SWIBOLD: Well I only applied to women's colleges, except for Yale. I had drank the Kool-Aid very early because my mother went to Bryn Mawr. So I had did — sort of had this sense that women's colleges were a good thing. And I went to a girl's high school. I went to the Ethel Walker School, I was a day student, but again, I appreciated those four years in an all-women's institution, so was comfortable with that. I got into all of them except that Bryn Mawr accepted me for the second semester, so I wouldn't have started until January, I didn't want to do that. And I

didn't really love Wellesley or Mount Holyoke, so Smith was the other choice. And plus, my choral director in high school said, "Oh, you have to go to Smith because their choral program is incredible. Iva Dee Hiatt is the best choral director there is." And so I took her up on that and I went to Smith, and of course she retired the year before I got here. So I didn't get to work with Iva Dee Hiatt, but I got — she left a legacy of really great choral music, so that was my extracurricular activity, was choir, and glee club and chamber singers. And so I liked that it seemed like a place where you could — where those extracurricular were valued. You didn't have to just be a student and be an intellect, that all these other things were part of life were important and there was time for that. I sort of had this feeling that Bryn Mawr was hyper intellectual and there didn't seem like there was as much balance — I don't think that's true, but that was my impression at the time. And Smith was a great place for me, I was really happy. It was a good choice for sure.

PEARSON: I see some mother-daughter similarities already with the choral singing — and Hannah, did you feel pressure to attend Smith because your mom went to Smith? I'm just going to ask this —

SWIBOLD: The elephant in the room.

BECKER: I think when I was younger, definitely. But as I started the process, you were very hands off about it, it was nice. But I did apply, and I applied to also Mount Holyoke and Barnard, but I applied to a bunch of other coed schools. But the best schools I got into were the women's colleges, and so that was what I was deciding between were Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Barnard. And yeah, I visited all of them and I didn't expect to go to Smith at all at the beginning. But I'm glad I did, I love it here.

SWIBOLD: I always feel like one of the things that happened to Hannah was that in the process of explaining to her friends why she was even considering going to a women's college, it helped her articulate for herself the value of those places. And so she sort of had to defend this thing and in so doing, I think it helped her come around to thinking, "Yeah, no, this is going to be OK. This is not a bad choice at all." Because I think there's so many people who don't — young people — young women will dismiss it out of hand as an option, and it's too bad because they miss some really great experience.

BECKER: And I'm sure even if I had gotten into one of the coed, I probably still would have picked one of the women's colleges. I can confidently say that. So when I think about if I had gotten into Williams, or something like — now I know people — I can't imagine myself there, this is, like, the kind of environment I imagine myself in.

PEARSON: Did the all-women's college have the same kind of negative connotation for — you were looking for colleges in the '70s, '78 you started?

SWIBOLD: Yeah. I don't think it did because I think there were more of them then in 1977 — '76 — '77. And yeah, and I think there wasn't the question about their need or the necessity for them. Now because of the women's movement, and there are people who think that we don't need that anymore. It's all done. There's no sexism, right? Of course that's not true, painfully not true, but it's not true. And — but I think there are a lot of people who don't realize the value of having this experience. But back then, it was more accepted and there were a lot of — a lot more of my classmates applied to women's colleges than I think do now.

PEARSON: I guess I'll just ask you this question too (inaudible) — but how did you fit in when you got there? Did you have — you hear a lot about Smithies and the typical Smithie women, so did you feel like you had to live up to an expectation of what a Smith student was?

SWIBOLD: That's a good question.

PEARSON: Or how did you feel when you got here?

SWIBOLD: I felt prepared for the academics, for sure. I had gone to a really rigorous high school, so I had read a lot and written a lot. So when I got here, even though I was not the smartest person by any stretch of the imagination, I was ready for the work. So that I felt ready for. And socially, I'm not a person who's worried about fitting in that way. I'm not — I know I'm not the coolest person around, or whatever, you know what I mean? So I was used to — and I sort of float among different groups and I don't have a clique — one clique. And that can cause problems, actually. Because then if you have different groups, some people think, "Well, she's leaving us for them." And but it gets silly. But I felt OK, I think, socially. I'm not — I didn't come from a rich family, so when you sort of experience some of the rich people and hear their vacations and all that kinds of stuff, that's — but I experienced that in high school, so I was ready for that. It didn't — I was able to let it roll off. But I think socially, I was OK. I felt like I belonged here. Like I said, one of the hardest things I think for a lot of people is that you come to a place like and you come, you're top of your class or near the top of your class, and you come here like, "Oh my God, there are a lot of really, really smart people here." And that's the great thing. I love that. I loved that. I loved being surrounded by people who were as smart as — if not smarter than me. And know the conversations we had and the discussions, the arguments, and all those things was awesome. So — but I think it wasn't that terrible. I'm sure there — I know there are people who had much harder adjustments than I had. But I also lived around here, I live in the northeast and I went to a prep school. And so, you know, I sort of had been prepared for all of it.

PEARSON: Yeah, prepared in certain ways.

SWIBOLD: Yeah, exactly.

PEARSON: Hannah, I guess the same question. I'd just like to know how — well I guess maybe for you because it's so — in recent memory. But just how did you feel when you first got here? Like that first couple months, was it what you expected? Was it better, was it worse?

BECKER: Yeah, it was what I expected. And I knew that I wanted to do a Capella, like I knew that for sure. So once I got into the group — I guess it was after that first month — that was my life. That's like my main friends — are my a Capella people. I do sort of have a clique, I'm sorry. But yeah, I know mom wanted me to choir, but I was like, "No, I'm not going to do it. I'm going to do a Capella, I'm going to audition." But even so, I made friends with other first-years in Chapin House, and so that was good for the first month, and I'm still very friendly with all of those girls. But definitely once I was in the a Capella group, it was like I felt at home. That was — the Smithereens (??) are my home, definitely.

PEARSON: So you did rebel in a way by being —

BECKER: Yeah, exactly.

SWIBOLD: Now, of course, I wish I had done a Capella when I was at Smith because they have so much fun. I mean I had fun in choir and glee club and chamber singers, but they're a different kind of thing. And so — but I — Hannah's a Smithie and she does her own thing. And one of the things that's been very cool for me as a mom-alum is seeing her do Smith her way. Seeing Smith as the same thing — we share Smith, right, it's — there are all these wonderful things about Smith that we share. But it's different. She's different. And it's fascinating and fun to watch. And sort of see how her personality and her strengths and her vision for herself come out and how she — she's her own person. She belongs at Smith.

PEARSON: I'd like to kind of switch it up a little bit because I think this is a really interesting topic. Just wondering if you could describe a little bit the atmosphere on campus. Because you were here '78 to '82 and there was a lot happening with feminism and sexuality and sexual orientation. And Hannah has been here for another really pivotal and kind of — now, it's seeming to be a progressive kind of moment where we're admitting transgender women to Smith. So just your feelings remembering back to on what it was like — your feelings about it and then maybe we can get Hannah's input to see the progression and how it's changed.

SWIBOLD: Well like I said, Smith is a very traditional place. And I think that I was here when that was changing. That when — because the Lesbian Alliance was a big thing when I was here. And they would come to the

house at tea-time and do presentations on, you know, what lesbians were, what their politics were, how to — it was really, I mean they were teaching people about their lives and — it sounds silly to you because well, what — they're just gay people, what's the deal, right? It doesn't matter. And I know now that I have friends from high school who were gay and they were deeply unhappy. And but I had no language for that, it was not part of my life, it was not part of what we talked about, it was not out. They were not out. And while we were at Smith, they were coming out, and they were coming out big and loud and proud. And so it was really interesting because I wore fairisle sweaters and lanz (??) nightgowns and all my friends — and seriously, we wore lanz nightgowns down to Serio's to get Freihofer's cookies. This is what we did. And then there were the women who were very butch and very — really in your face because they were — that they needed to express it that way and it was really —

BECKER: And it seemed like it was like, at the time, there was a space for that, which is cool.

SWIBOLD: Yes. Yeah, no. And there definitely was. But it was really interesting because there was this — there was definitely a clash, in a way. And yet, when I think about it, I have friends who are very traditional and very straight people, and I don't feel like it's not — it wasn't — there was a clash and they were out there and they were making a splash, but it didn't — it wasn't really negative in a lot of ways. I feel like Smith was able to handle it as a community. And I don't — I'm not articulating it very well and I haven't really thought about what happened and why it didn't seem so terrible — maybe it's just me because I'm a very open person and I didn't have any problem with people expressing themselves where they want to be and the whole thing. But, you know, it's really interesting. And there was, of course, no nukes, and there was this — I had a \$0.59 button, you know, \$0.59. Women make \$0.59 to the man's dollar. Now it's \$0.77, we should be so thrilled (laughter).

BECKER: Thirty-plus years.

SWIBOLD: Yeah, exactly. But there was a lot of stuff happening in Northampton too, and actually unearthed some pictures that I just got scanned of a tiny little no nukes rally in Northampton down in front of the —

BECKER: Yeah, I saw that.

SWIBOLD: Black and white pictures of my friends and me down there.

PEARSON: Oh, you participated in that?

SWIBOLD: Yeah, yeah. It was a little thing —

BECKER: There were like ten people.

SWIBOLD: – it was like — it must have been — I wonder if it was when they were doing the — when was the big one in New York? There's a big one in New York or D.C. and I wonder if we couldn't go and so maybe we had our little — you know, Northampton had its little thing. But and — General Westmoreland came to speak at Smith when we were here. And it was in Sage Hall, and I remember lots of protesters, the place was packed. He did not speak, he was not uninvited or felt like he couldn't speak, but we let him know what we thought of his policies. But I don't know. I've always felt like Smith is definitely an accommodating place. And it may not be as quickly — it may not progress as quickly as some people may want it to happen, that's the nature of, I think, anything. You know, there are people who want things to happen right now, and it doesn't always work that way. But I think it's a good environment to be in. And it was an interesting time for sure.

BECKER: It still an interesting time. There was — me and my friends were all really happy about the new policy. I didn't policy organize for it, but I know people who did. So yay, finally. All the other women's colleges beat us to it.

SWIBOLD: Well, Barnard hasn't yet.

BECKER: Yeah. But no, I do think — I'm also white and I'm straight and I'm cis, so I feel there's only so much I can say about these sorts of things, which is fine, but I do think that people make their spaces at Smith and, I don't know, I think the student body at least is very accepting of people creating their spaces, whatever those spaces are. And I can't speak so much for the administration because I haven't personally dealt with any problems because I'm — Smith has already been my space, like if I tried to go to Smith 50 years ago, I would still be able to go. Well I'm Jewish, so I don't know. Yeah, but I mean —

SWIBOLD: There have been Jews here for a long time.

BECKER: Yeah so, I mean I think it's hard for me to say. Because I mean so much of the issues are not really — like I'm fine. I've been OK. But I've seen a lot of my friends struggle and complain and try to make changes, and — this new policy is great. I mean the whole “Black Lives Matter” was an interesting to go through at Smith, especially being white and trying to figure out — I mean so much of it is now like how do you be an ally and how do you do all that. I mean it's hard, it's so hard to be white (laughter).

SWIBOLD: Well and that's something that I find — because I've been — I'm on the Alumni Association Board and I've been an active alum for a long time,

so I've watched the evolution of things. And I watch things differently than the average alum, probably, because I know the administration in that way and I understand that — I understand their viewpoint. I know the people who are fighting for change, you know, bitch and moan and complain, that's what fighters do, that needs to be done, those things need to be said. But I also understand that it isn't that simple and there are a lot of factors that an administration needs to take into account when they're dealing with these things. And, you know, you said we are the last women's college, well we're not the last college to make this decision, but it's also not a race. It's not a competition. Smith has to do what Smith has to do for Smith. And Barnard is doing what they have to do — I work at Barnard — they have to do what they have to do and they're going to vote next month. So it's just so interesting to hear the language that's used, that's a big difference for sure.

BECKER: Yeah. That was interesting to say. Like you didn't have the language for it and I think a lot of people do come to Smith and don't — like I definitely didn't have a lot of the language that I do now after four years.

SWIBOLD: Well you had way more than I did coming in having been a part of —

BECKER: The GSA in school.

SWIBOLD: The GSA in high school.

BECKER: But no, I definitely — there's so many — there's so much that I learned at Smith. My best friend at Smith is a sociology major and she would read me all of her homework because it was more interesting than my Spanish grammar worksheets. And so I learned so much from hanging out with soc just people. Like I wouldn't consider myself a really strong social justice person, but I have friends who are really passionate about it, and I think that rubs off on me.

SWIBOLD: Yeah, and I think — and I learned a lot too. Smith was an eye opener and is not — I took a class on women poets with Susan Van Dyne and — I took a couple classes with her. And I took a class on women in the media with Carla Golden who is no longer here, she's at Ithaca I think now. But she blew my mind. You know, that class was looking at advertising. Again, it was seeing things differently, sort of being — having your eyes opened literally to, "Oh my God, I had no idea that—." When you see it all laid out like that, and so that was huge for me. And a big part of my sort of growth as a thinking feminist person.

PEARSON: And wasn't that the first years that the women's studies program had started?

SWIBOLD: Yeah, it probably was sort of the beginnings of it. I don't know where there was a — whether it was called women's studies, I don't know, it possibly was. But there were definitely these — it was the beginnings of having those kinds of classes and looking at women's lives specifically.

PEARSON: I did want to ask, just because I have you both here and I'm like, "I got to do it." But you were both here at time when there were commencement speaker controversies. Jeanne Kirkpatrick, were you here for that when she withdrew from, I'm pretty sure it was like —

SWIBOLD: Yeah, I can't remember because I was away my junior year so I may not —

BECKER: Mine happened also during my — when I was away.

SWIBOLD: Yeah, I just don't remember.

PEARSON: And then I was just thinking last year with Christine Lagarde?

BECKER: Yeah, I was abroad. I was like, so tuned out.

PEARSON: Oh, so you weren't actually—

BECKER: Yeah that's why people talk, and I'm like — I mean I saw stuff, read articles, and people talk — but I was so — I was so literally in a different place.

PEARSON: Well, what are your opinions on that?

SWIBOLD: Well, I wish Christine Lagarde had spoken. And I am a very liberal person, and I understand some of the objections to the IMF but I believed Christine Lagarde is not the IMF. She is much more than that. And she is — I thought it would have been really interesting to hear what she had to say about how she got to where she got. And what her views are — what her thoughts are about the future of the IMF because she has a lot of — she wants to change things. And so I thought it was a shame she didn't speak. And I believe that students have the right to of course object, everybody's opinions are valuable and people have the rights to those opinions. But o think it was a shame that they didn't hear her and that they didn't want to hear her. And I think it's kind of a problem in colleges these days, that people don't want to hear stuff. You know, we didn't like General Westmoreland, we thought he was a horrible person, but it was important for us to hear him speak and we could object to his views and we could boo when he was done if we wanted to or whatever — well, that's not polite. We could pick up signs and say whatever, but we didn't turn him away. And I do worry that people don't want to hear things that they think they don't like. And I also feel like with Christine Lagarde, people would have been really

impressed by her and would be surprised if they'd actually listened. And so I think that's how I feel about it. And I worry about it in the bigger context of communication and listening and being open to other opinions and other thoughts in life. It's not a good education if you're not listening to things that you don't think — that you don't agree with. It's important.

BECKER: Yeah, yeah, I don't know.

PEARSON: And you don't have to have an opinion on Christine Legarde, but just that this is kind of happened throughout Smith history. So yeah, just kind of your opinions.

SWIBOLD: Well not just Smith history, in lots of institutions.

BECKER: I guess I agree with you. I like feel, I don't want my friends to see this now.

PEARSON: They can't see it until it goes online. So it's fine.

BECKER: OK. Good, I'm safe. But no, I definitely — I think that people are — don't want to hear things they don't want to hear. And I don't think that that's great. I liked your comparison. A guy came, and you didn't like him, so you protest. I think it's great that people protest, I'm all about that. And people should rebel and that's great but it's sort of a shame. I mean I think with the Christine Legarde was also that she — was it like a week before that she decided not to come finally? I think that was rude of her. I don't know. But I do also think that Smith does have a history of picking white women to do these speeches and so that I get is a problem. I'm really happy — I'm excited about our commencement speaker this year. She should be really good. I know she's not a famous big name, it's good to have—

PEARSON: She's not a pop star.

SWIBOLD: She's a really good speaker. She spoke at — on that panel on education at the inauguration and she's really good, yeah, she's going to be good.

PEARSON: Who is it (inaudible)?

SWIBOLD: What's her name? I keep forgetting her name because she's not famous and I feel terrible. University of Texas Brownsville, she's the—

BECKER: It's like Julietta something? No, am I making that up?

SWIBOLD: I can't remember, I just — I'm embarrassed because I keep looking it up, I've looked it up 15 times and I can never remember, but she's really good, she's going to be good.

PEARSON: But maybe people will remember her name now?

SWIBOLD: Exactly.

PEARSON: We can talk about some lighter topics and then maybe I'll do some more heavy stuff at the end. But what were your academic interests? You major, minor, did you study abroad?

SWIBOLD: Sure. I was an English major, I didn't do a minor, but I studied in Paris. So I did three semesters of French — first — second year or two. Make sure I could do that. I knew that I wanted to go abroad, my mother went to Paris her junior year, and so I knew I wanted to live abroad. And it was funny being an English major going to Paris, but I made it work. I took American Lit classes and it was really interesting, actually, to take literature classes — American — English literature classes in France. So it was great. And then I sang in the glee club and chamber singers. And that was really fun, that was my extracurricular.

PEARSON: Did you have a social life outside of glee club or something like that?

SWIBOLD: Albright House was really — Albright House was my social life. I didn't date when I was in college, and I was totally fine not dating. I had friends who had boyfriends and we had men come to the house, but we were happy, we socialized — and it was back in the day where we had our own dining room — every house had its own dining room. So Albright House is my family. And I had some really good friends there. And it was fun having friends from all different classes over the three years I lived on campus. We had fun parties, I've uncovered a lot of great pictures where we look really silly, but they were a lot of fun. And I just remember hanging out — and that was before the drinking age went up, or it was just when the drinking age went up.

BECKER: Oh yeah, it was 18.

SWIBOLD: But we were grandfathered in and the social life was — it was a lot easier. We went to whatever place down on King Street and got kegs and brought them into the house. And it wasn't a big deal. Everyone could drink, we had parties on our floors, and would hang out in the hallways and do things, drink things, smoke things (laughter). And I was a goody-two-shoes—

BECKER: What? Mom!

SWIBOLD: No, you've heard that before.

PEARSON: I wasn't expecting you to say that.

SWIBOLD: But I was a goody-two-shoes in high school, so when I got to Smith, it was sort of—

BECKER: My favorite story is of the hazing that she went through.

SWIBOLD: Oh God, it was terrible.

BECKER: So her first year in Albright, they took them all and made them all—

SWIBOLD: Yeah, India house, what's now India House was once an Italian restaurant. And they made the first years drink a lot. And you don't do that anymore now because it's bullying.

BECKER: Super illegal.

SWIBOLD: And it's really illegal because they are too young for it, first of all, but also it's bullying. It's really not good to make people do that kind of stuff. But yeah, that was quite an evening. But yeah. But we — it was very open, the house was a safe place. The house was our home. And we had a head resident, but that was really it. Now there's a lot more res life — layers and layers of people it sounds like from Hannah. So parties — partying is a little harder to do. But we could literally be in the halls doing whatever and going from room-to-room and it was—

BECKER: Those were the days.

SWIBOLD: Oh man.

PEARSON: I guess so (laughter). And Hannah, I know you did say that you studied abroad, but just your major, minor, academic interests, what you do for fun (inaudible).

BECKER: Yeah, I'm a Spanish major and a linguistics minor. I came into Smith having no idea what I wanted to do, but I loved languages — I studied French in high school and so I loved that. So I took French and Arabic my first year, and didn't take any Spanish. But then I was — I'm a Global Strides so I got to go to Argentina after my first year, which was really fun. And I learned Spanish in two months. So then I became a Spanish major and I — linguistics, I always thought it was cool, so I did it. So yeah, I went abroad to Barcelona my junior year on a non-Smith program. And it was really fun and I stayed for the summer afterwards with my Praxis. I loved it. And so for fun, I do the Smithereens, which I have been very involved with since my first year. I'm — this year I was the assistant musical director. And my best friend from sophomore year roommate, now we're suite mates, she's the musical director. So we've lived together and been in the reems (??) together. And yeah, so that's — my social life is Smithereens. We are together six hours a week, and we hang out. We travel a lot so we go to other campuses — coed

campuses, and woo — and sing with men and go to sort of real — I always — whenever I leave campus, I'm like, "Oh this is," like, you talk about parties, I'm like, "We don't have parties at Smith anymore." But so we go to other colleges and they have these parties and I'm like, "What is this? This is like real college." We were over at UConn at the beginning of the semester, and it was just like, "Where are we? Who are these people? How is this happening right now? How is this real?" Because at Smith, I mean here it's very — I hang out in our room and do whatever, but it has to be very contained, you don't want the head resident to know anything, it has to be very quiet. So everything—

PEARSON: I didn't realize it was that strict.

BECKER: It's — yeah. I think it also depends on the house and how paranoid — like, I'm a little paranoid so I would be more like — because I think part of me is very goody-goody and the other part is not at all, so those fight a lot. But I know in some houses, it's a lot easier and they don't care as much. But Chapin was pretty — my first year, my head resident was very — like she would walk around the halls on the weekends and she tried to scare us. It was very weird. I didn't have — my head residents since then have been super chill. But even so, after that, I was like, "Got to be careful." She would leave her door open at night, so when you'd walk into the house at whatever time, like she could be sitting there. And you'd be like, "Do I look drunk — I don't know what I'm — like, ahh."

SWIBOLD: Well it's so funny because my mother was Class of '55 at Bryn Mawr and she remembers — no, they had house mothers, and I think they had them at Smith back in the day where there was a curfew and you had to get in by a certain time and you couldn't have men past the living room kind of thing. So it's really interesting, sort of the evolution—

BECKER: I love that. People ask me, "Oh, you can have boys in the dorms?" I'm like, "Yeah. What year is this? Of course we can have — there are always men everywhere."

PEARSON: I'm sure in the span of 65 years, it's kind of — progressively less strict. But it's really interesting to see those rules compared to like '75, '85. Well we have about 15 minutes, so anything you — you both have both kind of answered a lot of these questions within your answers to other questions, I'm trying to sift though. But, well, let's start with the mom. I'm going to start with the mom. But how did you — how was your Smith education influenced your career choices after you graduated and ever since you graduated?

SWIBOLD: I don't really have a career, I guess. So the way my Smith education has affected how my work life has been is that it's in some way it's made me feel a little guilty in that — I've had interesting jobs and I've

worked in the nonprofit world, but I took a lot of time off to have Hannah and Adam, my son who is three years older than Hannah, and I felt really lucky to be able to do that. But sort of the timing — the time that I have grown up though that, I do — have felt guilty that I didn't use my Smith education. And yet, everybody tells me, "No, it's all about choice and you're doing a really important job raising children." And all those things—

BECKER: And your volunteer work.

SWIBOLD: And I do a lot of volunteer work. So what I've had to sort of come to is that my volunteer work is where — how I really value myself. That's the work that gives me a sort of value in the world. Raising two great children, but also — seriously, no seriously. Fabulous. I mean I just couldn't be more proud of them. So I hope I had something to do with that and that's a worthy thing to do. But in this world where money and how much money you make and what kind of job you have is so valuable and so valued by society, you know I have to sort of talk myself down from the ledge sort of regularly. To remind myself, "No, no, no. I'm doing really good things." And I do a lot of work for Smith, I'm on the board of education, I've been involved with PTA and the foundations and things in my community. So I know intellectually that that's all good — and to go back to your question about Smith — rather than a psychiatric, psychology problem, Smith gave me the tools to do all kinds of things. I really believe in the liberal arts and I believe that places like this teach you how to think and how to write and how to communicate and how to be critical and how to ask questions and how to gather information and take something from that and do something with it, whatever those questions are. And the work I did at Smith and the education I got here made me able to do that, and I feel really strongly about that. And it gave me friends that I value and will love for the rest of my life. And it gave me a place that I love to come back to anytime. And I'm — every time I drive up to Northampton, I'm a happy person. And I also loved that I've made friends from other classes. Being involved with my class, I made friends every reunion from my class that I didn't know before when I was other. But thorough other stuff. You know, especially the Alumni Association Board, meeting people from other decades and getting involved with that has just been — you know, Smith people are fabulous. Smith women are the best. And it's the gift that keeps on giving, I say. And being a Smithie. And so, it's just given a lot of richness to my life and I couldn't be more grateful.

PEARSON: You made me realize that I have to reword that in order to — because I was looking at your, I guess you call them — I guess what you've been doing since graduation on the alumni page. And it's a really impressive, kind of interesting list — I just thought jobs, mix of jobs, and volunteer

work and — so I wasn't sure — I just shouldn't use the word career, but yeah, I mean you've done a lot. Yeah.

SWIBOLD: Yeah. Well and I was thinking about how I just — in that answer and sort of my apology, I realized what the woman in the presentation about the libraries, Beth, said about how women still don't value the work they do. And still don't understand why anybody would want their materials in an archive. Like, "Why would you want my papers? I'm nothing." And so I realized I do that.

BECKER: You've internalized it, mom.

SWIBOLD: Absolutely internalized it.

PEARSON: Work like being a mother isn't something important, raising your children, which it is.

GEIS: And your relationship also affected you both. You're here. We haven't had — I can't think of any mother-daughter interviews.

PEARSON: No, I think you're the first.

GEIS: And yeah, that says a lot about your relationship, and that's huge. I think—

SWIBOLD: Yeah, well I mean I have to say thank you for saying that. And Hannah is a very independent person. And very easily I would have totally understood if she picked any other college to go to. And I am so touched in a lot of ways that she decided that Smith was a good place for her. Some people — some daughters don't want to do anything that their mothers do, right. They want to do exactly the opposite or whatever. So, yeah, I totally appreciate that. I really do.

PEARSON: Hannah, you have not yet graduated.

BECKER: Not yet, I've got a couple days left.

PEARSON: So I mean I would have to rephrase that question. But I mean you did say that when — you ended up majoring in something completely different. So can you talk a little bit about Smith, whether it's the — just the culture of being here? How that influenced your academic decisions?

BECKER: Yeah. Well I mean the open curriculum made it so I could have no idea what I was doing and not feel bad about it. That I could take random classes and be like, it's fine because I don't have any required classes to take care of that are then going to get in the way of a major. So I can not know until I have to know. So that was nice, I liked — I think the

curiosity that is — I mean the open curriculum fosters that sort of curiosity and ability to try things. I do think also the academic — it's very intense here. People from my first year were like, "So, you're thinking about grad school?" "I just got here, leave me alone." But it has definitely — being in a place where people are concerned about this sort of thing and are always thinking about the next step and thinking about what they're going to do after graduation right when they've arrived, it's made me think about that sort of thing and I've been very — not in a serious way — that I've had to think about my future. That's a little scary, I have no idea what I'm going to do. I have no idea what I'm going to do after I graduate. But that's OK because I do know that what I've done at Smith has been great and I've gotten to do a lot of cool thing, I've met a lot of cool people. The Smith network is there, I still have people I need to email from the directory to do that. Bu—

SWIBOLD: Well and it's always been that way, that there are people — I mean I didn't know what I wanted to do, I was an English major and I didn't — but I had a classmate who was a double Biology Music major. So she was either going to the lab or going to Sage Hall to practice piano. She is now a pediatric cardiologist at Columbia and teaches at Columbia, she is still the most high energy person. So there are — that's always — that ever going to be ever thus I think here. There are people who are so motivated and know exactly what they want to do and work harder than you can imagine is possible to work.

BECKER: But there are also a lot of us who have no idea.

SWIBOLD: And that's right, who have no idea. And they're exploring, and that's the beauty, I think, of this place. That you can do that.

BECKER: Especially when I — now when I meet first years who have no idea what they're doing and they come in like, "I'm undeclared." And I'm like, "Good, take advantage of it." Because a lot of other people at other schools can't. They really have to be thinking, "OK, is this going to fit into my major requirements and my core requirements." Or whatever. The majors are pretty manageable to do even if you — I — like none of my classes my first year counted for my major, and I still completed it.

SWIBOLD: I guess if you're doing the sciences and engineering, of course that's way more intense. But yeah.

BECKER: Yeah, I like that people do try random things. People go out of their way to say, "Yeah, I'm a science major, but I want to make sure that I have a sociology class or something different to mix it up." And people do that. It's good to be surrounded by that. Does that answer the question? I don't even remember.

- PEARSON: Yes. Yeah. Is there anything that either one of you would like to talk about that I haven't asked or that has been in the back of your mind? I haven't really done that today and usually I like to ask if there's anything that you would specifically like to talk about. And if not, it's OK.
- SWIBOLD: Yeah, I can't think of anything.
- BECKER: We've talked about a lot of stuff.
- SWIBOLD: Yeah, we have talked a lot, those are good questions.
- BECKER: Yeah, good questions.
- PEARSON: Thanks. Kate, do you have any?
- GEIS: I'm good.
- SWIBOLD: Yeah, well this so, so nice to do. And I have to say that my last time when I was here for my reunion, I thought about doing this, but I chickened out.
- BECKER: What?
- SWIBOLD: Well, again, I don't know. I wasn't sure what it would be like, and being videotaped, and—
- PEARSON: Oh, but you got the email?
- SWIBOLD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just didn't make the time to do it. And I sort of thought, no — well no, I didn't set a time, I just didn't set the time. I thought it was interesting, but I was — this seemed like the right time to do it and it would be kind of cool to do it with Hannah, so I'm glad.
- BECKER: Yeah, I didn't know it would be this involved. I met mom and she was like, "Oh, we're going to do this thing." I was like, OK. I'm sure you asked if I was interested at all and I was like yeah, sure, whatever.
- SWIBOLD: Yeah I did, and I appreciate the opportunity, it's really great.
- PEARSON: Can I just ask one more question, just one — like my closing question? Just advice that you have for a first year student and then advice that you would have for someone who is just graduating, which is going to be touching because your daughter is graduating.
- BECKER: I've got my tissues ready.
- PEARSON: Usually it's not next to the person answering.

SWIBOLD: Do you want me to answer to that? Is that for me or for both of us? I guess for a first year student, I would say what Hannah just said is one of the great things about being at a place like this. Don't put yourself into a box. Really explore and have fun and enjoy all the choices there are. Because I can tell you as an alum, I hear all the classes and I go, "I want to go back. I want to take that class. I want to class. Oh my God, that sounds so interesting." And so — there aren't enough classes — there's not enough time to take all the classes that are interesting. So really take advantage of that open curriculum. And also have fun. I, like I said, I picked this place. A lot of it was because I could do other things, I could be more than just a student. Because I was a good student, but I was not somebody who was obsessed. And I needed to sing. Singing is important to my life, so I needed that in my life. So do extracurricular and take advantage of all the richness of this place. And then for a graduating student—

PEARSON: For someone who's graduating.

SWIBOLD: Yes, for someone who's graduating. You know, that's a really hard one because it's rough out there in a lot of ways, and yet I don't want you to worry about having to make it right away. Because there is so much time to be stuck behind a desk in life. And hopefully you never will, maybe you'll be lucky and you never will. Explore the world. I'm so glad you want to go to Barcelona and go back there and explore the world and travel. And I hope you'll be creative, I hope you'll keep singing because that also — going back to the couch — I didn't sing for a long time after and I really missed it. And I still miss it. So keep making music because it is really important to have that in life. And stay connected to Smith, you will not be disappointed. This is a great place and it's always going to be here for you, and it'll be different when you come back, and it'll be a little weird the first couple times because you're like, "That was my room. That was my house. Who are these people and what are they doing in my place?" But stay connected because it's really a great place. But I hope you'll be happy.

BECKER: Thanks. Me too.

PEARSON: That's a good ending. Hannah, you can't have any advice for someone who's graduating because you haven't graduated yet.

BECKER: Yeah, I know, yeah. I should have gone first. Can you edit that around? Yeah, I can do the advice for a first year. That I can do. Take advantage of the open curriculum. I mean I always tell all my first years that get into the reem, "Study abroad. Do it. Go." Because this place is great and I love it here, but it is a bubble in a lot of ways. And it's good to get out of it for a little bit and to have to take what you've learned here and go to the world. I went to Barcelona and here everything is very politically

correct and you have to be nice to everyone. In Spain they don't care about any of that. And the things that people — I had to learn. That's just not how people are. But it was good because there were times when I was like, "This is a teachable moment for these people. I'm going to tell them." But I wouldn't have been able to do that and I wouldn't have felt empowered to do that if I hadn't come to Smith. But yeah, getting out is good. And now kind of I came back and I'm like, "Oh God, it's so nice to be here. And the people are so nice. People are understanding." Yeah, it's good to appreciate it. Because then — otherwise then you leave, you graduate Smith and that's when you're like, "Oh God, I didn't even realize how good I had it there." But now I know. I know how good I had it because I was out of it, but I got to come back and it was nice. Now I have to leave again. But yeah.

PEARSON: Well, thank you both very much. This was really fun and a first.

SWIBOLD: Well thank you very much, it was a pleasure.

PEARSON: And congratulations.

BECKER: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Corey R. Selhorst, June 2015.