

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Sydney Waller, Class of 1970*

Interviewed by  
Izzy Levy, Class of 2016

May 23, 2015

## **Abstract**

In this interview, Sydney Waller discusses her involvement in the Students for a Democratic Society and their activism in response to the Vietnam War. She talks about the countercultural movement, Free University, in Northampton at the time, her active participation within the group and the climate on the Smith campus during the Civil Rights Movement and assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. Waller comments on the administration's response to student protests and discusses her post Smith activist work.

## **Restrictions**

No online access.

## **Format**

Interview recorded using Canon Vixia HF.

## **Videographer**

Video recorded by Sarah Wentworth.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Linda Pongetti, Audio Transcription Center.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Waller, Sydney. Interview by Izzy Levy. Video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sydney Waller, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Waller, Sydney. Interview by Izzy Levy. Transcript of video recording, May 23, 2015. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Sydney Waller, interview by Izzy Levy, transcript of video recording, May 23, 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 23, 2015, with:

SYDNEY WALLER  
Northampton, MA

by: IZZY LEVY

LEVY: This is Izzy Levy. I'm here with Sydney Waller, class of 1970 in the Sophia Smith Archives. We are interviewing for the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project. And it is May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015. Thanks for being here.

WALLER: I'm thrilled.

LEVY: So my first question for you is just for you to bring me back to Smith. What were you feeling, what were you expecting?

WALLER: I arrived in the fall of 1966, and had communicated some with my roommate a head of time whose name was Preston Shackelford. And one of the first things we did within a month was take our mattresses off of the beds and put them on the floor and put the frames of the beds sideways and we were just — we'd both gone to restrictive boarding schools. I think the freedom of being at a place like Smith was overwhelming. So that was really kind of a silly thing to do. And I think shortly thereafter there was a campus announcement that beds had to be, you know, kept in the normal way with the mattress on top of the bed.

I just threw myself in everything and really enjoyed being able to take a lot of different courses. I mean I was an art history major. I knew I was going to major in art history, but enjoyed taking religion, and French, and different subjects. When I came to Smith, I think there was rule. I think we all had napkins in little cubby holes and we all had to wear stockings I think. But because it was the later '60s, it was '66 through '70, I think probably my roommate started it but we would wear them with runs, who got the most creative with something covering your leg yet it was still passed as a stocking but that disappeared. My — yeah, and I just really enjoyed everybody I met. There was a house mother. There were certain rules about when people could come and visit. Yeah, so it was great. I loved it.

LEVY: What was your house community like?

WALLER: Again, terrific and I had more of a sense of community. I think as I got older and really, we really enjoyed the students who were even maybe two years younger than we were. When I was there the seniors seemed very remote, and many of them sat in the front parlor, and played bridge, and showed their diamond rings. And so we really, you know, our class really was sort of on the cusp of a very big change. I didn't play bridge. They seemed very sophisticated, very grown up. And we were interested in being more questioning everything. Questioning everything and trying new things.

LEVY: Yeah, from what you shared, it seems like you were really politically active on an off campus?

WALLER: Yes. Yes. So early on my roommate who was and I had become incensed about the Vietnam War and we joined a group called Students for a Democratic Society, which seemed like a great idea to have a democratic society that would not choose war, and we became very political. There was a brilliant man who would come visit campus occasionally whose name was Al Lowenstein, and he's very revered in the sort of leftist circles — subsequently, I've learned that. And we organized — we worked with these — it was the Smith Amherst SDS. At a certain point, we got — we organized — they were organizing sit-ins, mostly around military recruitment because more and more of us were realizing everybody we knew, the men we knew were going to be drafted, brothers, lovers, and we were against the Vietnam War. And therefore, we would go and maybe sit in and maybe block the entranceway at Amherst of their career office when the military recruiters were trying to get in. And, you know, basically, the administration really didn't know what to do. And, I think probably they just scheduled interviews in another place, because they really didn't want to remove us physically and cause a scene.

Fairly early on though we became annoyed that every time there was something like that the guys, the Amherst guys would say okay, girls, make the posters, you know, have them ready tomorrow morning and then we'd all post the town. And I'm trying to think if that was the second half of freshman year, the first half of sophomore year. But we thought, you know, enough with that and we formed what we called a women's liberation group. So essentially, we broke off from the Amherst group. And unfortunately, everything is a little bit fuzzy, I mean it was not strategic, it was not intentional, it was very intuitive what we did. If we heard about things that seemed to work then we would try them out. And we began to practice what we call gorilla theater and, I think one of the more unpopular things was we decided to go and do gorilla theater at a bridal show at UMass, because we really resented how women were being treated, you know, as consumers for this ridiculous market where all this money is being spent on gowns and

flowers, and the women were being used. I think we had — we wore sort of plastic dresses, but so that was an example of something we did.

And on Amherst Commons we did combat things and lay dead. We didn't actually get that much attention in Amherst, but we got a lot of attention in Northampton because we were opposed to the draft. We decided we would picket the draft board, which was down at city hall. And then it was of course the city ordinance, you're not allowed to stand still so we would just move in circles of carrying our signs. And because the older residence here were Polish and we somehow wanted to have a relationship with them, the women in the houses told us how to write, you know, no conscription in Polish, and it was really quite I mean there was the hostility of the immediate municipality, the employees there was the amazement of the general person in the street. But then you would see older people look at the sign and nod. And there was — and that was a wonderful connection to make.

The head of the draft board said he refused to speak with us because we were demanding that we have a meeting with him to say of course, how dare you do this, you know, select young men and send them off to die in the war that makes no sense. And he said he would only speak to — he only dealt with matters of marriage and death certificates. And that's what he did. So the one of the leaders of the SDS said, "Fine, we'll apply for a marriage license." And so he and I — he went in and tried to apply for a marriage license, and of course, the clerks knew what was going on. We still didn't get our interview, but I felt compelled. I got nervous.

At the time I was also writing for the Sophian and my editor was getting more and more concerned that how could I be impartial, I mean I demonstrate and then I write it up. And of course she had a very good point. Again, we were — it was just the beginning of trying all kinds of things. So she suggest that I call the dean of students which I did that night from the Sophian office and I said, "I just want you to know I am not getting married," because of course it was not allowed. You were not allowed to get married, and you weren't allowed to live on campus if you were married so I had to explain that. And I don't really remember that there was much of answer, but I think it was the right thing to do to let her know. Also on what street, where Serios; what is the name of that street?

LEVY: State Street?

WALLER: State Street. On State Street there was a gathering of interesting counter culture people and it was called the Free U or the Free University, and one of the courses I remember was about drugs. Because in fact, we knew nothing about drugs. And so it was a very — it was somewhat academic and I remember even learning now apparently you can use

nine banana peels and get high on banana peels, but we were — we just wanted to learn everything and there were in fact, no drugs there. I was involved — we went to demonstrations in Washington, I mean my roommate and I, and a lot of other people we took buses down to the Pentagon. We actually scaled the walls of the Pentagon. People had ladders climbing them. The soldiers were just standing there at attention not moving and we were trying to have conversations with them to say come on over, and then there'd be rumors that some of the soldiers had come on over and, you know, joined us and in Washington it was just seas of people from all across the country. My roommate got arrested and I didn't. And I was kind of sad about that. But ran into friends from all kinds of other colleges. And there was such hope and such a sense of power and that we really could do something.

Other demonstrations, I remembered I hitchhiked down to New York with a — somebody from Amherst and we went to protest at the draft board there and there that was more the police were on horses and that was scarier because yeah and the organizers said, "Well, carry marbles and if you throw marbles than the horses are going to slip and then they won't be able to keep going." And I actually never saw that and they always said take off your earrings because the policeman will pull on your ears. There was a lot of lore almost but it also formed community and I know we were on the news and holding hands and walking down streets. A few times we went — we tried the Springfield draft board and that was probably the most emotional for me because the men are so young and they're getting off the bus looking so frightened and they're going in, and we're saying you don't have to go and of course it's more — it was more complicated than that. We did have a — we did promote an organization called concerned clergy against the war and if young men did speak to us and said, "I don't want to go." We would have them get in touch with some clergy people who were opposed to war and would help them figure out a way whether it's becoming a conscientious objector, whether it meant going to Canada. It became so intense that both Pres and I decided we had to drop out of school because it was so important and we moved to Amherst and we rented a house and the Free U moved there and there was a board of directors. It was the first board of directors I ever worked with and I've worked with boards for the rest of my life until three years ago. And they came up with enough money for us to have a tiny salary and we had a lot of workshops there, a lot of poetry, contemporary poetry and I think we had art classes. And while and that spring both Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were shot, I mean you had really such a sense that the world was not making sense and there was so much information about the military industrial complex and how, you know, Dow Chemical was making the napalm. And I think it was the beginning of a huge amount of research of course it was pre-Google and everything else but what corporations were making money off the war and at that time they would show body bags on television and so if we wanted the news in our — before we dropped

out of school, you know, to see body bags and the body count was horrendous. Horrendous. I ended up coming back to Smith because one of my friends who was back at Talbot House called me to see if I would room with her and so after that spring and summer of working in Amherst I did come back. And I had some AP credits and I took a few courses the following summer at Columbia but once I was back on campus we were very involved with the women's liberation. And it was a pretty small group. We decided we're really pathetic, we don't understand mechanics, and so we got somebody's brother to — we bought a car in a junkyard near here and he showed us how you change sparks, sparkplugs. We were supposed to ready up. I remember coming to the library and reading about internal combustion engines and just thinking yeah, you know, I really need to understand these things and again, we were naïve. We never got into the whole bra burning thing and thought that seemed a little pointless but the media loved that because it just seemed — and we really — we were opposed to — we — we were just opposed to women's bodies being used. Several times we demonstrated on campus. There was a magazine called Town and Country and we saw that they were inviting Smith women to come and try out to become — audition to be models for one of their issue because they loved to have the Smith Campus, the Vassar Campus and what the fashion was. And so our little gorilla theater group went to the interview and we confronted the woman about what she was doing and she was I think she had one person who came and I am sure we did prevent some people from coming because if they saw that we were there and it was clearly a little negative. Another time a recruiter came on campus. We had heard that somebody was going to be on campus to recruit for waves or some female military position. I remember the car got as far — we knew it was the right car because it said military and so some of us got in front of it and then we basically did a dance around it, and we kept going round and round so they couldn't move. And I remember I had a headband with a lot of little American flags on it and I — they never, I think they basically turned around when we — but that was another way to stop them. We had a lot of speakers come to visit campus. And there was some outstanding — there was Roxanne Dunbar I think was one of them and they would give talks at Right, I mean it was somehow we just set it up. I mean we definitely had support from faculty members so faculty members must have done some of the logistics to set these talks up. The one that everybody in my class seems to remember, some people is when we had the witches come and they were the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell and they did gorilla theater in front of the library. And a lot of pantomime and signage to try to get the message across to the student body wake up. And I think my culminating moment if you will as in the moratorium, the Strike that spring. And there were all kinds, there were teach ins and many of the professors were teaching on campus and we were studying the war and back history because there was the terrible stuff that was happening with the Black Panthers and now we know

really the FBI essentially organized assassinations. It was really a – but Kate Millet came up who was very famous at the time and wrote a book called Sexual Politics and she was doing the seminar when Kent State happened and four students were killed. So we decided we would have an all college meeting about that and she wrote the speech. And the little group decided that I should be the person who should read it at the podium. And some – the leading lines were basically that student and John M. Green filled entire school, you know, group came and our point was the four students had been killed which is not supposed to happen in a country. And that two of them were women. And when I made the statement that two of them were women, half of the student body started screaming boo very loudly and the other half of the student body was cheering wildly.

LEVY:

Wow.

WALLER

And I had not had the courses in public speaking so I couldn't decide what to do and essentially I decided I would keep reading the speech. But it was total pandemonium and I remember seeing President Mendenhall sitting in the front row just kind of like totally in disbelief at what is happening because this is just not the kind of thing that happens on a college campus. And of course that sense — that clack of disburse was very upsetting. One of my friends stood up. One of the omen from my house who was two years younger, one of those wonderful younger omen and she stood up and she said what did — I don't know what Sydney said. This was just totally inappropriate this kind of hostility. And there was a little bit of a — it was much more peaceful after that. So that was a culminating thing for the — from the — on the politics side. I also was involved with I can't remember how we got the word around from house to house, but there was a pregnant — problem pregnancies and of people got in touch with me I would have them again, with the clergymen who was terrific and he would do counseling for them on how to figure out abortion or if they wanted it. But the only person I really — I actually remember contacting me was a guy from Amherst who said he had a friend who had gotten a girl pregnant. So I gave him the information and he came to see me at Talbot House and I gave him the information. But what's interesting to me if I don't think any women ever got in touch but we always made sure that through the house rep meetings that were was some channel that would be supportive. An upperclassman my junior year I guess it was. A senior asked me if I would take over a course that she had initiated. And the course was called Human Sexuality. And again, we gave the course here at the college because we decided that we knew very little about, Our Bodies, Ourselves as just coming out but most of us felt pretty ignorant about our physical selves and we had somebody named Dr. Philip Sarrell who would come up from Yale every week to discuss some aspect of it whether it was male anatomy or female anatomy or what happens when you have intercourse. It was really and this was totally



well attended and I think we actually gave it with the pioneers of Hampshire College. I think there were some men involved and I don't know if there's literature about it in the Saffian, but that was another activity.

Meanwhile, I really never cut a class and I was an art history major so it was — we had in the women's liberation group a woman came to campus who was — whose name was Abby Aldridge. And she was going to demonstrate karate. This was more in the lines of being able to work on a car engine and having strength and she was going to demonstrate how breaking a board with your hand. So we'd gone over to Davis and indeed, she did it. But I remember initially I had taken my boyfriend with me. And she had my friends came up to me and said she doesn't want any men in the room. So that was — you know, and that was probably kind of wimpy of me and I know he wanted to see it too so.

So anyway that's some of the very heartfelt student activism that was occurring between '66 and 1970.

LEVY: Yeah, wow.

WALLER: So.

LEVY: How did the administration sort of respond to all of this?

WALLER: I know. You know, it's interesting because there was certainly nobody tried to reprimand us and I was invited back, I mean I hadn't — I'd taken a leave of absence. I guess I hadn't officially dropped out. And I think there was enough faculty support that at faculty meetings they weren't going to decide to censure us. And in fact, I actually I did an independent study senior year, which was in fact activism through the government department. And so when I wrote that was in the days when you did ditto or mimeograph and I would, you know — would write things all the time and post them around campus and get them to all the house and so I basically was learning how to be a community organizer but for the Smith community.

LEVY: Excellent.

WALLER: I know and really nobody knew. Nobody knew it that I was you know because it wasn't about bringing attention to yourself at all.

LEVY: Right.

WALLER: And the following year the whole campus my senior year when I was still doing women's lib there was a huge movement among the students about freeing Bobby Seal who was in prison. He was a Black Panther who was in prison in New Haven. In fact, we did go down to New Haven and at the Yale Harvard game we were demonstrating and trying to block traffic with signs that said "Free Bobby Seal."

LEVY: Phew. I'm taking it all in.

WALLER: It's not your typical Smith experience but there's a lot. I mean did you see our group today?

LEVY: Yeah.

WALLER: So we were the ones of course with the signs saying from Selma to Ferguson.

LEVY: Right.

WALLER: We are trying to get guess what, we didn't change the world. There are still many places where Smith women can focus their energy.

LEVY: What are your hopes for student activism at Smith?

WALLER: I think it's really healthy. My sense is it's healthy. I certainly hope that Smithy's get involved with immigration. Huge problem, I mean just unbelievably bad. I think the whole, and I don't even know would that – what your major would be to be involved with that, but I would like to see I don't know if in Northampton there is some kind of a refuge center. I don't know if in Springfield there is, or in Holyoke, but I would really want to see people working with local communities in that way to help them welcome other members of their families who are trying to leave Central America or South America. I would like to see the let's see yeah, immigration is huge. The whole political process of course is really scary. The way the civil rights, voting rights act has essentially been gutted and now many states are permitted to basically deny the vote to people who don't have their voting card and I think Smith women should get involved with that in all of their communities around the country.

LEVY: So how do you think Smith has changed since you were here?

WALLER: It just seems much more I mean we were in a way we were kind of sink or swim. We truly were on our own or we felt we were on our own, I mean there was a house mother who we never saw. Our advisors frankly, would just sign a card and then we were on our own. I think now there is so much attention on the individual student and trying to

find support for you, an internship for you, a paid internship, any kind of major you want to put together. I think it is much more student centered and of course, we were cusp generation and you were just expected to go to school and take notes and graduate and either be a teacher or a librarian or a nurse or get married and so they didn't really – they didn't anticipate, you know, we were the beginning of the trend. And then eventually, I think they – I think you have a wonderful president and have had a series of terrific presidents and that the transformation and the continued growth has been terrific. I'm very impressed for example that you're going to have these little credential seminars they're calling them where you can public speaking, that kind of thing, negotiations, building consensus, teamwork. These are the kinds of skills that on top of as a layer on top of whatever else you're doing really will help you be more effective. Again, we were just you know, yelling and screaming and –

LEVY: So did your feelings about Smith at all sort of change as you were –

WALLER: Yes. I think when I was at Smith I didn't feel particularly loyal to Smith. I mean I was – I loved my community and I enjoyed my professors who were quite remote but I started coming back and there was such interesting seminars, such interesting programs when you're first out, the first 10 years maybe I don't know if they will do that but very thoughtful, insightful programming for recent alumni which is pretty amazing. Most schools don't do that, and then periodically, I got support from the career development office. I fi wanted my resume tweaked, if I wanted to talk about, you know, career changes and even now periodically I take webinars and my feeling about Smith, my appreciation has deepened tremendously including that they gave us permission – they just gave us the room to protest and to try to change the world, that was I mean even though they couldn't give mentoring and support some of the professors did. There was, but it was a whole new world.

LEVY: So where have you, I guess to wrap up –

WALLER: Yes.

LEVY: -- can you give me an idea of where you've gone since Smith and what year, what course you're life has taken?

WALLER: Yeah, well, first I thought there was going to be a revolution because the world was really so scary. And so we decided, my boyfriend and I to live in this abandoned farm that my family had. And we were going to raise our own food, which we did and I had a wood stove and that's the only thing I could cook on. And so whatever happened in the outside world, we were going to be efficient. And but we stilled needed cash and he was doing carpentry kinds of things and we thought about

building a treehouse deep in the woods with it. We'd be even safer. And so I went to the local school because we still needed cash and I said, you know, can I get a job here. I was an Art History major, but an English minor and they said well, nobody will teach the seventh grade. There are two sections. It was a rural school --

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Linda Pongetti, June 2015.*