

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Katharine Esty, Class of 1956*

Interviewed by  
Sarah Dunn, Class of 2011

May 21, 2011

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Katharine Esty describes the political and social atmosphere at Smith during the McCarthy era, her experiences living in Jordan House and the divide between Jewish and non-Jewish students within the house, student protests regarding the Hungarian Revolution, the dating scene and how she met her husband at Amherst College, the lack of racial diversity within the student body, the impact that Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* had on her, and her later work for UNICEF and as a psychotherapist.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 60-minute tape.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Andrew Smith at the Audio Transcription Center in Boston, Massachusetts. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Olivia Mandica-Hart.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Esty, Katharine. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Katharine Esty, interview by Sarah Dunn, video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, tape 1.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Esty, Katharine. Interview by Sarah Dunn. Transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Katharine Esty, interview by Sarah Dunn, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2011, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 21, 2011, with:

KATHARINE COLE ESTY

by: SARAH DUNN  
filmed by: KATE GEIS

ESTY: OK. All right, we won't talk to Kate then. Ignore Kate.

DUNN: Unless at the end, sometimes she'll, she likes to add in some questions sometimes, but.

ESTY: Good.

DUNN: Just because she's got a good overview.

GEIS: Are we ready?

DUNN: This is Sarah Dunn, and I am conducting an interview with Katharine Cole Esty on May 21st, 2011 for Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you again for being a part of this project with us.

ESTY: You're welcome.

DUNN: We'd like to start out about how you got to Smith, and how you decided to choose Smith for your undergraduate career, so how did you choose Smith?

ESTY: Well it – I, I think came with this huge legacy. I had two grandmothers that went to Smith, which I think I was the first person that had two grandmothers because I had a grandmother that graduated in 1900, and one in 1896 or something, so and my mother had gone to Smith, and my sister had gone to Smith, and my aunts, my father's sister and my mother's sister had gone to Smith, so.

DUNN: You're a true granddaughter of Smith. (laughs)

ESTY: I had a true legacy, and so it was sort of assumed, and I think so you know I did apply to Wellesley and Vassar, but it kind of was so in the family, so I think – and I was very dutiful at that point, and my rebellious nature had not yet surfaced. So I came kind of like – well that's what's next. It was-

DUNN: Was that something that you wanted?

ESTY: It wasn't very well thought out, I mean assumed – I mean I was sort of at that stage in my life I did what was next, you know you take the SATs, you – so I, you know I didn't think of the options you know, I think I lived very close, I grew up in Amherst so it was like an unadventurous choice I would say, and so that had some ups and downsides for me of coming so close.

DUNN: Yeah. What was the atmosphere like at Smith on campus at that time?

ESTY: Well, it was quite conservative, this was the McCarthy age. I was – fancied myself a sort of a radical, but I wasn't, I was like middle of the road, but I didn't know that. But people were at my house, I mean this was the fall I got there was the Stevenson election, there were 72 people in my house and only two of them were Democrats. I mean it was really pretty shocking, so I felt a kind of – the people were very conservative, and I think that was happening – it wasn't that conservative across the board, but in my house it felt that way, so I felt sort of like I didn't quite fit, because people were very rich, they were very conservative, they were very Republican, they had 18 pairs of Capezio shoes, those were in at that time and I – you know they had fancy clothes, and yeah I wasn't quite sure who I was.

DUNN: Yeah. What house were you in?

ESTY: I was in the quad, I was in Jordan.

DUNN: You were in Jordan. What was the community like in your house? Did you, like did you feel that outsidersness in your house, or?

ESTY: Well I had a good – no, I had a group that would – sort of soon fell into a sort of a group of ten people that were kind of friends. Our house, and this is one of the things I wanted to get in here because it was really terrible, our house had like half Jewish kids and half non, and they were two cliques. They didn't mix, and I was a liberal so I tried very hard to get them together, that was my – one of my – because I felt it was awful and that there were two groups and they didn't mix, and it was one of my failures that I wasn't able to sort of do it and the, you know the college – and I don't know if you all know that, in those days they, as roommates, they put Jews with Jews and-

DUNN: Really?

ESTY: Which was like – so Smith wasn't very advanced, I don't think anyway on this. So I liked my group of ten a lot, I tried to make friends with the others, it didn't really work, but so the atmosphere, you know I think it took me a couple of years to sort of feel my way into Smith. By the

time I was a junior I really liked it a lot, I loved it, but it was a slow start.

DUNN: Did you feel accepted? Were you able to talk to Jewish students and-

ESTY: Oh yeah I mean-

DUNN: Was it accepting from, but it was just hard to integrate?

ESTY: I was just mad that some of the others in the group that I was in were sort of anti-Semitic, I think it was an undercurrent and I wasn't, I was the flaming liberal that was trying to save the world. But and I had – but it was, I don't know. It was hard to understand even at this point, I was talking to some of the people about what happened.

DUNN: Yeah. Did you, is your family pretty liberal, so did you come in very liberal-minded in the first place?

ESTY: Yeah. I mean I'm an aca – you know I'm a child of an academic and I'm probably more – you know I realized I was pretty conservative, you know I mean I really wasn't radical at all, but.

DUNN: Did you feel the atmosphere at Smith change around from conservative more to the liberal as people went through Smith, or?

ESTY: Only as we came back in reunions. I just got the statistics, our class switched at the – you know they were still Republican at the tenth reunion and the 15th reunion, it wasn't until the 30 reunion that they became more Democratic, and now they've stayed more Democratic, but we've been talking about that, and so they really did do a switch and I think it was the Vietnam War that really helped people, but – so then it changed, but when I was here, this was the time of McCarthy, you know Bill – there was like lots of sort of – it was not a liberal spirit.

DUNN: Did you – what was I going to say? Sorry. Did you see anything happening like with administration, or teachers with McCarthyism? I know that there was definitely some stuff towards the late '50s that were.

ESTY: Right, and we didn't see that so much. I mean it wasn't that apparent. I mean I know I was going to say Bill, but I want to say – they got a man at Yale, Bill Burke, Bock, anyhow. The (inaudible) you know his sister was here and she gave a lecture how bad you know the Communists were, and that McCarthy, Senator McCarthy was just right, and we all went to it, but you know we kind of – her name was Maureen and everybody was sort of thinking she was over the top, but so I remember feeling that the Smith – the college was going to stand up against it, but I don't know how much they did, actually. I think some.

DUNN: Yeah. Were you involved in any activism of any kind on campus, or any clubs and organizations while you were here? Not just the activism, but any general-

ESTY: Well the activism you know, I remember the year I graduated was '56, that was – in the fall of '56 was the Hungarian Revolution, and I remember hearing that there were big protests at Smith. I had never seen anything like a protest. Our generation, so I was like oh wow, you know but that was after I'd graduated so there was – when I was here, Archibald MacLeish gave our commencement speech and he talked about our class as the quiet generation, so there was no, you know I don't think people were politically active. I was, what I did in college here was you know I was on this curriculum committee, so we looked at the curriculum, I was interested in doing international stuff a little bit. I'd been to France before I got here, and was interested in that kind of stuff. I think I remember putting on a conference on Russia somehow, and we had – you know we brought in Russian experts, and then I did the curriculum committee and we talked about things, so I was kind of academically oriented, I guess I would put it that way, and – but mostly oriented toward my social life. You know I was sort of into boyfriends and that kind of stuff.

DUNN: How was relationships and dating while you were here?

ESTY: Well you know everybody, you tried to get, everyone tried to be out of the house and it was very different then I think it was there. I mean I – you know people went out two or three nights, we had blind dates that were terrible but you went out, you know. So I think I remember that I went out with 60 different boys my freshman year, I mean it was just like you know, and most of it was you know not, like just sort of meeting people, it was kind of frenzied, but.

DUNN: It was an early time for dating, so yeah dating really started.

ESTY: Everyone dated, everyone dated but you dated a lot of different people. You didn't have to – so you could go out with people and not feel that you were going to have to be stuck with them forever, so. But you would go out on a date, I remember going to Hamilton College, which is miles and miles away for a weekend, and you'd – on a blind date you know, you take one look at them and you think oh my god you know, I've got to spend the whole weekend with this character. But people wouldn't do that now, but we did. So it was – and then I got married in the middle of my senior year.

DUNN: Oh, you did?

- ESTY: I did, I got – my husband was at Amherst College, and so he was a baby dean, and he was older, and anyhow we got married and so I finished up, and the college had the funny stories, like warden as they were called then, that was – so I had to go get permission to get married, and so she says to me "Well, any special reason you're getting married?" (laughs)
- DUNN: (laughs)
- ESTY: And I said "No, just because I want to." So, anyway.
- DUNN: Yeah. So your husband went to Amherst. How did you two meet? Did you – would you go over there at some point?
- ESTY: Yeah, I lived – of course I lived at Amherst, so I was a faculty brat and then my – actually my father was the president of Amherst, so I knew Amherst College very well, and – but I was in a play at Amherst and I met him because I was playing the second prostitute in "Death of a Salesman", my brief dramatic career, that's how I met him. And he was just, he was 25 he was just back from the Air Force, so – and he came to that dress rehearsal so we got married a couple of years later, so.
- DUNN: Wonderful.
- ESTY: Yeah. We're still married, so.
- DUNN: Wonderful.
- ESTY: Fifty-five years.
- DUNN: Fifty-five years. Did you study abroad at all while you were here, did you study in Europe?
- ESTY: No I went – you know I went the summer to France and the experiment before I went, and I – my sophomore summer I went and worked with the American Friends Service Committee in an international work camp, which I loved and that was exciting. So I had two really interesting summers. But you know I didn't – my father who was an educator had opinions like that he didn't think doing a year abroad was good because it disrupted your academics, so I was again, I was still – I didn't really – had it in my mind that much to go anyway, so.
- DUNN: Yeah. You mentioned religious tension on campus, did you notice class tension or race, anything around class or race?
- ESTY: Well there couldn't be any race, there couldn't be race tension, because we had no blacks in our class. We had two Asians out of 643. It was a pretty white, lily-white upper middle class kind of milieu, you know?

And now our class is still privileged I think, and well – so, there wasn't much, there were very few blue collar kids, you know I don't think – a lot of people were country club, golf, all that stuff but that sort of turned me off.

DUNN: Yeah. What did you expect as a Smith graduate in terms of marriage, work, family, what were you expected?

ESTY: Well, I think I bought the whole nine yards of what was, you know the post-war script. So that I was looking to get married, and you know did get married even – my mother had gotten married right out of college, and you know my father was an educator but he – I was expected to get married and have kids, and that was what I was planning to do and I – you know I did it and it – so that I wasn't thinking about a career, and that's been what surprised me most of my life. I'm really into my work and what I've done since, and – but it didn't, I mean I'm one that was really bowled over by Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, that hit me like a ton of bricks.

DUNN: Did it?

ESTY: It did I mean I suddenly, I had by then I think two kids and suddenly I realized, I mean it was like a jolt to sort of realize that I didn't have much expectations for myself, and here I was obviously intelligent, creative, and I wasn't planning to use my intelligence in any way, it's like shocking. But it hit me, and sort of – so then I kind of did a turnabout, so I started pretty soon teaching part-time, and then I went to social work school and became a social worker, and then I went back and got my PhD in social psychology, and have been working you know since I started working full-time and started a company, you know that did – and also the diversity had – it was a diversity consulting firm that consulted to corporations and you know, on issues of race, and gender, and class and all those things, and then I went and worked overseas for a lot of U.N. agencies doing strategic planning on issues that was just fabulous. This was like a chapter of life in my 50s which was working for, I started out for UNICEF doing these large group strategic planning on issues like child labor, and maternal mortality reduction, and AIDS, and these kind of national issues and UNICEF had the money and we'd bring in all these – like on child labor we'd bring in the laborers, and the child laborers themselves and the educations in the government, and the whole top – the whole country you know, we'd bring – and we'd have like 100 people in for three days and get them to – people that didn't talk to each other and kind of bring them together and kind of coming to consensus on how to approach a problem like child labor, and so that was like an exciting decade of my life when I was doing that, so. And I still have a psychotherapy practice, I gave up my consulting firm about five years ago, but I still have a psychotherapy practice.

DUNN: Wonderful.

ESTY: Yeah.

DUNN: And did you feel that Betty Friedan's book was the main part of that, or do you feel that coming to a school like Smith at all, how did – what did that mean to you?

ESTY: Well I think I got, yeah I think I got very well-educated. I have four children too, I've got to put that in there, I always like – I was going to have 12 children, that was kind of the – and then I was going to have six children, and I had a few fertility problems but I have four sons, and of course that was like prime in my life, I was really always – so the career always came second you know? I was always like, and so I worked it around that, but it was – so I think Smith, what I valued so much is that the education was fabulous. You know I majored in history, I had very solid, good teaching, and some excellent teachers, some wonderful teachers, and some really good English teachers. What I didn't get was I mean, it turns out that psychology was what I really – and you know I took that, it wasn't until I was 28 that I stumbled into that, which you know – but what I had was well grounded in writing and so I think I learned to have very high standards you know, and sometimes I've had to work to realize that you know, I think the creative part of trying to – it came later. So, that you can kind of be too – learn to be too much of a critic, and so I, you know when I went to social work school, I just you know I realized I could do this with the back of my hand, and at Smith you know I think we all worked very hard and you know it was not – it you know it was like very academic, but so I do value the Smith education, I think it gave me a set of values, a perspective, but I think I've added perspectives to it, it was Betty Friedan, but I also went to a Jungian analyst and kind of saw another – I think our culture, or mine, was all rational and I came from an academic family, so I think what I've learned is a more holistic, psychological approach of some other values, so it kind of has been a – but Smith has played – I mean I – it played an important part of my life. It did.

DUNN: Yeah. Do you have any advice for current or future Smithies?

ESTY: Well it seems like the education is sort of the – so many doors are opened and it seems like we were sort of listening to the dean of the college last night, and it seemed like there's fabulous opportunities. I mean I think of – please, I was kind of turned off to Smith and I wanted to say I have been pleased how it's reinvented itself to be champions of diversity, and that means a lot to me because I was – it certainly is far from the place of the Republican country club horse-riding – I had a roommate that, my freshman year, that played golf, rode horses, was in a country club, you know. So it's nice to see what it's done, and I, so I'm very proud of Smith and the way it's reinvented itself. So I don't

know, my classmates here are all upset about thinking that it – does the lesbian issue keep people away, do people not come? And it seems like whatever the kind of formula that's – of the reinvention is working beautifully with it. It comes back with a diversity emphasis, with the scholarship money, so I feel like it's done a great job. My advice for kids is that you know it's hard to figure out what your focus is, and I'm sure it's still hard, it's never easy. And it – I think you can't be expected to be 21 and know what you're going to do and then sort of give yourself a little time to kind of bat around, because I think it's how you find out is by doing a couple of other things, trying it out.

DUNN: You mentioned the thing about the other classmates and the lesbian issue. Did you feel anything around that when you were here, and like how have you seen that change?

ESTY: Well my class, we were all – they were all laughing, I don't think they knew the word, you know? I mean I – looking back on it I have a sense that you know – but nobody – and to this day, when I did, I told you I did the questionnaire, and one person wrote in and said I've been in a happy lesbian relationship for 30 years, but nobody's ever – we don't know who that was because it was an anonymous questionnaire. Nobody ever mentioned it, I mean so our class isn't great on talking about issues, and they – one person said they were you know, had been in AA but these issues just weren't – they were under the table. And it was – it really was a silent generation so for us, all of us, you know it was in our adulthood that we kind of learned, I mean 56% of my class, or 66% of my class I think it was have not used drugs. I mean and I know, so there are – that was just wasn't in the horizon, it wasn't there. So it's quite different, yeah. I would like to interview you, but well that's another time here if what you guys have to say-

DUNN: (laughs) We can talk after, I'm OK with that. I feel like I feel good, do you have a follow-up?

GEIS: I think it could either be one or the other of the questions of (inaudible) or what you were most surprised by.

DUNN: Oh, yeah. What about were you most surprised by?

ESTY: Well, in college?

DUNN: I liked that.

GEIS: So yeah-

ESTY: In my life, or?

GEIS: In your life.

ESTY: Oh, in my life. In my life it's been about how much I love work. And I mean I have loved work. I mean and you know I loved the kind of consulting I did, I went to like factories, I did consulting at like Gillette and would go to a third shift and I – somehow the whole world of work, you know I love being a psych therapist which I am now, and you know I love my clients, I love being a – doing this overseas work, so it's just, you know I do think Freud was right, which is love and work. And – but I think most, I kind of assumed that love was important, and family, and kids, and all that. So just to find out how much fun you know that work has been, and I know you know hear a lot of my classmates, I think I'm on the cusp of being a feminist, but the people, we still have 40% of our class that feel that the feminist movement hasn't touched them. That was today, they still think so. I think I was one of the early adopters or whatever you want to call, so I went to work and I've had more of a career than many, and it's been a broad, enormous pleasure. And like family has also brought me pleasure. I have four sons and they, you know we have ten grandchildren and we've traveled, you know they're all – I have three sons that were professors, you know we're still an academic family, but it's been – the world of, I think the surprise has been the world of work and what fun it is if you find something you enjoy doing, so you wake up and really want to go to work. But I'm surprised I grew old, too. I'll have to say that like all my class you know it is a shock, because somehow – I don't think people are schooled to be grandmothers, or schooled to imagine themselves at 70, you know what we're actually going to be doing, and so I think Jill Ker Conway spoke to our class last – yesterday and she was saying you know we should have, Smith should have a seminar for people our age, she's our same age, and you know we should be thinking you know, because our class isn't really dreaming ahead, so it'll be interesting what, and I mean I think to be of use. I mean I think that's what I've learned, that to be of use is so important, you know? To be doing something that has real value in the world.

DUNN: Yeah. That's beautiful. Thank you.

GEIS: Thanks so much.

ESTY: Oh, you're welcome.

DUNN: Thank you very much. It was wonderful.

ESTY: Thanks. You know I had a few – there was a few of those thoughts on my mind too, I thought I've got to-

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Andrew Smith, July 27<sup>th</sup> 2011.*