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Ellen Robinson Epstein '69-Joan Hosmer Smith '69

Ellen Epstein

Joan Smith

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Ellen Robinson Epstein: Okay, I'd like to begin by saying that I am here interviewing Joan

Joan Hosmer Smith: Joan Hosmer Smith.

EE: Right, and the interview is taking place on Friday, May 31st, 2019 as part of the fiftieth anniversary of the class of 1969. The interviewer is Ellen Robinson Epstein, and I was also a member of the class. So, I'm going to ask you some questions. You can veer off the subject, you can answer however you want. But, why did you decide to come to Connecticut College?

JS: It was such a beautiful place, an interesting place. People I had known who had come here before were intellectually stimulating and interested people, so it was really a no-brainer. I was lucky to be here.

EE: Where had you grown up?

JS: In Worcester, Mass. In Holden Mass. So ...

EE: And did you apply to other colleges besides Connecticut?

JS: Yeah, I got accepted at Chatham, another women's college. I think that was about it, yeah. So, yeah, these days I'd probably apply to 13 schools or something or 20 schools, but no, just the two.

EE: And was there anything that surprised you when you got here that you hadn't expected?

JS: I think I- I really enjoyed the French faculty, the French department and plus the Botany, the Arboretum, all of that, so, between the two, I think that was a pleasant surprise. It just- it just sort of grew on me, participating in- in- interacting with- with the faculty and the French House and ... Dr. Niering, for Botany, he was the kind of guy who had a four-wheel drive and would go sideways off the trail and at high speed and we would have to chase after him, catching up. And so, that was kind of a surprise, just because I hadn't been exposed to so much. And another surprise was our dinner conversations. We had so many students with different majors, so that there was always an exciting conversation going on because somebody had something controversial that came up in class and then we all had to weigh in from our different perspectives. You had psychology majors, history majors, you know. I was a French major, ultimately. So, yeah, so that was a surprise, that there was something lively going on.

EE: It's interesting but when you mentioned Botany, because I just learned this morning that this is the only college in the country with a Botany major where it's not part of the Biology department.

JS: Mmhhh, yeah, it's a very strong program and I mentioned earlier today that Dr. Goodwin and Dr. Niering were founding members of the Nature Conservancy, which grew into a huge international organization, so, and it was a real privilege just to know them and it was Dr. Niering was such a down-to-earth person. He would do dumpster diving in lectures to freshmen what they were wasting from the- you know, things that were thrown out the year before. So, he was ahead of his time for recycling or reducing the use of things. If we took a field trip, we were not allowed to use aluminum foil or plastic. We had paper cups and wax paper if we had to wrap anything if there were food or something. So, well before the modern practice of recycling and not using plastic and stuff. He was- he was ahead of his time.

EE: Interesting. I only met him once but I-, people talk about him like he was a god, actually.

JS: Well, he was like a little boy at Christmas. He was just so happy to be out there. And he was so thrilled that he was getting paid to do what he loved to do. And he was always busy. He was always darting here, there, just involved in projects, involved with the students. So, yeah, there's an inspiration when you have an example of someone who loves what they're doing.

EE: So, what pushed you over to French as a major?

JS: Well, that was the same thing. It's very interactive. We had wonderful faculty and there were a lot of social events at the- in the- in the French corridor. They mingled with us and French was fun. We got better and better at the language. Most of us were taking the- the overview course, you know, the one after you had four years in high school then you take the introduction to French literature or something. It was fun. I loved reading Descartes, Montaigne, I mean, or the 20th century authors. It was- it was fun to discuss existentialism and all that and when you're 18 or 19, you feel very- very sophisticated going into all of the deep stuff. So, it was just the pure joy of it. Later I went- I- I went to nursing school after I graduated with a degree in French. I went to Cornell Nursing School, so that's when I went to do something practical, just jump in, roll up your sleeves, and get to work. The French was just fun. Yeah, the Botany I didn't want to do. We were memorizing ten twigs or leaves or something every week. And that was fine for the first two or three weeks. Then, okay, you're up to thirty, but by the end of the semester, you're up to hundreds of little twigs that you have to key out and memorize and all that and I thought well I really don't want to get into the course where you learn all of the stuff and just memorize it and my heart wasn't in it. My heart wasn't into- into the nomenclature, and the keys, and the organization of botany. It was being outdoors. Right now I am a president of a land trust. So that

was just the direction I took, being outside, going sideways like Dr. Niering, looking at things, finding things.

[coughing]

EE: So we were in the last class for women. Do you have any observations on that? The school went coed in the fall of 1969.

JS: It- it probably would have been more fun to have men or to have a different perspective, but I liked that we could speak out and be comfortable. We didn't- we were- the pressure for dating and stuff was off. You could just be yourself, go to classes. Yes, that was a privilege. Yeah, that probably why most of us chose a women's college.

EE: But there were a significant number of people who transferred, who were miserable. Do you remember that?

JS: I remember some people who left because they were- it was too difficult. They were getting behind or just felt overwhelmed or some who were bored who wanted to go to the theater in New York or something. But I don't remember anybody transferring because there were no men. I mean there were plenty to be found. It was a two dollar fifty cent ride to Yale or something on the train, so, yeah, and it was- it was convenient because you could date several people and they didn't know each other. Or you can, yeah, you can- it's easier if you break up with somebody that you're not going to see them around out there. Right, but I- I don't think that should be a reason for someone to transfer. That doesn't make sense to me.

EE: Do you remember any controversies that took place while you were here at school that made an impression on you?

JS: Well, we had the usual change that was going on for our whole generation: Vietnam, the racial- Civil Rights movement, but, not really. I did an exchange semester at Spelman. I changed places with a student there. That's an all-Black college.

EE: Talk about that. I didn't know ...

JS: That was an experience: to know what it's like to be a minority. You know, when I walked into the dining room at the school, all the heads, this was like a dining room with 600 people, all the heads turned and looked at me when I walked in and that was the first time I had that experience of really standing out like a sore thumb. And that was the year, the semester I was there, when Martin Luther King was shot, and I was on campus and the president of the college and the deans and all the- all the big muckety mucks called me in and said, "Oh, there's nothing to be afraid of." "I don't know why you're telling me this." And basically they said don't go to

the dining room, because there was a lot of violence in Atlanta all around and don't go off campus. Stay away from the dining room. And so, I got the opportunity to be an usher as his- as- as his body lay in state in the chapel on our campus. So, I was standing right next to the casket when all the people, the mourners, were filing through. And then I got an invitation to go down to the Ebenezer Baptist Church, the day before the funeral, the big funeral when the presidents and the Rockefellers and all those people were showing up but just local people were there the day before. And I didn't realize until later when I was much older or- or when history showed what a significant moment that was. There was some discomfort when I was- right after it had happened there was a call right down the hallway, "Let's get that honkey," and my friends closed the door to the room and said, "She ain't here." So there were threats on the corner right off the campus. Black people were throwing rocks at white drivers and- and- so that was pretty close to campus. I was walking near there and someone steered me away from there saying that's what's happening on that corner.

EE: Had Conn arranged for you to do this or you found the program and then went and said ...

JS: Yeah, it was an exchange program that Connecticut had. I think they had been doing it for a couple of years.

EE: Do you know anybody else who ever did it?

JS: Just the other-, I forget, there was someone the year before me, because I talked to her, asked her about her experience. I don't remember her name. And then there were two other students from other colleges, two other white students, like, doing the same thing as I was doing.

EE: And the Black student who came here, did you ever talk to her or meet her to find out how she was received at Connecticut, which was predominantly white?

JS: Right, no, we wrote to each other and I think she may have found it a little academically challenging, but she apparently did very well. And I talked to white classmates this reunion and she had- she was the one who delivered the news to her about Martin Luther King. She was walking across campus and saw her.

EE: What was the girl's name? Was she in our class?

JS: In our class, yeah.

EE: Not Diane Harper? No.

JS: No, no, no. It wasn't a Black girl. It was- it was a white student who told the Black student. But that wasn't Diane. Diane Harper, no.

EE: I'm just saying, well do you know the name of the Black girl from Spelman?

JS: I don't remember, no. That was fifty years ago and I didn't get to know her because she came up and I- I left, so ...

EE: That's funny, I didn't know about that program.

JS: Yeah, so just my eyes were opened to- just even socially. If you went to a dance and the music stopped for any reason, the other students would just clap their hands and just with rhythm make music so people could dance, even if there was no band. And, yeah, that was beyond my experience. But, yeah, it was- it was a lot of fun. There-I'm trying to think-academically it was not up to- up to Connecticut at all.

EE: What classes did you take there?

JS: Well, I wanted to take the French classes, but it turned out for the undergraduate level the highest level they had there was equivalent to a Connecticut freshman course that I took in French. It was, you know, that was as high as they got. So I ended up taking graduate courses. They were like a consortium of five colleges all right in that area. So, I took graduate courses, which had the same titles, you know, "Nineteenth-century literature," whatever, "Seventeenth-century ..." they would have at Conn but they- the volume of work on all my classes was a fraction of what we did here. We just- we had piles of reading, piles of papers and- and this was the first time that I had free time because there wasn't so much demand on your time from all- all the work. In Spanish I was taking beginning Spanish, but I had to go advance to their intermediate class because they weren't- they were basically at the mid-semester, at one semester at the same level we were at after two weeks or so, the grammar and stuff. I mean if you take language lab here at Connecticut, it's accelerated. So, it's just- I had to- it was kind of hard for me to learn since I had to pace it back, because we'd been, you know, accustomed to such challenging work that ...

EE: Was it your thought, you know, Conn used to be referred to as the eighth seven sister. Was it just the nature of Conn versus other schools that were not quite as demanding or did you feel that it was a Black-white ...

JS: No, no. I don't think it was Black-white. I think it was the school was meeting the needs of the students that were enrolled there. It could become more competitive or harder, but they're meeting the needs of- of that student body. I wouldn't say it's Black-white, but it may be a

matter of background, you know, of privilege, economics really, not color. I think if most of the people who come into Connecticut have had a rigorous high school and that was less challenging. There were some people who were excellent students, you know, but I think they could have been challenged more.

EE: Interesting. So, you talked a little bit about your life after Conn, becoming a nurse. Did French or botany have any impact on that in any way?

JS: Not so much. The French a lot, because for a while we were working in Miami and there were a lot of Haitians or international people that came in, so the French helped all the time. There would be someone French-speaking and you could do it, but no, but I think you go forward with confidence. If you've had a good education, it really doesn't matter what you're going into. You have the discipline to learn, to pick up what you need to know and- and do it. So, I think the liberal arts education just prepares you to do anything, and to know how to approach it and get it done.

EE: I agree with you 100% and for people who think it's a waste of time, what you need to learn, you know, Chaucer or whatever. It enriches your life and it prepares you for all kinds of things.

JS: And not necessarily the content. It could be Chaucer, it could be something else, but it's the fact that you've applied yourself, you're disciplined, you know, you also need to be able to communicate well. If you can write well, you- that will serve you in anything you can do.

EE: And deal with ideas and brainstorming and organization.

JS: All of that. Yeah, yeah, yeah. No matter what you do, you'll do it better if you think- think things through. As you say, organize, brainstorm, make a plan.

EE: So when you think about college today and you hear about other college students, sometimes, we were talking to some of the students helping last night and they're very positive on their experience here, but they have some stories that would probably make your hair stand on end.

JS: Okay, of what? Like, you mean campus life or ...

EE: More like the- the terminology of snowflake children and the Millennials and all. They say it's less prevalent here than some other places.

JS: I get the feeling that it's the outside world that's judgmental, you know, the negative terms and- and stuff. I- I don't have first-hand experience to understand exactly what they mean with inclusivity and safe places and all that. I'm not sure where- where to go with all that.

EE: Right, exactly what we were talking about. You know, Harvard had safe rooms and faculty are not allowed to enter.

JS: Okay, yeah, that's an alien concept to me. But I remember, in- when I was in nursing school, somebody was telling me, "That guy over there," we were in the library, "you know, he's gay, but he doesn't let anybody know" and, you know, it was like, a real secret. You just can't let that out. It's a stigma or something. You know, we- it almost seemed as if you would risk getting kicked out of school. It might be a criterion for dismissal or something, so I can remember how hush-hush it was and there was so much pressure to stay closeted. So, I think that's a positive change. It's not just school, in our society in general, people are a lot more comfortable, maybe not in certain pockets of the population, but, you know, in a place like this, you could be comfortable.

EE: Absolutely, I agree. Is there anything—it doesn't sound like this—but anything you shouldn't have gone to Conn? It doesn't sound like that from what you say.

JS: I might have liked more choices. You know, like the Botany part, I liked being outdoors, but I just didn't like the ac- the academic direction it went. I might have been happy with horticulture or it was early for ecol- for ecology sciences or something, but I easily could picture myself as an educator in ecology or forestry or something National Park Service, that kind of thing, if there'd been a program like I- I know at University of Connecticut they have forestry, they have school of agriculture, master gardeners with the extension service. If we'd had a wider choice of things to do in botany, I might have gone in that direction, but I just didn't want to learn- I just didn't have my heart in it to learn all the plant names. And I know people that do and they love it and it's like Christmas, they're, you know, so excited about it, but it just didn't work for me.

EE: Well, I just told somebody, 1965, Mary Saunders, who was my good friend, was a Botany major and it was the first time I ever in my life had heard the word ecology and I said to her, "What's that?" I never heard the word.

JS: Yeah, yeah, well, I think ...

EE: The school was pretty advanced I think in terms of ...

JS: Absolutely. I think back in the '80s I audited a lot of Niering's courses and it was- that was ecology, Ecology 101 course, and the fun part of that was we had a field trip every Monday

afternoon. You know, either we would be in the Arboretum or we would go on a bus and go to northwest Connecticut or go up to the brownstones in the middle of Connecticut, the quarries, or- and we- or a marsh, a Barn Island marsh and you'd compare saltwater marshes with freshwater marshes and stuff, so that's the stuff I loved. I would have- if we'd had that, an Ecology major as opposed to a Botany major, I probably would have done more.

EE: That's interesting, yeah.

JS: But, you know, you can't have everything, you know. You- you make do, take the best with what you've got and then you, you know, you don't know, at 18, what your interests are going to be anyway, so, yeah, you- you find it eventually.

EE: What branch of nursing did you go into?

JS: I did a little bit of everything. I would say the most exciting stuff was hospital work, meaning emergency room, post-op, cardiac, surgery, high-intensity, high-pressure stuff. But also the hospital owns you. They owned you for 24 hours a day, all year round. The more fun things were school nurse in Alaska, and, you know, with a junior high and it was so much fun, it was all the adolescents, all the things they try to get up to and into, you know, it was just ... And I was a visiting nurse. We- we did our visiting nurse practice in Spanish Harlem and so, you know, the kind of praxis, they said, you know, "Somebody wants to steal your bag, you know, don't fight them for it." I remember one of my fellow students and a car pulled up to her, she's walking along the streets. She said, "Here," just hand her bag over to the ... But, the visiting nurse thing gives you a perspective. You're seeing people in their homes or you're dealing with a lot of- they're emptying out the mental health hospitals, the psych hospitals, were supposedly having care in a less restrictive setting, but it- it turned out many people were just turned loose without structure and getting their medications and they were going, you know, just returning- reverting to back to whatever problem they had, so I worked with families if they- if they were available, to structure the care and make sure that they knew they had a connection back to the medical system if they needed it. So, yeah, what else? Basically they had a wide- I had a wide variety of jobs. My husband was in the Coast Guard, so every four years or so it was time to move and I would find a new- a new challenge, try a different thing. So, it was satisfying.

EE: Alright, well, we only have a few minutes left because they are keeping to a regular schedule. Is there anything you can think of that you would like to add that you might have left out?

JS: No, I think, you know, most of us who have come back for fiftieth reunion I think are people that I think are kind of happy with themselves, with the life they've led, or the people they know, and so I think it was really heartening to see that, I think 93 of us showed up, one of the highest

percentages of a class ever, so I think that speaks well for our class and for us, so- so, good. Everything's good.

EE: Well, thank you very much for doing this, I really appreciate it.

JS: Well, thank you.