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Claire Bronson '69-Kathryn Riley '69

Claire Bronson

Kathryn Riley

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Claire Bronson: Okay, this is Claire Sekulski Bronson, class of '69 interviewing

Kathryn Riley: Kathryn Riley, class of 1969.

CB: Kathy, they have quite a few different questions here, one that they must find interesting because they put it first and ... is why did you decide to come to Connecticut College for Women.

KR: I do- It's a good question, but I do not have an interesting answer to that question. I applied to a number of colleges. Somebody who had graduated from my high school a couple of years before me who I had a good bit of respect for came to Connecticut College and I can't- I don't recall, but it was- it was not a very focused decision. It seemed just like a good place to go. Sorry. Also, it was far away from Ohio where I grew up and I wanted to, you know, get out of state and get- go to a different kind of place.

CB: Okay, well, that's ...

KR: That's not a great answer, but it's the truth.

CB: Okay. I'm the interviewer, I can't make any comments, but we can talk later. What, if anything, surprised you about the College during your time here?

KR: Well, I guess a reason I eventually decided on- on a women's college and what I really liked about being here was that, because everyone was a woman, you were taken really seriously as an intellect. And I don't think that was true in high school. I can't- I don't know if that really surprised me but it was a really good feeling and one that I- was important to me and formative to me. So, that's- that's the big change between high school and coming to college was being taken seriously as a- as a mind, as a brain.

CB: Okay. Where did you live, I assume on campus since you came from Ohio?

KR: I did. I lived in the- first year I lived in Lambdin in the Complex and then I moved with a couple of other people to Harkness where I stayed for my last three years.

CB: Why did you move? It's such a different kind of housing.

KR: It is. Again, I can't remember, because I moved with some upperclassmen who wanted- it was a lottery system and we put in for a couple of places and we wanted- there were a group of three of us that wanted to be together and we got into Harkness. And I liked- once I got there I liked it, so stayed.

CB: What did you study? Did you have memories of classes or professors that stand out?

KR: Yeah, I- I was a Government major ultimately. I didn't know what I was- wanted to study when I got here, but that's what I studied. And of course it was a great major because there was so much going on in the political world at the time. I felt like I was studying something that was happening. The head of the department at that time was Marjorie Dilley, who insisted on being called Miss Dilley, I should say, and not Dr. Dilley. And she- I went into teaching and then to teacher education and a lot of things and she was and has always remained my- the standard by which I measure teaching. She was just the best teacher I- certainly I have ever had and I have ever seen and just really aspirational when it came to teaching and the importance of- the importance of listening to a student carefully and asking them a question that was specific to them and that caused them to think. She was really superb and I am sorry I didn't stay in touch with her more.

CB: Why did you choose to take Government? At the time it was Economics, Government, and Sociology that was the grouping- curriculum grouping you chose- had to choose from. Was there a particular reason?

KR: No, I never took an economics course. I think I probably took a sociology course, but I wanted to do something that connected with something I could see as opposed to something theoretical and because the political life of the country was so vivid and kind of horrifying at the time, but, you know, it was the Vietnam War, it was really what we just heard about in the lecture. It was generational change in a very overt way. And I just- I wanted to do- I wanted to be learning about something that appeared very relevant to me. So, anyway, that's why I did it.

CB: Did you have to take the American history class or did you pass the entrance or whatever exam that was that they gave us?

KR: I cannot remember that. I don't remember taking American history.

CB: Okay, so you probably didn't have to.

KR: It may have been that.

CB: Just checking. Okay, were you involved in any groups or activities that were important to you?

KR: Yes, I was- I- I worked on and eventually became managing editor of ConnCensus, which was the name of the student newspaper at the time. And I was- I spent a lot of time on ConnCensus. And again, it was a way to- it was a lens to look and report about what was happening in kind of the political world both on campus and off campus. And I became- I was just very- the two other women who were in leadership positions then, that were Jackie Earl and Maria Pellegrini and- I mean I went to New York City to cover a George Wallace rally. I mean, we did some- we did some crazy things, but it was- it was very gratifying and I loved

working and that was a big part of my confidence building. You know, when you write something, an opinion, an editorial, and you put it in print and you put it out there for other people to respond to, it- it takes a bit of courage and, you know, it builds your confidence to do that. So, being on ConnCensus was a big part of my experience at the College. Very important to me.

CB: Okay. This question is a big one. What was the campus climate like while you were here. Do you remember any particular events or controversies? Then it goes on to what are your memories surrounding the debates on coeducation? Has your opinion of the College's decision changed over the years?

KR: Well, I was- as I say, I was struck- what I liked about Connecticut- I don't think I was quite ready for college. I was a young, you know, some people come with a passion and a direction and I was not that person. I do remember, I loved being taken seriously by my professors and I thought in most cases the- the level of teaching was really excellent. I mean, Dilley. So I remember those things. And I do remember the debate about coeducation, though really students didn't have much- we knew it was going on ... So, I remember when the vote was taken and I felt some sadness because for me a women's college was a place to find- was a refuge to find a place to be taken seriously and so I thought other people like me won't- won't have this. I have it. It doesn't really affect me. In retrospect I think the College, Connecticut College, has done the switch to coeducation very, very well. And when I look at a lot of the programs they're running now, and I have felt this way for the last, well, fifteen years, I wish they had been, you know, some of the programs they have done- have- have now, I wish I had- they'd been present when we were here. And I think they've done the coeducation well. And it's interesting, I'll just add this, my attorney retired a few years ago. He handed me over to another attorney, who was reviewing my will and I have left some money to Connecticut College in my will. Not a lot, but something. And he said to me, "Well, why- why did you leave money to Connecticut College?" And I said, "Well, I'm an alum." And it turns out, this never would have come up, that he was in the first class of men at Connecticut College and he said, "Well," he said, and I said "I remember when the vote was taken," and he said if you want to talk to a group of men who have stayed tight throughout the years, it was that first group. He said- I said- I think there were about 80 in the first year. And he said, "Boy that was a- being the first men, that was really something." And I said, "Well, I think the College has done a good job," and he said, "I think so too." So, I add that too for someone who was four years behind us. So, I do think they've done a very good job and I've, you know, I've- and the world is different now too for women. But, so I think they did the right thing, and- but like I say, I wanted to make sure there was always a place for women to take- to be taken really seriously, you know, and that does happen when everyone is a woman, I mean, it's a little hard not to. So, anyway ...

CB: Yeah, that's- that's very true. This isn't my interview, but because of what you just said, I was an economics major. That's why- that's why I know those were choices that we had to make, either this one or this one or this one and I happened to choose economics and when I graduated I had applied and been accepted to go to UConn to their new graduate program in economics. And they, you know, it was a good fellowship and the whole thing. But the first day I

went into class, there were 30 in the class. There were 28 men, me, and a girl who had just graduated from Mount Holyoke. And it was the biggest surprise of my life, because that- that's what it was all about, being in a major that allowed you to think and to learn without being challenged as to your opinions. And only once during the time, once I got over it, being ...

KR: Two women.

CB: a minority, a real minority, a different way of looking at being a minority, only one time was I ever challenged by a- a guy and he said, "What are you doing here in this program? You're taking a man's seat."

KR: No kidding.

CB: And I said, "I'm entitled to an education just like you are." But only one. It was a- it was a very interesting thing. I was so surprised that I was really in the minority because here you never felt that, no matter what your major was or what you were involved in, you didn't feel like you were in something that was a man's field.

KR: Well, you- the point is, you were there to exercise your brain and so gender didn't get in the way, if you will, during like a class discussion, for example, or something. I'm just saying it wasn't- it wasn't- it freed me, I think. So, yeah, gender does make a difference, the makeup- the makeup of a group, any kind of conversation. But I think people are more aware now of the difference that gender made. I think when we came here, I don't think people understood how- how gender affects all kinds of dynamics, including classroom dynamics. So, it- to me coming here just freed- it- it was good for me. And, going back to the question about changing, you know, changing away from single-gender education, like I say, for me I understood why they were doing it, they made a very good case for it. But I also knew for someone like me, it was losing that safe- that safe spot to grow and experiment. But it is what it is, so there you go.

CB: Okay, so now we are moving on to your afterlife. Can you talk about your life after Conn?

KR: Well, I would love to know all about my afterlife quite frankly.

CB: How did your experience shape your life after graduation, if at all?

KR: Well, you know, I didn't have a career path, you know, plotted out even before I came here nor when I graduated here. I just want to be clear about that. But, I did, after just putting around taking graduate courses for a year, I joined the Peace Corps and after that I came back and got a master's degree in teaching English as a second language and that really started a career path of just working really around immigrant- and education of immigrants as adults, I wrote some textbooks, and children and eventually I worked for the- I worked as the manager for programs for immigrant students for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. So, I did a lot of policy work, a lot of teacher education work. I should say the confidence, though, for me, I mean, I gained a lot of confidence here in myself and just to go into the Peace Corps, to do- and

to do- and to really- ESL was a new field at the time and to take on, you know, I did a lot of public speaking, a lot of work in the public and I really, as I say, I gained the confidence here of- of my own- in my own ability to think and reason and express myself. That's what helped- why working at ConnCensus helped. Working on written expression and clear expression. It's hard work, you know, writing is hard work. It's really hard. So, I would say it gave me a lot of confidence and I always knew I had received a good education. I knew what good teaching looked like. I knew what high standards looked like and I do think that's the part that really- that I carried with me. So- so, yeah ...

CB: Do you keep in touch with your classmates?

KR: I do. I've kept in very close touch with maybe five or six of them. Really- really very close touch, and no, you know, there are children and all that, that kind of stuff, which makes you even closer.

CB: Do you visit with them or ...

KR: I do, well, I, you know ...

CB: Where are you living now?

KR: I live in Boston, right in the city. But, and I travel. Katie Montgomery, one of my friends, she, I was in the Peace Corps and came back and then she was in the Peace Corps. I went to visit her in the Peace Corps. We traveled together. She worked for the State Department, I visited and we traveled. So, Katie, another friend of mine, lived in Vermont and I went up there all the time. I really know her children very, very well. Ellen Lougee Simmons and I have kept in very close touch and are ... So, you know, maybe not the last- not the last ten or fifteen years have I seen these, you know, when kids are growing and you- it's a shift. The last five years have seen a big shift I think in peo-, in my life certainly and maybe in other people's lives and what we choose to do with our time. But, yes, I- I- I- I do count some of my best friends, it's maybe five or six people that I met here. And that's a lot, considering fifty years has passed. Have passed. Has passed. Have passed. Anyway, that one, that one.

CB: Good, thinking about college today, is there something from your experience that you wish students today could have? Is there something happening on campus now that you wish you could have experienced?

KR: Well, I think a lot of the interdisciplinary programs they have here, certainly the internship programs would have been very helpful to me, very helpful to me. And some of the things, I do want to say and this is going to sound critical, but, you know, in the- in the- in the tour this morning they talked about these support services they had for students, they have for students now, if someone is in trouble, there is a referral. I wasn't aware frankly of any support services and I know I and some other people could have used some support services. I- I- I just- I was saying to someone, this is going to sound terrible, but, you know, they used to- they used to

have these mixers, I don't know if you ever went to mixers at Wesleyan and Trinity and whatever, whatever, and they'd put you- they had a bus, you'd go, you'd be let out in a fraternity house or something where there was a keg of beer. People would get very intoxicated. At a certain time you were supposed to be back at the bus and come back. So, I am thinking about the issue of sexual assault. I don't remember anybody ever talking about this is what you should be careful of if something happens, whatever. I mean, I can't help but feel that, you know, there were some not great things that happened to students and there were just- those things weren't talked about in general. I certainly feel like at a women's college though, which we were then, they should have been talked about. Someone mentioned going to a group therapy session this morning. I didn't even know that was- that took place. I didn't know if it was there. So, I think that the non-academic lives of students didn't get as much nurturing, support, and attention as it does now. I think the way it is now is much, much better. But I certainly could have used some of that, you know, support and I- I- it- it probably was here but very invisible to me, anyway. So, I think that all that is really good, you know, addressing who students are and the lives they're living not only their intellectual development, so I think that's good. Like I say the interdisciplinary programs, lots of programs abroad. I'm thrilled that they require two semesters of languages, I think that's still fantastic. So, I think they're doing a lot of really, really great things. I'd like to come back and kind of, you know, there are things I'd like to learn. Yeah, and this seems like a great place to do it, so I ... So, anyway, and when I read certain things in the newsletter I think "I'm missing out. Why didn't they have this when I was there?" You know, why ... really, I do, I do.

CB: I know what you mean.

KR: And I think that they could have done that. It wasn't an impossible thing to do. So, anyway, and I can't but think that becoming coeducational has opened up more resources. Still, men earn more money than women on the average. I would guess having male alums as well as female alums brings the College more in donations. I think they're able to do more now and I think that was one of their big reasons for becoming coeducational, to broaden, you know the economic base and I think it's worked for them. So, it's good. So, anyway, that's all I have to say, that's all the ... whatever.

CB: Okay. Have you had any, this is not on the sheet, have you had any contact back with the high school, the area you came from in Ohio?

KR: Well, I remain- my parents- my mother died soon after I left Connecticut and my father moved, so in terms of having a family home, I didn't have it, but my- I had very close friends from high school so I go back to class reunions and I have cousins who still live in Ohio. So, I do go back a lot and actually I went to my 50th high school reunion, whenever that, 1965, and I- I walked through the high- we had a high school tour. It was interesting, given by the vice-principal- the current vice-principal of the high school where I went and it's a community that really, really values education and I was really kind of proud of where I had come from, proud of that legacy that that community still holds. But I should say, it was, and I don't know it's that

way today, but it was a huge cultural shift for me coming from the Midwest to the East Coast. It was huge. A lot of the girls who were here had gone to private school, for one thing.

CB: Right, that's true.

KR: They had gone- they knew New York, they knew Boston. I didn't- I had never been alone in a big city by myself. There were a lot of Jewish girls here. There had been one Jewish student in my high school class and frankly I think it's still that way in the town where I came from. There- I came from a place of almost no racial diversity or ethnic diversity and it's still that way. You know, there are a lot of towns in America that are still that way. So, it was hard and I was a long way from home. And, you know, there were no cell phones. So I called home once a week from a little phone booth and a lot of girls had, you know, they lived in Connecticut, their parents came and picked them up on weekends and this and that. So, I really felt it was- it was a strange- I was a stranger here in general, you know. And that was- that was ha- that was hard.

CB: It almost speaks to the support. Modern- modern colleges now have different ways of getting, you know, students together from a similar area and I can see where that- that could have helped.

KR: Yeah and East- now that I've lived on the East Coast, East Coast culture is different from Midwestern culture. It still is. And- and- I mean I've loved living in Boston. I've had a good life, very happy life, but- but- I still- people say where are you from, where are you from- where are you from and I always feel like I'm really from the Midwest and, you know, that's my sensibility. And so, so that was another part of coming to Connecticut. It was a long way in those days, with very, you know, a long way. People didn't come to visit you. I went home for Thanksgiving. I mean, you know, it's a long way. So, and I could have used, probably, easing into college life. I could have used more interaction with home. I was really, you know, isolated in a way. Nobody else from my high school else came here, you know. So, I could have used more support, not that anything horrible happened to me but I realized a lot of it was struggling. My mother hadn't gone to college. I mean, I didn't have, really models. A lot of, you know, so anyway ... So, I remember it initially as being a strange place, you know, for me the culture was strange. And New London is also kind of a strange place, in general. So, I- I- yeah ... of course what I want to do, you're the interviewer, but I want to ask you, after I say these things, my instinct is to say, "Well, what was your experience?" You're not supposed to do that, but, where are you from?

CB: I'm from Connecticut.

KR: You're from Connecticut?

CB: I'm from Connecticut.

KR: A lot of people were from Connecticut in our class. It just felt like a lot. Yes.

CB: Well, there were five from my high school.

KR: Which high school did you go to?

CB: Torrington.

KR: Torrington.

CB: Torrington.

KR: Who was I was sitting with today and there were five kids who got scholarships from her class. There were scholarships ...

CB: Our class. There was one- Torrington is in northwest Connecticut.

KR: That's what she was saying. Who was I sitting with? She is a nurse.

CB: Were you sitting with Anne Hutchison?

KR: Anne, it was Anne who said that to me.

CB: Where were you sitting? I was sitting next to Anne.

KR: Well, we were sitting together at breakfast this morning.

CB: Oh, at breakfast, okay

KR: At breakfast, yeah.

CB: Right next to me at lunch? No, you weren't.

KR: No, you weren't. No, I wasn't. You are correct. Yeah.

CB: Yes, there were five of us and so ... but that was a lot of money that came out of Litchfield. There were a lot of women here every year. I think ours was just the largest class, was five. But there were two or three every single year. I don't know going forward. For a while, I'm sure, because my freshman sister when I was a junior, she was from Torrington.

KR: Well, what a great opportunity.

CB: It was wonderful.

KR: I mean really. Yeah, because there wasn't that in Ohio, let me tell you. There wasn't that kind of, you know, "Come to Connecticut College" thing, but, so anyway it just seems very long ago right now to me. Doesn't it seem ...

CB: It does, it does. Well, I have a niece who graduated from here in '01, so I-, you know, I- I hear different things.