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Kathryn Riley '69-Ellen Robinson Epstein '69

Ellen Epstein

Kathryn Riley

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Kathryn Riley: Here we go, okay. So, my name is Kathryn Riley. I'm a member of the class of 1969 and I'm interviewing my old friend ...

Ellen Epstein: Ellen Robinson Epstein, also the class of '69, but she should say, "my friend of long duration," not, "my old friend," but welcome too.

KR: Well, my old friend of long duration, whatever. Yeah, yeah. So, Ellen, what brought you to- how did you end up here at Connecticut College?

EE: Well, I'm so glad you asked that question, because I actually wanted to go to Barnard. And my- it was in the '60s, '65 of course was the year we started, and in those days there were articles in the *Washington Post*-I grew up in Washington, D.C.-that people in New York who were going to bank tellers or any public place and even though they were wearing heavy winter coats, people were sticking hypodermic needles in the coats to give them an injection of some drug, do something terrible. I don't know if that ever happened or happened one time, but my father saw that article and he said, "You are not going to school in New York City." And he was adamant. And I remember, I think I got on the waiting list at Barnard, I'm pretty sure, but I got into Connecticut and several other schools and Connecticut we had visited and we loved it and thought it was beautiful and wonderful and of course it was always known as the eighth seventh sister. But, coming to Connecticut- do you want me to talk about this now, or ...

KR: No, I just- so, in terms of you being here, the question is what surprised you, but what- I'm going to say what impressed you? What- what happened to you here?

EE: So, this is what I spoke about this morning and I get very emotional when I talk about this. I had gone to a very excellent public high school in Washington, D.C. Something like 85% of the class went to college and it was a top-notch school, but if you were smart and you were female, it was the kiss of death. You wouldn't get invited to dances. You- people would make fun of you. And, I recognize that that's probably changed now, but that was for sure the way it was and I was very athletic. I once had a female friend introduce me as "athletic, intelligent Ellen" and that was a put-down by the girl introducing me to another girl. So, I got to Connecticut and not only was it good to be smart, but the smarter you were, the better it was and I thought that I had died and gone to heaven, because when you talk- when I tell people, "Women's Liberation," I wasn't an activist in the traditional women's liberation, but my women's liberation was coming here and finding out that it was okay to be female and smart and interested in all these fabulous, fabulous courses that- I was like a kid in a candy store.

KR: You were. I actually remember you. Anyway ... This is- I'm sorry. So, what kind of memories do you have about living in the dorm, the whole kind of residential- I'm assuming you lived at home before you came here, so this was your first away from home ...

EE: Yes, and you know, all the dorms were singles and now of course and it's been rebuilt and all doubles, so interesting. I would love to know why the school thought that because I thought it was genius that you didn't have to adapt. And if you wanted a roommate, you could have the four corner rooms and some of those were triples. The- what I spoke about this morning also—I don't know if you were there at Plant when we were on the tour—we were so naive, so naive. I can't even- in hindsight, my six-year-old granddaughter knows more about sex than I knew, you know, when I got here and what I mentioned this morning, there was one girl whose mother had died. She was extremely unattractive and homely. Her father was a professor and we- she needed braces on her teeth and she needed glasses and- and we felt sorry for her, but she was just socially awkward. And there was a senior who took her into her room every single night and the freshman spent every night of her life in that senior's room. And it never occurred to us that anything untoward might be going on. You know, we thought the senior was the nicest girl in the world for befriending this young girl. Now, I told that story this morning and somebody said—somebody who identified as a lesbian—“Now how do you know that they didn't love each other?” I don't know that. It didn't occur to me that they were lesbians. Maybe twenty years ago I thought maybe the senior was abusing the freshman girl, but none of it entered our minds. We just- we weren't thinking in those lines and I don't think- we certainly weren't stupid, but we were unaware of any of these things that are so prevalent now on college campuses that, you know, sexuality and gender and which bathroom you use and, you know, nothing.

KR: No, and I just- I talked at breakfast with someone this morning who had shared a dorm room with someone who was mentally troubled, really, and reported it to the College. The College had no back-up, I mean, it was unprepared to do anything. So, I think that whole part of our lives was not addressed here. There wasn't the capacity to address really it, as far as I can tell.

EE: Tina Scott's husband went to Bates, which was all-male, and the president announced in front of everybody that there was nobody on the college campus who had a- any mental health issues. The president of Bates. He's having his 50th reunion next weekend, so he's exactly our generation.

KR: That's right. Anyway, so what did you study? What are your memories of classes or professors that really stand out?

EE: Okay, that's also a great question. I studied art history and I feel a thousand times blessed for having found that major. I told each of my five children that if they didn't take art history

courses, I wouldn't pay their tuition. I think that studying art history I took like- I would take 18th century art, 18th century music, 18th century history, 18th century British history, whatever. And I would do the same and it was an eye-opener to see how things all gelled and it really helped me understand the world. And people thought it was going to be a useless major, which it wasn't, and I had phenomenal professors, although, in light of, again, the Me Too movement, I remember Professor Knowlton—I hate to mention names—talking about how the Nile River would overflow the banks of the Nile the same way a man spreads over a woman when they're having intercourse and I mean, it was shocking. He did that in a class, you know. And he, I guess, was ...

KR: He got off on that.

EE: Yes, and, I don't know if you ever had him in a class.

KR: I didn't.

EE: Anyhow. And several of the other male professors, I think- I think some of them really hated women if you want to know the truth, but they were good teachers, but they- they would put us down in a way. And I took Psychology from Dr. Rhyne and my first grade in the six-week class I got the highest grade in the entire 200 person lecture. It was a D+.

KR: I remember that about him.

EE: And I couldn't tell my parents. I mean, I had been a straight-A student my entire life. I called my uncle. I was sobbing. I was so devastated. I didn't know what I was going to do and, you know, it was such an eye opener.

KR: He did that. That was a shock what he did to everybody. Now that you bring it up, I remember other people talking about that and that was his message. That was his message.

EE: Right, right.

KR: Were you involved with any groups or activities that were important to you here?

EE: Well, Mary Saunders who was really very close to me, who—I feel so fortunate to have met Mary and Charlotte and you, Kathy, because I felt like if I hadn't lived near all of you, I wouldn't have met you if you had lived at the other end of campus. And I feel like there would have been a deficit in my life, you know, that these were women who were so amazing and added so much to my years here and—just lost my train of thought, what was it?

KR: Well, the question was, any groups or activities that were important to you.

EE: Oh, yeah. Mary was- Mary-and I tried to get her to come to the interview because she was Chief Justice of the Honor Court-and I got involved in Honor Court because of her and to me that was one of the outstanding things about Connecticut College, which I asked the students who were helping our class last night if it works now and they said, "Sorta, kinda." They felt that because of computers that it's easier to lift something from a text or something and not- if you forget to annotate it when you're actually working with a book and you have the name of the book and you've create a notecard because you have to footnote it and you're typing your own paper and it's not that people are purposely plagiarizing, but it's easier to crib something or copy something. I don't know if that's true.

KR: There's always so much out there, there's always so much out there now. It's really hard.

EE: Right, but I do remember one person who got expelled senior year, right before-you don't remember this? Yes, not in our class, but the class be- ahead of us and it made a huge impression and I took that whole honor system- I think it really worked. It really, really worked. And that, along with the core-I forget what they called it, the comprehensive stuff that we had to take where everybody ...

KR: Comprehensive exams, like ...

EE: Well, that, they're gone now.

KR: I know, but I do remember ...

EE: No, I'm talking about the core curriculum where everybody studied the first couple years. You had general liberal arts. I thought that was the biggest plus around.

KR: No, I thought it was- I thought it was good. Yeah, and I ... yeah, it's not my ... but, yeah. What- what was the campus climate like while you were here. Do you remember any particular events or controversies? And, for our class, for example, and what are your memories of the debates surrounding coeducation? That is, what do you remember about campus life?

EE: Yeah, so I was very much in a shell, you know? I really- one of the things that is hard for me to admit, the *New York Times* stopped-I want to say June 1, but we must have been finished in May-whatever it was, the *New York Times* used to get delivered to our door and it stopped two weeks before the end of school and the Six Day War broke out in the Middle East and I

didn't even know about it. I mean, I was- we didn't have tele- I never watched television in my life.

KR: There was a television, but I don't remember watching.

EE: I don't either. I don't even think I had a radio- I did have a radio. I had a clock radio so I could wake up for class, but I don't think ... you know, and I was oblivious to so much. Now, the Martin Luther King riots I do remember. Bobby Kennedy was killed after we left.

KR: That's right. I can remember sitting in my- I remember exactly where I was, when he- I heard the report.

EE: Yeah, and- was the moon landing '69 or '70? It might have been '70.

KR: It was after we left.

EE: After we left. But I was- we were in sort of a blissful never-neverland of ... and I wasn't interested in protesting or politics and bra-burning or any of that stuff. It wasn't my personality. It's not that I didn't care about those things, that I didn't march.

KR: You were a very serious student.

EE: I was very- Susan, I- one of my stories that I love to tell, I just told somebody, one Saturday night when I was- when I-I'm not kidding you, I was the only person in Palmer Library, in the entire place, okay?-and my best friend from high school was at Vassar. And we had these little cutesy things we used to try to outdo each other. We would send each other something stupid, really dumb things. So, I came up with the idea of Xeroxing my face and sending it to my friend whose name was also Kathy. So, I picked up the-right when you walked into Palmer, there was a photocopier machine right in the center hall and I had- I'd been in the study carrels, nobody was there. I picked up the cover, I put my face down on the thing, I took my right hand and dropped the nickel into the little slot to photocopy it and all of a sudden there was a tap on my shoulder. It was Dean Noyes. She said, "Ellen, do you have a problem?" I was so mortified. I was trying to explain that I was going to send a photocopy of my face to my friend at Vassar, you know, just ... But, you know, I was very serious about my work and I felt that I was here and I felt it was a gift that I had these four years to do nothing but read and study and, you know what I miss most about Conn other than my friends, is the reading time. I- my husband is always reading, listening to books, everything else. I sit down to read, if I'm lying in bed at night, I'm gone, I can't even read. And if I sit down to read, oh my God, forgot to put the laundry in or I've got to make this phone call or I have a work thing due and I- I read, but I don't read like I read in college. I mean,

in college it was- it was heaven to have- I even loved reading week, except that it was after Christmas and that was ridiculous

KR: Yeah, that wasn't great, but ... yeah. So, can you talk a little bit about your life after Conn and how did your experience here shape your life after graduation, if at all?

EE: Well, I got a very glamorous job because of my architectural degree. I went to London for a year and studied ...

KR: You got a degree in architecture?

EE: I didn't get a degree in London, but I took architecture courses for a year and then I came back and I ended up getting a job working for General Services Administration, which is the administrative arm of the government. Nobody knows about them.

KR: Well, I've heard about them.

EE: They do everything from buying the toilet paper to the food in the cafeterias to paying the electricity in the ... And, this is a little known fact, the GSA administers the East and West Wings of the White House and the Department of Interior and the National Park Service run the mansion. So nobody had ever written a history of the East and West Wings of the White House and I actually wrote the definitive history on those two buildings. Sadly, it was during the height of Watergate and it never got officially published by the government. It got published by the District of Columbia Historical Society, but that job was because of my degree here and it- my office-I was the architectural historian here, an art historian doing WPA murals, and we had a boss over us and that was it-it was a pretty glamorous job. I then met my husband and we- from the day we met until the day we got married was ten weeks after getting engaged on the second date, which was pretty radical and I had started interviewing his family members because he had a very exotic family, who ended up in San Antonio, Texas by way of Poland, Mexico, and Lithuania and I was like, you know, all-American. And so I got started doing interviews with people and ...

KR: This is after you got married?

EE: After- well, before- well, after I got married I started interviewing-his father had died and I didn't know him and I wanted to know what kind of person he was and people started saying to me, "Well, my father's going to turn 70, can you interview him?" It sounded so old at the time. And so I got involved and my husband, as a baby gift when our first child was born, gave me a card that said, "Ellen Robinson Epstein, Director of the Center for Oral History" and there was

no Center for Oral History. But over 30 years I built it into a business. I wrote a book. A woman in Japan has taken my oral history interviewing techniques and codified it as the Epstein Methodology of Oral History Interviewing, so I've done, you know, a lot of it. But I attribute all of that to my education and, you know, learning how to think, how to talk, how to ask questions, how to have some historical background. I mean, when you're not forced to take World War I history because you're not interested in it, you know you lose a lot of the context for what's happening in the world.

KR: It's true. Do you keep in touch with classmates?

EE: Very few. I try to keep in touch with you.

KR: We don't do a good- we didn't- we did a good job for a while, but we don't do so well.

EE: But we should try and talk every six months or so.

KR: We should.

EE: And I don't- I don't talk to Mary and Sue that much, but, again, when I- what I love about my friends here, it's really as if I just talked to you yesterday, we totally pick up. I forget, you know, where you were working or, you know ...

KR: I think we have the essence of each other.

EE: Absolutely. And- and we have so much that we've shared from our years here that it's just easy. And, you know, we go on very different paths in our lives, but it's very easy to continue that.

KR: You're going to have something to say about this question. In thinking about the College today, is there something from your experience that you wish students today could have and also is there something happening on campus now that you wish you could have experienced? You- you alluded a little bit to things that- practices that they no longer have that you think were greatly beneficial.

EE: Yeah, and, you know, last night we stayed up for two hours talking to the four students who are our shepherds, or whatever you want to call them, who were fantastic. I was so impressed by them. I had heard very negative things about Connecticut .

KR: Really?

EE: Before talking to the ... Yeah, the drinking started on Tuesday night and people were throwing up all over the common rooms and breaking the furniture because they were so drunk and really bad things. And there was a whole issue, I don't know if you were aware of a Professor Alan [sic!] Pessin, who's been dismissed [Pessin took a leave, but remained on the faculty] because of some comment he made on Facebook, not in the classroom, that was pursued- was perceived as anti-Muslim, and I- I read a people- all kinds of people, both Conn students and non-Conn students sent me these articles about him, I still don't know the resolution of what happened.

KR: So, you talked about that a little bit with these young women?

EE: No, I didn't talk about that at all. I talked- but they were very positive that the drinking doesn't start until Thursday night, that they're going to redo Cro, I think, and they're going to have a place where people 21 years old can go and get the alcohol and bring it out, that it won't be available to everyone. What I find so interesting, and it's not just Connecticut, you know they want to have all these rules and regulations about how to treat people with what gender they are and their- person they love and the bathroom they use and there you want to obey the rules. But when it comes to drinking and the rule is you can't drink until you're 21, then they don't want to obey the rules and why should they police it. And, you know, the alcohol- they admitted that the alcohol is a problem, but it's not a horrendous problem.

KR: It is a problem. It's a problem in society.

EE: Everywhere.

KR: Everywhere. Big, big problem. I have a niece who just graduated from Cornell. She actually did her first year at Colgate. The drinking's a horrible problem. She doesn't drink at all. I think mostly because it's just turned her off entirely to it.

EE: Why should you be allowed to break a law that- it's a state law.

KR: Well, the thing is it also affects behavior, so she had a problem with a roommate who drank all the time and it was- it was-, you know, when you drink, you change. That's why people drink. But- so, it becomes a- a pervasive problem. It's not just breaking of the law, it's among people who live together on a campus and it's- it's- it's hard. I don't- I don't know.

EE: One thing they said today that I find that I think I would not be comfortable with is they assign rooms based on just names. It has nothing to do with sex.

KR: I didn't know that.

EE: Now, I didn't get a chance to ask, I would guess that you would have when you fill out your housing form, you would have to be willing to say, "I will accept a roommate of whatever sex." But, it has got to be somewhat uncomfortable.

KR: Well, I don't think, I- I- I- I'd be interested to learn about that, but the fact is there are religious instr- restrictions ...

EE: Well, they do have single-sex floors you can request.

KR: But, I mean, but, you know, it also- it's not that you have to be in a single-sex floor. You just don't want to be sharing a room with somebody who's not of your gender. I- I- I just think people of certain backgrounds, that would just be- I wouldn't have wanted to do it quite frankly and I still, you know, I still can't share a bathroom with anybody of any gender. But, anyway, it's just I- I- well, it's very interesting. probably should turn this off.