

Janis Nelson
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Hudson Rogers '25

ROGERS: This is Hudson Rogers. Today is Sunday, May 7 2023. And I am conducting this oral history interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam project. I'm recording this interview by Zoom video call with Mrs. Janice Nelson. I am on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. And Mrs. Nelson is speaking to me from Los Angeles, California. Mrs. Nelson, thank you so much for speaking with me today. If you could just start by telling me your date of birth and location of birth.

NELSON: June 15th 1950, New York City [NY].

ROGERS: Awesome. And how did you like growing up in the city?

NELSON: It's all I knew.

ROGERS: What did your parents do when you were growing up?

NELSON: My mom was a housewife and a mother. And my dad had a business in the Fulton Fish Market.

ROGERS: Oh, awesome. And were you involved in activism in New York from an early age?

NELSON: Yeah, I think my earliest memory was when different families were bundling their kids into the cars to drive down to Washington [DC] for what turned out to be the "I Had a Dream" speech. And my parents being on the fence about whether they were going to take us or not, and finally deciding that they thought we were too young to drive all that way, all those many hours. And so we didn't go. But it lets you know, that's the philosophical bent of the community. We were very much in support of what Martin Luther King was doing, of rallying for causes, and very community minded, communal spirit minded. Very much red diaper babies.

ROGERS: Would you say growing up in New York was very helpful for that sort of thing?

NELSON: There were a lot of us for sure. I'm not that aware of the push back, although it was there you know, there was a lot of upper crust noses in the air kind of people. You'll excuse the expression, Ivy League kind of people.

ROGERS: Where did you go to high school?

NELSON: I went to Hunter College High School.

ROGERS: Did you enjoy it?

NELSON: Very much.

ROGERS: Were you involved in any extracurricular activities in high school?

NELSON: I was. I was involved in student government. I was involved in student theater.

ROGERS: Were you always very interested in theater and politics?

NELSON: Yes.

ROGERS: So how did you decide to go from there to then going to Barnard [College]?

NELSON: My high school was kind of a feeder school for Barnard in those days. And my parents didn't want to send me out of town anywhere. So it was kind of Barnard or CCNY [The City College of New York]. And Barnard said yes, so I said yes.

ROGERS: Was there anything about pursuing an all women's education that attracted you?

NELSON: My high school from seventh grade to twelfth grade was all women. So actually, no. I very much wanted a co-ed environment, but Columbia was across the street.

ROGERS: When you started Barnard, did you interact a lot with the Columbia students?

NELSON: We did in a social sense. The Columbia students, Columbia College at that time was all male. So, it was not co-ed. So, yes, there was a lot of interaction. All the dances and whatever social activities there were. Were, you know, mixing both schools.

ROGERS: And so when you started out, Barnard, what do you think changed in your life when you started college?

NELSON: Nothing.

ROGERS: You were still commuting from home?

NELSON: I was commuting from home, I was in an all girls environment, nothing. Different subway stops.

ROGERS: And when you got to Barnard and you were with a lot of young people, were a lot of people like-minded and their attitude towards the Vietnam War?

NELSON: I think less so than in my high school community. You had more people coming in from what I will call the hinterlands. More mainstream America. So you had a more diverse viewpoint, diverse being, you know, pro-war, pro-government or whatever than I was used to in high school and in the community.

ROGERS: And so how did you get involved in activism in college?

NELSON: It was kind of all around. That— my freshman year at Barnard and Columbia was a very pivotal year. There's been a lot written about it. But the first thing that happened was I guess you would call it the Linda LeClair, Peter Behr debacle. It made front page news. All throughout the city I didn't know about nationwide, but certainly the Times [The New York Times] and the Post [The Washington Post] and the Daily News [New York Daily News] especially, which were the three papers in those days. Had it all blasted all over the front cover. A sophomore from Barnard and a sophomore from Columbia, shock, horrors, they were found living together off campus. Just the most awful thing you could possibly think of. How shocking, how scandalous. And this was, this was major news and the big debate over, they called it in loco parentis. What role did the school have? Could they enforce this punishment on these kids for living together when that was totally against the rules. And it got everybody very fired up. And the whole notion of, for instance, in the dorms at Barnard, you could only have male visitors during certain hours. And when they were visiting, I think this is true at Dartmouth also, for when women visited, you had to keep a trash can in the doorway, the doorway couldn't be closed. It had to be open to trash can's whip. And I mean, it was bizarre, it was so bizarre. I mean, there were rules about how you had to dress for meals. It was the Dark Ages. So there started to be a lot of pushback around that, there was an edginess, a buzziness around campus already.

And then there was— Columbia is situated, I don't know if you know the geography of New York, but it's sort of just south of Harlem. And just east of, I guess what you call East Harlem, just west of the East Harlem. And what Columbia was proposing to do, they had bought up some land, and then we're going to build a big expansion gym protruding out into this neighborhood that was underserved, predominantly Black or Hispanic. And they were, you know. This white upper class, Ivy League school was going to build this special facility there and it became very fraught and very political, and there started being demonstrations about that. And they called in the cops, and people got arrested. And it was the whole thing. And that set the campus off on a whole political mindset, I guess you would call them and that's what triggered the occupation of the buildings, and everything that followed. And that's what basically sparked the whole student movement in the country. So it was going on coincidental with the anti-Vietnam movement.

ROGERS: So speaking of the occupation of the buildings, you witnessed the 1968, Columbia Uprising?

NELSON: I did, firsthand.

ROGERS: And how did that affect you?

NELSON: It was very exciting. It was very empowering. For somebody just about to turn eighteen and to suddenly have peers taking matters into their own hands in asserting themselves. It was incredibly empowering. I think it was very important for a generation.

ROGERS: Did you assist those that were occupying the buildings in any way?

NELSON: We did. They had set up sort of a control central down the bottom of the Student Union Building. And there was a whole cadre of Barnard women who would go there, spend the day there and make peanut butter sandwiches for the kids in the building. Yep.

ROGERS: And so that was organized by Students for Democratic Society. Did you know anyone that partook in that organization?

NELSON: I didn't know anybody then. But I do know now. And if you want to talk to somebody, I could put you in touch with them.

ROGERS: Thank you. So then from this, why did you decide to apply to Dartmouth?

NELSON: Wow, that's a long story. But for the summer of my freshman year, I had applied to be what's called an apprentice in their theater program. They had an equity theater program at the Hop [Hopkins Center for the Arts]. And I was accepted. But it costs money to do it. And my folks were really not inclined to spend any more money on me. They wanted me to get a job for the summer. So I ended up not going to Dartmouth for the summer. But somehow I got on somebody's radar. So when they started taking women, for the next year, the year after, they reached out to me and said, "would you be interested in this program?" I said yes. I put in the application for what was called the ten College exchange program. And that was the first year that they took women, we were seventy of us in Cohen Hall.

ROGERS: And what year of your college was that?

NELSON: That was my junior year. I describe it as my junior year as abroad. Yes. In Hanover.

ROGERS: So you spent two years at Barnard then decided to go to Dartmouth?

NELSON: I went to Dartmouth for my junior year. And I had to go back to Barnard for my senior year.

ROGERS: How was the transition from being at an all women's school but that was kind of connected with Columbia to then going to an all men's school.

NELSON: How much time do you have?

ROGERS: We have a lot of time.

NELSON: Dartmouth was a really strange place in those days. I mean, there had been centuries of no women or a certain kind of attitude towards women. And so having us around. Now, I was used to more even though it was a women's school, we had co-ed classes all the time. And I was used to hanging out with the guys and all that. And I get to Dartmouth and these guys were totally freaked out having women around having women in class, not knowing what to say to us, not knowing how to be with us. It was really bizarre.

But on the other hand, I was in the theater department, where there are a lot of factors in the theater department, you tend to get very close. There were a lot of guys of the other persuasion as it were, and it was really easy to be friends with them. So I had, I had people who knew how to be with women and then a lot of people who didn't.

ROGERS: And so you describe a big difference between the men in the theater department and the men outside of the theater department. What was your main interaction with those that were outside of the theater department?

NELSON: Different classes? You know, I took academic classes. But guys at the fraternities became friendly with the guys, the guys at a couple of different fraternities.

ROGERS: When you arrived, would you say that the Vietnam War was a prevalent issue that people were talking about?

NELSON: Well, Parkhurst had occurred the semester before, which I thought was, having come from Columbia, I sort of thought it was a too little too late effort, but the people on campus really thought it was a big deal. So there was certainly a heightened sense of something wrong going on in the world. But as that year progressed, it became more and more. There was the, if I'm remembering correctly, it was an escalation of hostilities involving Cambodia. And there was, there was a lot of stuff. People would go leaf living in the towns around Hanover. There was more connection with, with organizations outside of Hanover, to you know, keep up the education, the battle, what was going on and keep up the awareness. And then of course, there was the draft. The draft lottery that spring, and that was a very pivotal activity.

ROGERS: And what do you remember about that time?

NELSON: Well, the night of where or afternoon for you, everybody was sort of huddled around radios, and some people were cheering because they got high draft numbers, and some people were throwing up because they got low draft numbers. You know?

ROGERS: Do you remember anyone in specific, any friends that got either lucky or unlucky?

NELSON: One very close friend, who was trying to decide between medical school and architecture school for his post grad work. And when he got a very low number,

he immediately knew he was going to medical school to get the exemption. And somebody else who had actually served two years in the military, and thus was ineligible for the draft and got the highest possible draft number. So that was true irony.

ROGERS: So when you were on campus, in what you described as your more academic classes, were there times that you were the only woman in the classroom?

NELSON: The only one or the only one of two. Yeah.

ROGERS: And would you say that that was challenging?

NELSON: Indeed.

ROGERS: How so?

NELSON: Well, there was one professor in particular, who would continually ask for the female point of view, which is really sort of nauseating, but he was sort of nauseating. You always felt like you were in a fishbowl, you know.

ROGERS: Did you feel that way when you were walking across campus?

NELSON: Very much so, very much so.

ROGERS: Were people aggressive or rude in any way?

NELSON: No, just awkward.

ROGERS: Just awkward?

NELSON: Yeah. Nobody was openly hostile, although there were heated debates about the pros and cons of coeducation. And what a terrible thing. Some people just thought it would be awful to have women there all the time.

ROGERS: Were there any demonstrations about that?

NELSON: No. Not that I remember.

ROGERS: And were there any demonstrations about Vietnam during your first term there in the fall?

NELSON: I don't remember.

ROGERS: So then during the spring, in 1970, you describe that you went to Washington DC. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

NELSON: So it was a competition. I forget what it was called. I have a poster upstairs that says but it was something like the National Student or collegiate theater competition or something like that, and they had regional competitions. And we had done a show, through the Dartmouth Players, that won the Northeast. And so we got to go in the spring, to the fort, to Washington, DC, where we were going to perform at the famous Ford's Theater, the place where Abraham Lincoln got shot. And there were student theater groups from all over the country who were competing for the ultimate prize. And the weekend of the competition in Washington coincided with the big Washington anti-war demonstration, bad spring. So we were smack dab in the middle of it. I remember there was tear gas. And I don't remember if it was the night that we were going to the theater or the night after the theater after we did our play. I just remember being caught in the tear gas. And I remember attending the rally.

ROGERS: So you attended the big Kent State Rally?

NELSON: This was before Kent State.

ROGERS: Okay, so this was May 10, 1970. For the Cambodia incursion?

NELSON: Yeah. If that's the date, I'm kind of thinking it was before that.

ROGERS: Did you guys all march? Was it just you? Or would you say that a lot of the people that came for the theater?

NELSON: Some I can't, I can't say it was all of us. I know it was some of us.

ROGERS: Do you remember anything more about that or what that was like?

NELSON: Other than feeling quite impassioned about it. And that it was a lot of people and there were a lot of speakers, no.

ROGERS: Before you came to Dartmouth, when you applied at Barnard, was there anything that you expected when you were going into Dartmouth? That wasn't, that didn't come to fruition.

NELSON: I expected it to be a little more of the world than I found when I got there. I had never been there before. I didn't expect it to be quite so otherworldly, so isolated, and insulated.

ROGERS: Could you elaborate a little more on that?

NELSON: Both years, the late 60s early 70s were a real social revolution. A lot was changing. A lot was changing on the Dartmouth campus. Remember that was. The year I was there was the year that, what's his name? John Kemeny came in as president in the middle of the year. That was very controversial. There was something called the Manchester Union Leader with a very right wing publisher editor. And there were always, we were always reading the editorials and feeling very angry about them. And particularly on campuses, starting with what I was talking about with Columbia and the horrified administration, when these kids were caught living together off campus, I mean, Dartmouth was that in spades, it was so old fashioned, and the guys were all so uptight. And they had all these strange. I mean, at Columbia, you wouldn't be caught dead joining a fraternity. At Dartmouth, everybody was in a fraternity. And they had all these strange rituals, and the bonfires and the football games and all this stuff that were totally alien to me. And I found it bizarre.

ROGERS: Are there any of those activities that you enjoyed or didn't enjoy?

NELSON: You know, I mean, I went to a football game and cheered and I went to what? I went to one I went to fraternity parties, of course, because what else was there to do? But it was all weird.

ROGERS: And so being in such a male dominated space, back to the draft, the weeks following what would you describe the mood to be? The weeks following draft that is.

NELSON: Probably very somber.

ROGERS: Alright, awesome. So we can go back to, flashforward back to the Cambodia protests in your time in DC. After that competition, did you go back to Dartmouth?

NELSON: Yes, it was. Yeah, I remember flying into LaGuardia [LaGuardia Airport]. My parents coming to meet me and having dinner with them at the airport. You could do that in those days. And then flying on to Lebanon [NH]. Yeah.

ROGERS: So back in those days, you guys flew into the Lebanon airport? Was that common?

NELSON: Yeah. Is it not now?

ROGERS: I don't think so. I don't know many people that fly. We have the Dartmouth Coach now. So most people just take the bus.

NELSON: From where?

ROGERS: I'm from near the front of the library straight to Boston. Yeah, it's only three hours. So that actually goes back into the point of it being isolated. Did you feel at times that you were very isolated from your friends or family back in New York?

NELSON: Oh, we were totally isolated. Yeah. They're also the year before I think, there had been a terrible plane crash with a whole bunch of girls, a whole bunch of I don't know, Holyoke or something like that. Girls who were coming up for a weekend. And it crashed into the side of the mountain and I remember that. It was a terrible tragedy.

ROGERS: Do you think that when you arrived at Dartmouth, the women really had to stay together in terms of like when you were having lunches and dinners, or did you guys build a community with men that were more accepting?

NELSON: I want to answer that, yes. Here's what I remembered. What was it called, Thayer [Thayer Dining Hall]? The dining room? So we had a meal plan at Thayer for the first trimester. And it was awful. I think the women all stuck together. I don't think the men would come sit with us. But I can't remember all that much. Because I do know that by second trimester, I no longer was going to Thayer. And my boyfriend was at Tri Kap [Kappa Kappa Kappa fraternity], the fraternity house. So I used to cook in the kitchen at dry cap, which was gross. But we used to, we used to cook there and eat there or we would go into town. There were a couple of places. There was Lou's, which is still there. There was another place I think called the Village Green, which is no longer there. And some place. I wish Jim [was here. Someplace else down the street, those called like the red door, the green door, the red shutters or the green shutters. And that was about it. I mean,

most of what's on Main Street now did not exist then. And so we would go eat there and then it was more co-ed, you know, and I had a boyfriend so we hung out with the boyfriends.

ROGERS: Did a lot of the women get into relationships during their time?

NELSON: I think so.

ROGERS: When you were dating the man at Tri Kap, did you spend a lot of your time there as a result?

NELSON: Yes.

ROGERS: What would you guys do there? Would there be a lot of parties or?

NELSON: I seem to remember hanging out in the basement and watching television. They had a television. It's really a long time ago. I don't remember.

ROGERS: Do you remember what your first winter was? In Hanover?

NELSON: Cold. Icey.

ROGERS: Would you describe it as even more isolating than in the fall?

NELSON: I don't remember, what felt more isolating?

ROGERS: Did you partake in any winter activities? Just skiing or the Winter Carnival?

NELSON: [Shakes head no]

ROGERS: No? So after your theater program, you came back to Dartmouth? How were your final weeks at Dartmouth?

NELSON: Well, they canceled classes. And basically you can take anything pass-fail. So I think on the one hand, it was very relaxed. On the other hand, because we knew we were in this tornado, politically, it was very tense.

ROGERS: Could you describe more of the political climate on campus at that time?

NELSON: I think there were those who felt very righteous about their political position, whether it was antiwar or pro-war, pro-government. And so there was a lot of tension. And I do believe that there was some tension among the small number of black students and the white students. And I seem to remember either, that there was something at graduation where the black students turned their backs or they raised their arms and something happened. And it would— there was tension. A lot. I think a lot of people who were more sheltered throughout their lives were very shocked that this was going on. For me it was more a normal way of being. Of course, we were doing this because that's what you did.

NELSON: Do you remember why you were so adamantly against the Vietnam War? What about it really struck a chord?

NELSON: Well, throughout my high school years we had done, I think they called them 'teach-ins', something like that, where we would learn about the geopolitics of the region. And nothing about what we learned about made the war and our involvement in the war make any sense. And that's the best way I can describe it.

ROGERS: Yeah, of course. And right before you came to Dartmouth, January 20, in 1969, Nixon was sworn into office. Do you remember what that was like? Or your opinion towards that?

NELSON: Very depressing, very depressing. It was all very complicated because Nixon defeated the guy named Hubert Humphrey, who was reviled. Who was Johnson's vice president. He was reviled by the kids on the left, let's call them. And there had been all the protests at the Chicago, Democratic Convention, and all of that. And God bless my father. He kept saying, be careful what you wish for. There are Supreme Court appointments coming up. And you don't want Nixon in there, appointing Supreme Court justices. And, you know, you better get behind Humpfrey and of course, we were like, no, no, no, it's McGovern [George McGovern] or McCarthy [Eugene McCarthy], or whoever we were supporting. Or Bobby Kennedy till he got killed. And of course, Nixon got in it was like, almost as bad as when Trump got elected, but not quite. That feeling of having the air kicked out of you?

ROGERS: So when you were leaving Dartmouth, were you ready to go back to Barnard or was part of you sad about it?

NELSON: I wanted to stay. I wanted another year, but I couldn't manage him. Dartmouth wouldn't give me a degree. And Barnard wouldn't give me a degree if I didn't have at least one year of upper class work at Barnard. So I had to go back.

ROGERS: Why would you say that you didn't want to leave despite at times feeling isolated and being in a fishbowl?

NELSON: Cuz, it's Hanover? I mean, it's fabulous. Why do I keep coming back? It's just, it's glorious.

ROGERS: Do you have anything else to say about some of your favorite times there?

NELSON: Just when spring comes and everything starts blossoming. I imagine you're in the middle of it right now. You can't beat it. The colors of autumn you, can't beat it. I mean, it's a very idyllic place.

ROGERS: So what did you do this summer before you went back to Barnard? If you remember.

NELSON: I did my obligatory Europe tour. We hitchhiked our way around Europe. On five dollars a day.

ROGERS: And were you still keeping up with the Vietnam War updates as you were doing so?

NELSON: In a more international way. We were very much in an international community as we traveled and there was a lot of opposition to the war. And that became clear.

ROGERS: So then you went back and finished your senior year at Barnard What was that like?

NELSON: I was barely conscious. What can I say? I got through my classes. I finished the year. I don't know. I don't remember much about it.

ROGERS: Were you still commuting from home at that time?

NELSON: No, no, I was living up. I was living in, not in a dorm but a kind of apartment building that the college had for students.

ROGERS: During your time at Dartmouth, was there anyone from Barnard that you were friends with at Dartmouth?

NELSON: No. I was the only one.

ROGERS: So when you went back, did you go back and stay with your friends from your freshman and sophomore year? Or did you go back and make new friends?

NELSON: I had a very close friend from high school, who was a classmate at Barnard, who had married in the autumn the year, just as I was going to Dartmouth. The autumn of '69. And in the autumn of '70. When I got back to Barnard, she had a child. So I think that a lot of my time that year was taken up with hanging out with her and her kid. Yep, as I recall.

ROGERS: So what did you do postgrad?

NELSON: My final semester at Barnard, I did an internship at the repertory theater of Lincoln Center. And after graduation, they hired me as kind of an assistant stage manager, apprentice all around helper for no money kind of thing. You know, very little money. And I did that for probably about six months, I got engaged to my Dartmouth boyfriend during that time. Then the theater company told me they didn't have any more money to pay me. And that if I wanted to stay, I had to do it for free. They couldn't afford to do that. So I left the theater company. And I got married about a month later. And yeah, that's what I did that year. I got married, set up an apartment.

ROGERS: And did he, he was also living in New York after graduating Dartmouth?

NELSON: He was living in New York after graduating. We are no longer married. But we were married for a couple of years.

ROGERS: And how was it like being married back then?

NELSON: I guess it would, it was, it was okay. I mean, it was in those days, it was kind of the only way I could get out of my father's house and go live on my own. I mean, having my own place was unheard of. You know, just beginning to become otherwise.

ROGERS: Did he share your political beliefs about the Vietnam War?

NELSON: Sort of, it's complicated.

ROGERS: I take it he wasn't drafted?

NELSON: No, no, no, he was the one who had served for two years and got the highest dress number you could possibly get. Number three hundred and sixty six.

ROGERS: And he had no desire to go back and serve again?

NELSON: Oh, no.

ROGERS: So from then how did that lead you to get your JD [Juris Doctor Degree]?

NELSON: So, after I left the theater company, he, my then husband, was working in film. And in order to be together, I started getting work as a production assistant on films and started working in the film business and continued working in the film business for a number of years. There was a very high glass ceiling. Anyway, eventually I found myself in, I had started a production company with another woman, and we were trying to get a movie made. And I kept ending up in lawyers' offices, trying to raise the money. And at some point, I said, I want to do that. I don't want to sit here with the tin cup in my hand. And so I applied to law school.

ROGERS: When you started the production company with another woman, was there a lot of female representation in the film industry at that time?

NELSON: None. Very little. That's what I mean by a very high glass ceiling. It was very hard to make a living as a woman.

ROGERS: Do you think that being at Dartmouth and being one of the few females there helped prepare you for that?

NELSON: Yes.

ROGERS: In what ways?

NELSON: To just go for it. To, you know, know that I could and to just go for it. Yeah.

ROGERS: And where and when did you get your JD?

NELSON: I got my JD at UCLA [The University of California Los Angeles] in 1984. No, 1986 I started my, the end of my first year was '84 '85 '86. Yeah.

ROGERS: And was that your first time moving to the West Coast?

NELSON: No, I had moved in '79 when I got divorced.

ROGERS: And did you know that you wanted to stay in the West Coast when you first got there?

NELSON: I had not a clue.

ROGERS: Why did you decide to go to UCLA?

NELSON: Because I lived walking distance from the law school.

ROGERS: And did you work at the same time as you pursued your JD?

NELSON: I did. I still worked freelance in film.

ROGERS: What was the political climate like at that time, in the early 80s, late 70s?

NELSON: So, my second year of law school, there was a presidential election. And a local guy named Ronald Reagan was running for president. And he was a joke. And one of my fellow classmates, we were in the middle of recruiting season on campus. And he was wearing a very nice three piece suit. And he looked quite spiffy. And we were talking about the election and kind of going, and he said that he was supporting Reagan. And we were kind of saying, How can you? Again, you had the Supreme Court appointment questions. And how could you go with those kinds of policies? And he looked me in the eye and he said, "I've done without for long enough." And I found that very amusing.

ROGERS: How do you think that America's political climate had changed after the Vietnam War?

NELSON: After Vietnam. Well, you had because of the Vietnam protests, and then the whole Watergate scandal, you had I think, a very potent move to the left and awareness of humility on the part of Americans I think. About their position in the world you know, the world that we weren't Teddy Roosevelt, marauders across the globe. It was time to be more mindful of local customs and more respectful.

And those people that Trump led out into the world at the time after Vietnam, I think, saw that it was time to crawl back under their rocks. And they stayed there for a while. Until Trump. Well, until Reagan, I shouldn't say until Trump. I think Reagan showed us that a movie star could. That America was stupid enough to go for a movie star regardless of what he was saying. Regardless of the implications of what he was saying.

ROGERS: So at that time, you were living in Los Angeles, what did you do directly after you got your law degree?

NELSON: I went to work at a law firm. I got married a couple of years later. I had kids. The usual.

ROGERS: And so flash forward to pretty recently, you were involved in filming a documentary about the reunion of the first women's transfer term here at Dartmouth, what made you decide to come back to be a part of that?

NELSON: I'm forgetting how it all happened. But there was a reunion, the forty fifth I believe it was, when for the first time since we were there, the school decided to reach out to us and invite us to be part of whatever existed, because in their stupidity, they, they kind of got rid of all of that none of our records, they didn't know how to find us. And for all those years, they never went after us for money. And I think many of us would have stepped up to the plate had we been asked, but we weren't asked. So it was decades. But they did invite us for this reunion. And some of us went and it was fun to be together. And during that time, did they put together a pen? I feel like they put together some kind of panel. About coeducation. And Billy [Billy Aydelott '72] had been my friend when I was at school. And he, I think he filmed it, he filmed the panel or something, and decided to expand it into a film. I can't remember exactly. But there were a couple of events on campus. After that, commemorating fifty years afterwards. I can remember going to a homecoming, where there was some kind of panel. I want to say there were three separate things, but it's sort of fuzzy. And then Billy said he wanted to do this film and started interviewing us.

ROGERS: And you said, a lot of women came but a lot didn't. Do you think that there were specific reasons why some women didn't come?

NELSON: I think a lot of them were not contacted. I mean, it took a lot of effort on the part of a few people to find us. And it was really a matter of reaching one person and saying, "Are you in touch with anybody else?" And finding those two people and

then finding the next one was a big effort. There's a woman named Alice Malone ['71]. And she got very involved in doing this. And I happened to connect with her because she was living in Charlottesville, Virginia, and my son coincidentally went to UVA [University of Virginia]. So we were spending a fair amount of time in Charlottesville. And so we got together with Alice. And so that's how I got caught up in it.

ROGERS: So speaking of coeducation in September of 1972, is when Dartmouth first launched their co-ed, how did you feel at that time? Did you know about it?

NELSON: Of course, we were so excited. We felt vindicated. We felt it was, I mean, bummed because it was too late for us. We were already out of college. But yeah, I'm very proud.

ROGERS: And did you keep in touch with a lot of the women that you went to school with?

NELSON: None at all. I forget how I got back in touch with one woman who I had been very close with. When I was at Dartmouth, it may be for a couple of years afterwards, when they were having this 45th reunion. And she said, "Well, if you ,I'll go. And if you don't go, I won't go." And so we decided to go. And that's how I got back in touch with her. So now we're in regular correspondence. And there are a couple of guys who I've been in touch with, who I moved out to LA with. And who I've been, you know, pretty close to ever since starting. One in the class of '70, and one the class of '72.

ROGERS: Why do you think the college neglected to contact the woman for so long?

NELSON: 'Cuz We were off the radar. We weren't alums. We didn't get degrees.

ROGERS: But do you feel like you had a large role in bringing Dartmouth to coeducation?

NELSON: We certainly were the guinea pigs and we advocated for it.

ROGERS: How did you advocate it during your time on campus?

NELSON: We had, there were lots of I want to say Ad Hoc conversations about it and there were probably a lot of officially organized conversations about it that we attended and debated it.

ROGERS: Do you remember any specific?

NELSON: Not really.

ROGERS: Do you remember any of the main reasons that some of the men advocated for non co-educational education?

NELSON: You could find it in the old alumni magazines. There were very old letters about it.

ROGERS: Of course. Yeah. So do you feel like after the reunion that you were able to reconnect with Dartmouth or do you think that you always had that connection?

NELSON: I have had, I've always had the connection. I like to say I have married sequentially Dartmouth grads. So I always received the alumni magazine, although through my husbands. When my kids were small, we sent them to a summer camp, just up the road off of Route 25C, and so every summer for visiting weekend for Parents Weekend, we would come up and spend the weekend either at the Hanover Inn or nearby and, and hang out in Hanover. So there was always this connection.

ROGERS: Always a connection?

NELSON: We were there pretty much annually for many, many years.

ROGERS: And do you think that you would have a connection with Dartmouth if it weren't for you marrying Dartmouth graduates?

NELSON: I don't know, can't answer that.

ROGERS: After you got your law degree, you had children, were there any other huge events in your life in the late 90s, early 2000s?

NELSON: Like what?

ROGERS: Any sort of activism you were involved in?

NELSON: Before the millennium, I became part of, I can't remember the years now. It was before Clinton [Bill J. Clinton]. And then coincided with Clinton, I became active in a group called the Hollywood Women's Political Committee. And we would have maybe semi-annual retreats where different Democratic candidates or office

holders would come address us. It was largely a fundraising group. I remember going to a fundraiser for Clinton. So that was 92. Because I remember it was my first time out after I had my daughter. That was '92. So there were all those years where I was active with that. There was a period of time where we were, I mean, mostly just going to, you would go to gatherings in people's houses for this candidate or that candidate, or this initiative or that initiative. That was probably in the early aughts. But I tell you, everything came crashing down after Trump was elected. I guess there was a lot of excitement when Obama was in. Although, that was less exciting his second four years because things seemed so stodgy.

ROGERS: Could you tell me about the excitement when he was first elected?

NELSON: There was just a lot of excitement in the air, there was, people are going to Washington for the inauguration. And it was like look, we elected a black man. Anything's possible. There were many, many years where I was very involved with advocating for the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment]. And then, of course, the feeling of loss when it ran out of steam. But I'm mixing up, you know, chronologically now.

ROGERS: In 2003, with the invasion of Iraq, did you feel like there were any similarities between that and the Vietnam War?

NELSON: Vietnam was a much longer build up, you know, much longer evolution. Iraq was more precipitous, and stupid. There was a lot of activity in Southeast Asia before it became a thing. You know what I mean?

ROGERS: And so you say it all came crashing down with Trump. What do you mean by that?

NELSON: Hillary was the culmination of decades of what felt like progressive progress. And we were finally gonna get our first woman president. And we didn't. And instead we got this disgusting clown. What can I say?

ROGERS: Before we wrap up, I was just wondering if there were any other memories or times at Dartmouth that you'd like to share?

NELSON: Well, I'm gonna offer a couple of thoughts to you. One is you might want to talk to my husband, who was actually at Parkhurst. I wouldn't have a lot more information for you on what was going on on campus. Because he was there for

all those years. And the other is, I have a good friend who was front and center with the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] at Columbia. And he might be interesting for you to talk to, he might even be able to put you in touch with Mark Rudd, who was the leader of the Columbia uprising. The leader of SDS.

ROGERS: And how did you get in touch with these SDS members after your time at Columbia?

NELSON: I'm the one who I'm in touch with now is married to a high school friend of mine. And we connected probably 15 years ago. I don't remember how we found each other. And then I met him. And it turns out he was SDS, Columbia.

ROGERS: Sorry to take you back. But during your time at Columbia, do you remember people talking a lot about SDS?

NELSON: Yeah.

ROGERS: Was it a big organization on campus?

NELSON: Well, it led the strike. It led the whole occupation. Yeah.

ROGERS: And was the administration very against the group?

NELSON: Oh, yeah. And it was considered very radical and shockingly, left wing.

ROGERS: And you were in support of the group?

NELSON: Yes. Although I found it a little scary.

ROGERS: How so?

NELSON: It was very left wing. Very unsettling. It meant for a solidly middle class comfortable little girl. It meant really thinking about things and, and challenging some of your deep seeded beliefs. I mean, ultimately, I think it was worthwhile. But it was difficult.

ROGERS: Do you remember any time in college when your beliefs were challenged that you changed your opinion?

NELSON: No. I can't say I did.

ROGERS: And then it seems that correct me if I'm wrong, that Dartmouth had a really, really big impact on you despite it just being one year. Why do you think that it impacted you so much?

NELSON: Small school, but there are those who love it. I don't know. It's a pretty special place. I mean, for a city girl to live for a year in this sort of idyllic little cocoon in New Hampshire. It was really fun.

ROGERS: And so you think that the struggles at times that came with it being a male dominated space were all worth it?

NELSON: The struggles were all part of growing up. I mean, they occurred. The whole world was struggling, but we were struggling and growing up at the same time, so it was exhilarating. It was like, I am woman, hear me roar. Just as I'm starting to feel my oats. So what could be better? You know?

ROGERS: Yeah, of course. So ever since you got your law degree, did you always work at the same law firm? Or did you move around?

NELSON: No, no no. I was at one law firm then another law firm, which became another law firm. And then I went to another law firm. And then I went to another law firm. And then I tried to retire. And then I got asked to do some temp work at a studio that lasted twelve years. And then I joined a firm. And then I worked at Sundance [Sundance Film Festival].

ROGERS: Awesome. It seems that activism played a really large role in your life. Do you think that there's a specific reason that you were so involved and cared so much about the community that surrounded you?

NELSON: I think partly my upbringing. We were very much an activist community and an activist family. And it was partly the times. I mean, part of being a cool kid was going on marches, you know, you got caught up in it. At a very young age, I mean, I probably started attending rallies and marches when I was 12 or 13.

ROGERS: Do you think that the majority of your adolescence and young adult life was Vietnam marches? Or were there other things?

NELSON: Civil rights and then Vietnam.

ROGERS: And was there one that impassioned you more or just everything?

NELSON: It all felt important at the time, you know, civil rights, Vietnam and then women's rights.

ROGERS: And are there any other Vietnam protests that you remember making a big impact on you?

NELSON: There was a huge one in Central Park. I remember. When I was 14, or 15. And that felt really important.

ROGERS: And did your parents take you there?

NELSON: They must have.

ROGERS: Well, I think that's everything unless you have anything else you'd like to share?

NELSON: No.

ROGERS: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for doing this interview with me.

NELSON: Let me know if you want to talk to those two guys.

ROGERS: I will I will

NELSON: Get back to me.

ROGERS: Okay. Thank you so much.

NELSON: Okay, bye bye.

Abstract:

Janis Nelson, born June 15th, 1950, was among the first women to attend Dartmouth College as part of the women's exchange program in 1969. She discusses her time at Dartmouth College as one of the first women. Nelson also reflects on her time in New York City at Barnard College, witnessing the Columbia Uprising in 1969, and discusses how her parents supported her in her activism, which began early in her youth and lasted well into adulthood.