

Elizabeth Hoffman, Class of 2013
Dartmouth College Oral History Project
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World
February 4, 2013

AL-JABER: My name is Laala Al-Jaber. I'm here at Rauner Library. Today is Monday, February 4, 2013. I'm here with Elizabeth Hoffman, who is a '13. And can you start off by telling me about your—briefly about your life before coming into Dartmouth?

HOFFMAN: Mm-hmm. I think a good place to start is probably with my mother, who is a graduate of the Class of 1978. So she was one of the first women or in one of the first classes at Dartmouth that had women matriculate. And I grew up sort of coming here on different weekends and seeing how happy it made her to be back in Hanover. I grew up originally in Colorado. That's where I was born. And then moved, when my parents were divorced and remarried, when I was seven, to Massachusetts. So that's where I think of myself as from.

I went to an all-girls middle school and then a private half-boarding high school which I really loved. It's called Concord Academy. I walked to school and enjoyed the really intellectual nature of the high school, but also how community-based it was. It was full of sort of the quirkiest kids around. So people really did their own thing. And even though I felt a little bit limited at the time by a certain lack of breadth, I guess, you know—it was a very small high school—looking back on it now, I really appreciate the flexibility that students had to do what they wanted and be supported. You know like there were kids that would every Wednesday dress up as zombies. [Laughs] You know, slam poetry for no reason. And our lacrosse team never won a game, but our plays were the best in the state.

We were just really, really artsy, smart, awkward kids that got to go to school together and learn from really interesting teachers. And it was in that time in high school that I started to think about gender, which has been a very important part of my college experience, both socially and academically. But in that context it was very different the way I see gender at Dartmouth. And we'll probably get into that a little bit later.

AL-JABER: So you mentioned that your mom was one of the first women to go into Dartmouth.

HOFFMAN: Mm-hmm.

AL-JABER: How was her experience like, and did it affect your coming into Dartmouth?

HOFFMAN: That's a great question because it really changed the way she talks about her experience, really changed based on the stories that I've given her of my experience here. So growing up, as I said, you know, we came to Hanover occasionally. And we always went to the Hop to get fries. That was my mom's favorite thing to eat here. And really saw the way it made her come alive when we visited. You know I was always wearing Dartmouth sweatshirts when I was younger. But because it was my mom, and she's so normal to me, I never was able to associate Dartmouth with being that special of a place. And I know that sounds bad; but, you know, when someone who you consider the norm, like close to a model, talks so much about a place, you expect it to be as normal as she is to me.

So I actually went through the college process expecting to get in, and I did, which was lucky. But I mean I think it had a lot to do with the fact that I was a legacy, and it was certainly the best school I was accepted to, which is the reason that I attended... This is so not the question you were asking. But anyway.

So Mom's experience was very, very positive. She went from a super small town in Pennsylvania where, you know, she just didn't have access to the arts or an intellectually-engaging community of professors or, you know, peers, to this place where she was really stimulated in a lot of ways. And she, I think, had a background that enabled her to enjoy a lot of the opportunities here that I don't think many women of the time did have. You know she came from a good background. She sort of walked and talked and dressed the way that women of the time were meant to. And so, you know, she talks about it, all the time she spent at Phi Delt, and is still very, very close with many of her friends that she made here.

But when I began my time and started talking a lot, when I came home, about violence and discomfort between or within the dynamics between men and women at Dartmouth, that's when she started telling me about some of her experiences that reflect those concerns that I've had. So in fact her first husband was a classmate of hers, and the marriage was annulled because he was abusive. So I found that out. And then, you know, I found out about a time

when there was a man who broke into her room and sort of tried to kidnap her, and that somebody else had to come in through the fire escape to make sure that she got out okay.

So it's really interesting to hear these stories, because she was so thrilled to send me to Dartmouth because of something that was a really positive experience for her. But then realizing these pretty traumatic situations that were sort of a result of her time here, that I think she'd suppressed. You know, it's sort of a confusing way of understanding her experience here because it does seem to be sort of bipolar, I guess.

AL-JABER: Would you have applied to Dartmouth had you known about your mother's negative experiences here?

HOFFMAN: Yes, absolutely. Because it's still the best opportunity that I was presented with.

AL-JABER: As a legacy, did you feel that there was a sense of expectation that you were... that coming to Dartmouth was inevitable? Or did you look at other options?

HOFFMAN: I definitely did. I thought I wanted to go south. I wanted warm weather and Southern gentility. [Laughs] And then I realized that that would have probably made things a little bit worse for a feminist like me. It turns out that I love going home, so it's a nice to be closer. And I certainly did look at other options. But, you know, I could be at Wake Forest now, and I'm sure that would have been an interesting and probably fulfilling experience.

But I don't often regret coming to Dartmouth. I think I, like my mother, actually have learned a tremendous amount through the challenges, the social challenges, I've experienced here. And I think even though I don't think that those challenges should exist for a student, I'm grateful for the learning process I've had. That's also how she discusses her time here; that when she went on to Wall Street after Dartmouth, none of the tactics that men in the business field used to undermine her would work because she had seen so much worse here. [Laughs] So does that answer your question?

AL-JABER: Yes. You talked about facing a lot of challenges while you were here. Can you talk—elaborate on that?

HOFFMAN: Sure. And again, maybe to situate it, like I did with my mom, like I have an incredibly privileged background, and I feel very lucky for my opportunities and my privilege. I'm not on financial aid. I have had, you know, access to all the support networks I could really ask for. So I think—I don't know, just being a white, upper-middle-class woman at Dartmouth is very different than other people whom you might be hearing from. I'm becoming more aware of the role of race here, but I'm not sure if I can really speak to that.

So the challenges I faced are very much based on my gender. And I think that being a woman at Dartmouth can be very hard, although again there are plenty of women who wouldn't feel that way. For me it's meant a lot of exposure to sexual violence, and especially awareness. So personal and social exposure, so myself and my friends. And with those stories—and a lot of stories—for me there's been sort of reverberations from that. So there's the way I've learned to relate to men, which at times in my career here have been really unhealthy. The way I've related to myself and my sexuality, and my body, in an environment where certain women's bodies seem very targeted for violence. And then the way I've seen myself at Dartmouth. Sometime in my sophomore year, I was having—I was certainly depressed. But the way I sort of think about it now is that I was experiencing sort of like secondary PTSD symptoms; although I hadn't experienced something that would trigger PTSD. I had heard so many stories that would. So I was hyper vigilant. Like a lot of the symptoms: easily intimidated, like afraid of public spaces and loud noises.

AL-JABER: So what sort of triggered the...?

HOFFMAN: So I came into college with some understanding of violence against women because of knowing about my mother and her first husband. So the idea of, firstly, feminism was not unknown to me, nor was violence against women, which I think a lot of my peers here are also not that way. That like the word feminism was not used ever in their family or home or anything. Whereas I knew as soon as I heard it that was like, something I really loved. So I came in with some understanding and some willingness to engage with discussions or social trends that were based on gender and based on some sort of idea of women and men are not being treated the same, and that's a problem.

AL-JABER: Mm-hmm.

HOFFMAN: So my freshman fall—I would say I really embraced fraternity culture. I was excited to be in a place that was so different from my high school. And really rewarded a person like me, you know, being like a cute freshman girl in the basement—I had a lot of attention, and that was so new to me. I felt appreciated in a way that I never had before, and it was really exciting.

At the same time, I was very aware that all of those spaces were controlled by men, and that women were allowed there, and as guests subject to certain expectations or judgments that wouldn't have been there had I been a man. And I think with that comes just an awareness of power and how, you know, I could feel flattered and pursued sometimes, and that was really nice. But I ultimately didn't have power like my male peers did. At least the ones who, you know, had a sense of ownership in those spaces.

So it wasn't really until my freshman winter that I began hearing stories of actions that I think are based on that sort of power dynamic that's very gendered. So freshman fall was an awareness and sort of, you know, feeling out what the dynamics here were. And in the winter I started hearing those stories. I was hearing some really, really violent cases of rape. And then also not very violent ones, but rape nonetheless. And hearing about who had done them and where they'd happened and how many people had been either active or passive participants in those assaults. And so I stopped keeping count. But I've really grown used to hearing those stories from freshman winter through now.

AL-JABER: Is that when you stopped going to the fraternity parties? Or did you still go?

HOFFMAN: That's a good question. Yeah, I still go to fraternity parties, although certainly not in the same way. And I mean now that I'm 21, I really enjoy going to bars and hosting events. I live off campus, and I really like using my own space. But I think a huge part of feeling safe in a fraternity is knowing people there. Freshmen or first-year students don't have that, usually don't have that privilege.

And I also feel much more comfortable with myself now in a way that if someone treats me poorly in a space, I'm either going to choose to leave immediately because I know that doesn't fit with my standards or I'm gonna, like make sure that they're held accountable for that. I think as a freshman I didn't feel like I was able to do either of those things. I also, you know, maybe spend

more time upstairs than in basements. And then to the people who think that, you know, boycotting fraternities is the best way to change the system, I think you need people not to rush and affiliate. And because these can be really dangerous spaces, I think it's better for someone like me to be there and be aware of my surroundings and able to look out for especially younger women, as opposed to choose to remove myself completely. I'm also very social, and like I usually have fun if I choose to be there. So....

AL-JABER: And how did you find your sense of community at Dartmouth, and has it changed?

HOFFMAN: Yeah, it's certainly changed. When I matriculated and for the first two years of my time here I spent a lot of my time dancing in the Dartmouth Dance Theater Ensemble. And so it was something I did very seriously in high school. And my community was the dancers. And I chose to leave after my sophomore year because I really struggled to work with the director. And, you know, didn't feel as if I had any say in the creative process of something that was taking up so much of my life. And decided that wasn't worth it anymore.

So at that point I really invested myself in some of the student and community groups that deal with sexual assault and domestic violence. And that's when I found the men and women who thought the way that I did and had the same vision of Dartmouth that I do, who—I don't know—seem to have the same capacity for empathy and compassion that I'd really been looking for. And I mean that's how I got my mentor and just some other good friends.

And that process is what made me feel so much better about myself, because during the time which I described, you know, I was really depressed. I was constantly feeling threatened by really, really small environment, situations, that I'm sure weren't intentional. But I had to like overcome a lot of those thought processes of assuming violence from people who like were not meaning to intimidate me or hurt me.

So finding that core of people was instrumental in like my own cognitive processes and in just feeling like I belonged to a group. And then my junior spring the mentor I had found through some of the sexual assault work had tapped me for the senior society I'm in now, which is the best. [Laughs] And I think I haven't felt grounded

in Dartmouth the way I have through that society. So those are the two main ones.

AL-JABER: And has it changed? Or has it stayed constant, your sense of community?

HOFFMAN: Yes. So it totally changed. I guess where I found it has definitely changed. My sense of it.... I mean I would say my sophomore year I didn't have a sense of community. And junior year I certainly did, and now I definitely do, especially living off campus and crafting my own home with people I care about is really great. And also, you know, that process of feeling like you've found a community. For me it really facilitated healthy relationships with men, which was great, because, you know, you don't want just one type of friend. So I think moving into a sense of community that's based on.... Perhaps my ability to role-model the values that I want to see, I think because I've had leadership positions, perhaps people are aware of what I do and what I stand for. And I feel really proud about that. And I also feel supported in that. So I think...I think I'm rambling. [Laughs]

AL-JABER: And so you identify yourself as a woman of privilege and as a feminist. How do you think these—how have people perceived you within the community with these titles and so forth?

HOFFMAN: Hmm. That's interesting. So like what people—students or professors?

AL-JABER: In a general sense.

HOFFMAN: Well, so I'm a Women's and Gender Studies major, so I think about these things sort of a lot, especially as they pertain to sexuality. And so something I have thought about is the way different women, I mean, you know, tons of variables, are treated differently, I think, by groups of men on campus. So I think there's a ton of slut shaming and judgment that's totally sexist here and really maintained and perpetuated by fraternity culture and the way that that celebrates sexual conquests for men and then slut shaming for women. But because I think in social settings that are pretty public but sometimes feel private, I choose not to engage with that behavior. Like not doing the crazy college party-girl thing. That it's because of that that maybe men respect me on campus and not because of the actual work that I'm doing. So like even if I were doing all the same things in the daytime and going crazy at night, I

would be perceived in a totally different way just by, you know, having a certain set of values and accomplishments or whatever. So I think that's a big one. It also happens to reflect what I'm comfortable with, so I don't regret that. But I think it is really unfair the way that women can be so harshly branded with different labels here, that don't reflect anything but how many people they've had sex with, you know. I don't really think that that's that important. But--

AL-JABER: So have there been times at Dartmouth where you felt like an outsider?

HOFFMAN: Oh, yeah! Definitely. So that time in sophomore year. So I'd actually done a study abroad in India my sophomore winter and came back in the spring and did an internship at the SAAP office. And started hearing a lot, a lot of stories from survivors. And at the same time I think I was experiencing a lot of reverse culture shock. And that's when I started getting really depressed and experiencing some pretty intense self-esteem issues.

I remember walking into the Thayer dining hall and feeling so afraid of all the people who were looking at me. There used to be this thing called the runway—I don't know if you were here. The way the tables were organized, you would have to walk by everyone in sort of a proportionately narrow walking space compared to all the tables. And there was really this dynamic of, you know, watching who comes and goes.

And, you know, I think—I had discussions, especially recently, with a lot of the racial tension and bias incidents that that've been reported recently, about micro-aggression and a lot of my friends who are super privileged, you know, in fraternities, white men, athletic, all this stuff, like, man, I do not get that, you know. Somebody had to move off the sidewalk. Or, oh, it was just a look. But those things, I think, can be really powerful. And I remember, when I was in that state, they were determinative of my sense of safety. So I think feeling as if I was being constantly threatened by the presence of men because of all this exposure to stories of rape, I felt very much an outsider. And not only an outsider, but someone who is at risk for some pretty bad violence that's totally unprovoked.

AL-JABER: And now that you've developed like a sense of community, would you say that you feel like an insider or it varies at different times?

- HOFFMAN: Hmm. Yeah, really would. That's interesting. I mean I feel very established in my friend group. And I feel very comfortable engaging outside of that group. I also just because I know a lot of people; so that helps, too, you know because you.... I feel like I've covered a lot of the student population in terms of establishing trusting connections even if they're somewhat superficial.
- AL-JABER: Mm-hmm. And if there is a sexual assault on campus, maybe you'll reevaluate your...how you fit into the Dartmouth community. Can the same be said about all these different racial incidents that have been reported?
- HOFFMAN: So in terms of like overcoming....
- AL-JABER: How do you see yourself within the Dartmouth community?
- HOFFMAN: Mm-hmm. And race?
- AL-JABER: Has that made you reevaluate where you fit in?
- HOFFMAN: Oh. Um...
- AL-JABER: I guess a different way to phrase it is, have you been affected by it?
- HOFFMAN: By the recent incidents?
- AL-JABER: Yes. Are you taking such a strong stance on it like you do on sexual assault?
- HOFFMAN: Oh. Um, no I'm not.... Yeah, that's a really good question. I think.... I mean partially because I've really invested myself in one issue and find that one really exhausting sometimes, that the way.... I mean I'm certainly concerned with the way that students of color are treated and the reports I've heard and seen. But I haven't taken up that issue.
- I think that the way I've tried to respond to it is having discussions with some of my really close friends. And especially with the ones who are mostly women of color. And making sure that firstly I'm supporting them. But also understanding what their experience has been like and asking more questions about race at Dartmouth. Umm... yeah. But I think honestly I'm really tired of working with sad stories, especially as a senior, because I only get a couple months of college left, and I know that these things don't go away

when I graduate. But right now I'd like to enjoy like this finite opportunity that is Dartmouth. I'm also just a little bit tired of.... You know. [Laughs] But I do care. And there probably is more I could do.

AL-JABER: So you mentioned being tired. So have there been times where you take up this issue, and then you focus on other things that you're not sort of preoccupied by?

HOFFMAN: Hmm.

AL-JABER: Or are you constantly aware of the gender dynamics?

HOFFMAN: Yes. That's interesting. The weirder parts of my day are when I run into a perpetrator on campus because I know a lot of these stories, I know a lot of the names and faces. And, you know, I'll be like in the zone at the gym, and there I see my friend's rapist. Or, you know, in the line for KAF and there's that guy I heard about from two different girls. And, oh, man, I'm in the bar for senior 'tails, and I really want to just pour my drink all over him. And so, you know, we're in such a small community, that Dartmouth is very small, and it's hard to escape my knowledge I guess.

At the same time, one of the most important parts of my development as an activist and responder has been prioritizing self-care, especially after being really depressed and, you know, thinking about transferring. Just assessing that I needed to change something. I saw a counselor for a long time, I learned about how to manage these issues and the stress it creates in a way that I'm not sacrificing myself; I'm just investing. So that's been really important.

AL-JABER: So do you think Dartmouth's location has affected its sense of community, its isolated nature?

HOFFMAN: Hmm. It probably facilitates a lot of community actually. At least one of my best friends goes to Columbia, and I visit her a lot there. And the sense of place is very different because students are so dispersed through this hectic city. You know I think we certainly have a bubble, and that's not always a good thing. But it is insular. And I think it means we have no choice but to spend time with each other. And, you know, that's one base for community. I think it also creates a scenario where there's not really an opt-out option. You know there isn't really that much access to...especially I mean underage drinking, not that that should be accessible. But, you

know, for college students that's important. So that alternatives are—I guess, not very competitive.

AL-JABER: Mm-hmm. And how have you changed as a person?

HOFFMAN: Oh, man!

AL-JABER: It's a big question.

HOFFMAN: That's a huge question. Wow! I hope that I'm smarter. I'm certainly more of an expert in sexual violence [Laughs] than I was when I came. I think I also have a better sense of what I want to do with my life and the things that I stand for. Better knowledge about who matters to me and who makes me happy or what. You know I don't think it's been so dramatic. I haven't changed who I am that much. I've just found who I am. And found some really wonderful friends and professors and administrators that have supported that process.

AL-JABER: What has been the most memorable experience for you here?

HOFFMAN: Memorable...so, either good or bad?

AL-JABER: Yeah.

HOFFMAN: I don't know if there's just one. I think I really segment my memories by term. I think a lot of students do that. It's a little bit weird, like my life is made up of ten-week chunks and the time in between. So, you know, I think about these finite experiences of junior fall, junior winter, junior spring. And sort of a feeling that characterizes them as opposed to specific moments. So I don't know. I think I have made memories at Dartmouth that are much more broad. And I'm trying to think of something that was really specific.

I guess one of them would be from my freshman winter. I did the training to be a Sexual Assault Peer Advisor. And it was one of those moments where I could feel a shift in the way I thought about Dartmouth, I guess. And it was when, you know, you'd done all this work on what is rape? What is sexual assault? Who do you talk to? You know. What about the police? What about the hospital? You know we've gone through the resources and the definitions and the laws. And then finally we got to one of these training sessions that was Sexual Assault at Dartmouth and the way that violence here looks different than elsewhere. And how it has to be treated

differently because of, you know, our community, our size, and the way that our social system is organized, those kind of things. And it included an overview of our Clery statistics, which are mandated reporting from the federal government of higher educational institutions. And also only like a sliver of the true number of assaults that happen at Dartmouth. And I remember hearing that number and being floored. And then hearing about, oh, this is probably only 15 percent of the cases that happen. And not knowing what to do with that knowledge and feeling really shocked and disappointed that that was...that that could be said of a place that I'd come to really enjoy and wanted to call home. But then felt as if, you know, how could I possibly embrace a school that allowed violence like that?

AL-JABER: Did you talk over this with your mother?

HOFFMAN: Um, I don't remember. I'm sure I did. I talk with my parents a lot.

AL-JABER: Because it would seem that she would... She had a lot of experience in that and she could help.

HOFFMAN: Yes.

AL-JABER: And did she sort of take on the same role that you did on counseling, that you have on campus?

HOFFMAN: I don't remember any specific conversations with my mom. This is three years ago, so.... [Laughs] I'd like to claim, you know, a little old age. But I think it was actually my dad who's probably been more supportive of engaging with this issue and being a little bit radical. I think my mom, you know, for her being a woman at Dartmouth was often about ignoring your gender identity. And the way that she talks about it is, you know, being successful not because you're a woman and doing these things, but because you're doing them better than the men are, or at least as good. So for her, I think, the way she got through Dartmouth was not by really thinking a lot about gender and thinking of herself as a woman. But it was thinking about how am I going to succeed and prove that even though I'm a woman, I'm successful? So that was a very different frame for her to use to approach these issues. And still we don't talk about them as much as I do with my dad.

AL-JABER: And is this sort of an issue that you're going to pick up as an alumnae, or are you leaving it behind?

HOFFMAN: That's really a good question. So I would love to get more alumni involved, and I think especially in... You know, we need a culture shift or a culture change, especially in the culture of fraternities and sororities. There's definitely a sense among the students that they're sort of key players that determine that culture and preserve it. And I think that those are all alums. But, you know, I was in a sorority. I left it. I don't have any power in the Greek life. And, you know, I'm still not an expert. And I don't really have the resources or knowledge that I think the College usually looks for when they engage alumni in these kinds of ways. You know it's very targeted. I also—I feel as if I kind of stumbled into this issue. That it's sort of what I learned about, the issue I learned about first and cared about most.

You know I want to be a doctor, and am actually very interested in global health. But I've never been a part of any global health club at Dartmouth because I'm too busy with the ones about rape. So, you know, I don't know if it's really what I want to do and focus on when I leave. Although I'm obviously very invested in the issue and seeing it change. It would also be nice to have some distance, although I haven't been very good at that yet. So, I don't know.

AL-JABER: I think we've covered everything, but is there something that you want to add or something that you think I've forgotten to ask you?

HOFFMAN: Mmmm. No, I don't think so.

AL-JABER: I'm going to turn off the recorders now.

HOFFMAN: Okay.

[End of Interview]