

John Peter Smith, '09
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Community and Dartmouth's World
By Mary Stelle Donin
November 5, 2012

DONIN: Okay, so today is Monday, November 5th, 2012. My name is Mary Donin. We're here in Rauner Library with John Peter Smith, Dartmouth Class of 2009.

Okay, John, I think just to put your story in context, we'd like to know a little bit about where you grew up and how it is you decided to come to Dartmouth.

SMITH: Okay. So I grew up just across the river in Vermont, about a half hour south of Burlington, in a rural area, but I went to school in Burlington, to a private school, a small Catholic school. And I guess my decision to come to Dartmouth—I knew that I wanted to go to school probably in the Northeast, and I wanted to be challenged academically and I wanted to be around other people who would challenge me academically. So going to a well-regarded academic school was really important to me.

DONIN: Were there people at your high school that were sort of selling Dartmouth to you?

SMITH: No, not really. I'm not aware of, like, any recent graduates from my high school who went to Dartmouth. I'm sure there were some, but not that I knew.

DONIN: How did you learn about Dartmouth, then?

SMITH: Just in the process of sort of researching colleges. I was aware—you know, you're aware of Dartmouth from *Animal House* and just it being so close to where I grew up.

DONIN: Right. Had you been on campus?

SMITH: I visited, yes, a couple—I visited once, like, in my junior year of high school and liked the feel of the campus and sat in on a few classes and really liked them. And I visited again after I got in. But there wasn't anything—there wasn't really

anything—any close connection that, like, drew me to Dartmouth in terms of, like, a person or an experience or anything. Like, I hadn't really—I didn't have any experiences with Dartmouth other than visiting briefly as a prospective student, sort of, yes.

DONIN: So it sounds like it was mostly the academics that attracted you.

SMITH: Yes, yes. And sort of the social—the Greek life was, like—it was a pretty big negative for me when I was considering where to go to school.

DONIN: Really?

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: Because of the *Animal House* reputation?

SMITH: And just I didn't think that that was who I was, really. Like, my idea of the Greek life was pretty different from my sense of who I was. The academics were much more important to me. And I was sort of, like, willing to sit—like, my idea of it when I was deciding to come here was, like, I was willing to put up with sort of the Greek life in order to get the stronger academics that I thought that Dartmouth would provide.

DONIN: Is it fair to say, then, you didn't perceive yourself as sort of the, you know, drunken frat boy?

SMITH: Yes. Yes, I didn't perceive myself definitely that way when I was deciding to come here. Yes, I didn't see myself fitting in with those drunken frat boys that I thought were here.

DONIN: And were they here?

SMITH: Yes, I sort of became one of them. [Chuckles.] A little bit. I just got a much different sense of what Greek life actually means here when I actually got here and experienced it, rather than just having this idea in my head that was based partly on a movie and partly off of—I'm not sure where my other conceptions of what a fraternity was came from, really, but—popular culture and—

- DONIN: Right.
- SMITH: Yes. Not really based on any fact.
- DONIN: It's sort of the Dartmouth brand, a little bit.
- SMITH: Yes, yes.
- DONIN: Unfortunately.
- SMITH: Yes.
- DONIN: Yes.
- SMITH: But I feel like I was even less—I didn't have that much exposure to the Dartmouth brand, either, I guess. Like, *Animal House* wasn't—like, I had seen it once, but it wasn't a big—it didn't really form my conception. Yes, it wasn't really that formative of my conception of Dartmouth; it was more just my, like, vaguer idea or less informed idea of what—I knew that Greek life was really important here and sort of what that meant, I guess.
- DONIN: So tell us—so you get in, and you come. Tell us what did you find when you got here? You know, going through the— your first impressions of going through the orientation and trips and all that kind of beginning, first-year stuff.
- SMITH: Yes.
- DONIN: What did you find in terms of what your perception was before you got here and then the reality of what it was when you were here?
- SMITH: Yes. Well, I guess—definitely at the beginning it was really overwhelming for me, just socially. Like, I was always, like, a pretty shy kid, and so, like, the trips—like, I didn't really have a great time on my trips.
- DONIN: What did you choose? What trip did you choose?
- SMITH: I went fishing on the Grant.
- DONIN: Oh!

SMITH: Yes. So I like fishing a lot, and I was excited to go on that trip. And I had, like, a reasonably good time, but just the way—just sort of everything related to the DOC trips, like, all the, like, flashy clothing and the sort of general outrageousness associated with them is very—like, doesn't fit with who I am at all.

DONIN: So you're talking about all that weird stuff that you did out in front of Robo?

SMITH: Yes, all the dancing and, like, the loud music in front of Robo Hall, like, when you get here and, like, sort of—just the general culture surrounding the trips, about, like, specific songs, like, and dances and raids and crazy costumes just isn't really who I am. And sort of my first impression—I understand that they do that so that—they try to make things as, like, ridiculous as possible so that people feel more comfortable. But I guess I sort of, like, thought that maybe, like, a lot of the people here were sort of like that, like the trip leaders and stuff like that, and [chuckles] I was a little bit worried that I would have, like, a tougher time fitting in because—yes, that's really not who I am as a person.

But I guess my freshman fall—there were two people from my high school who came, from my high school class, who came to Dartmouth also. And I hung out with one of them a lot, who was sort of, like— I definitely relied on him socially. And sort of he was more outgoing socially than I was, and I spent a lot of time with him and sort of doing things that he wanted to do. You know, one of his trip leaders was a brother at a fraternity, so we spent a lot of time there because we had, like, a little bit of an in. It was just a little bit more comfortable hanging out there, like, kind of knowing people. And so that's definitely—that was sort of my first real exposure to the Greek life here.

DONIN: Did you feel pressure to start engaging in the Greek life thing right away?

SMITH: I'm not sure if it was pressure, but it seemed like that was—that was the thing for—like, that was kind of the thing to do. Like, that seemed like the best option. It was less pressure and more sort of, like, Well, this seems like the best thing—

the best use of my time socially, the best outlet, kind of, for social interaction, at that point.

And it was a lot easier for me to just kind of, like, go along—like, I didn't have to—it was a lot more comfortable for me to just hang out with my friend and go where he wanted to go.

DONIN: It was almost like he was doing all the work for you.

SMITH: Yes, he was kind of doing all the work, and I didn't really have to, like, put in quite as much effort.

DONIN: Right. How about, like, your hall mates?

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: What dorm were you in?

SMITH: Yes, yes. So I lived in New Hamp, second floor of New Hamp. And, yes, my roommates—I lived in a triple freshman year.

DONIN: Oof!

SMITH: One of my roommates was on the cross-country team, and there were a few other cross-country kids in that dorm, and he kind of, like, did his own thing. He was a little bit aloof and not the best roommate, actually.

But my other roommate was this kid, Colin Gentry, from Tennessee, who was an Asian from Tennessee, and my first interaction or correspondence with him on e-mail was this other kid, you know, said he was on the cross-country team, and then [chuckles] Colin said that he really likes video games.

DONIN: [Laughs.]

SMITH: So he had all these video game systems, and he is just a really nice guy and fun to hang out with. So at first it was easier for me to hang out—to spend time with my friend from high school, but eventually—there was one night in the fall where a bunch of our floor mates ended up just, like,

hanging out on the floor and drinking a bunch on the floor and just, you know, getting to know each other a lot more, and sort of—that was kind of a turning point, where I became closer friends with my floor mates than I was with—I was spending more time with them than I was with my friend from high school. And so that brought, you know, a much bigger community, and I generally became much better friends with them and developed a lot of close relationships with the people on my floor and spent a lot of time with them during the rest of my time at Dartmouth.

DONIN: It seems pretty key to a lot of people.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: Their freshman year, first year floor mates really played a big part in their lives.

SMITH: Yes, yes. And we definitely had a pretty big identity as—like, our identity was “second floor New Hamp.” So it was mostly freshman. There were some—there were a few random upperclassmen there, some of whom we interacted with a fair amount. We had, like, two football players who lived right across the hall from us, and I remember during finals—like, we played a lot of poker on our floor. Like, poker was kind of like a big thing. It was getting really big, like, as a cultural phenomenon around that time, and we played a lot of poker. And some people played online poker, too.

DONIN: Oh, yes. I remember reading about that.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: Yes.

SMITH: Yes. So we got into that. And I remember during finals of our freshman fall, we played a ton of poker. Like, we brought desks out into the hall [chuckles], and it was, like, fairly disruptive to the hall, but these two football players who lived across from us would play with us. So that was fun. They were somewhat part of our community, and, like, I would, you know, say hi to them—you know, at least one of the guys, like, the rest of my time at Dartmouth. Well, I guess he was only here for two or three more years. But generally we

had—it was mostly freshmen on our floor, and we had—you know.

DONIN: Was it co-ed?

SMITH: Yes, it was a co-ed floor.

DONIN: Did you find that you steered more towards your own gender or were you able to be friends—

SMITH: I felt like it was more—there were certain people on the floor who would just, like, generally hang out together, and most of them were guys. But there were some girls, too. I think we generally had more guys on the floor, too. But, yes, there were some girls who were definitely part of the sort of second floor New Hamp group.

DONIN: Did they play poker and that sort of thing?

SMITH: No, they didn't play poker, but we would hang out in each other's rooms. We ended up—like, we would watch a lot of movies and stuff, and we ended up eventually building a Pong table that we kept in someone's room.

DONIN: [Chuckles.]

SMITH: And, yes, the girls would hang out and play Pong.

DONIN: Is Pong—I should know this. Is Pong specific to Dartmouth or is that a college, general college thing?

SMITH: The way it's played at Dartmouth is pretty specific to Dartmouth, so at Dartmouth you play with paddles, and it's more of a game, whereas at other colleges they play Beer Pong.

DONIN: Beer Pong, yes.

SMITH: And usually it involves, like, throwing a ball into a cup, whereas at Dartmouth you're—it's a little bit more like Ping-Pong at Dartmouth.

DONIN: A little more athletic.

- SMITH: Yes. Yes, a little bit more competitive, too.
- DONIN: It requires a little bit of skill.
- SMITH: More enjoyable. Yes, it requires definitely more skill.
- DONIN: I see. Okay.
- SMITH: Yes.
- DONIN: So how about on the academic side? I mean, did you develop any friendships through your classes?
- SMITH: Um, I'm trying to think. A little bit. Like, I would take some—some of my friends, mostly from my floor, were in some of my classes, and I would gradually sort of—I was really shy, like bordering on, like, social anxiety disorder shy. And so I had—it was very easy for me to just sort of, like, go with this, like, group that I'd been given and not really push myself to reach out to other people that much. Like, I was happy with the friends that I had kind of been given, first from my high school and from my floor and eventually from my fraternity.
- So I didn't reach out that much in my classes. Sometimes I would, you know, meet people, like, through my other friends who were in the same class. But I didn't really develop many friendships or close relationships with people from my classes, themselves. You know, there would be people—like I took Writing 5, like, the intro of writing class that you have to take with this guy on the hockey team who ended up becoming the hockey captain in senior year.
- Like, we just took this one class together, but throughout my time at Dartmouth, we would say hi. And a couple of times I ended up—we'd play Pong together or something like that. But in terms of my really close relationships with people, they were either—yes, mostly people from my freshman floor or eventually from my fraternity. Or a couple of people from working at the grill at Homeplate.
- DONIN: Oh, yes, student jobs.
- SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: Yes.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: That's a good bonding—place to become friends.

SMITH: Yes, yes, it was.

DONIN: So how do you think you felt about belonging or not belonging here? Especially when you are a self-described shy person. Is it easy to feel you don't belong because you sort of—I don't know how to say this—stay outside—you stay outside the circle a little bit because you're shy?

SMITH: Yes. Yes.

DONIN: Does that also give you a feeling of not belonging, as a result of that?

SMITH: A little bit, I think. I definitely felt like there was this kind of, like, a very visible—like, even within our '09 class there was a very visible group of students, kind of. And some of my friends were, like, part of that group, who were, like, involved with student government or in, you know, some of the popular Greek houses.

So I definitely felt like a little bit on the outside, but I also felt like I was pretty comfortable with the group of friends that I had developed. So it didn't really bother me that much, but I was comfortable with the people that I hung out with and had a good time spending time with them.

DONIN: Yes. It wasn't your choice to want to be with the so-called popular—

SMITH: Yes, yes. It just generally wasn't who I was as a person. I wasn't trying to, like, get involved with all these clubs and—I don't know. Like the people who hang out at Collis a lot. [Chuckles.] Like are always in all of these different groups.

DONIN: The sort of leaders of all the activities—

- SMITH: Yes, yes, and, like really active with, like, SA and student government and Programming Board and different student groups.
- DONIN: That's just not your thing.
- SMITH: Yes, it just wasn't who I was.
- DONIN: Right, right.
- SMITH: And I understood that and was okay with that.
- DONIN: So how would you describe what your view of a community is, your community? And I'm not saying identifying necessarily who they are but, you know, what does it mean to you and what does it mean to belong to it in terms of your existence here at Dartmouth? (That's a hard question.)
- SMITH: Yes.
- DONIN: On your list of sort of to-do's when you arrived here, was one of them, "I gotta find my group?"—you know, "I gotta find my people"? Or did you let that sort of happen? You used a phrase earlier, "These people had been sort of given to me."
- SMITH: Yes.
- DONIN: Which sounds to me more passive than active in terms of who you ended up seeing as your community.
- SMITH: Yes. I feel like the—Well, yes, my initial community was my freshman floor, and I don't think that I reached out very well or very much to, like, create the initial relationship with them. But once it had been created, then I definitely put in a lot more effort in strengthening the relationship, I guess. So it was definitely really important to me to have close friends, and I feel like I did develop very close friendships here. But I didn't spend a lot of time and effort, like, searching out who—like, establishing a lot of, like, less strong relationships with people, developing the initial bonds. I didn't spend a lot of time and effort developing the initial bonds. I just—once I had some connections and thought they were people that were pretty compatible with me and with whom I would be, could be pretty good friends, I definitely put in a lot more

effort and time, spending time with them and trying to develop a closer relationship with them.

DONIN: So being someone who isn't sort of actively recruiting friends, how was it you ended up getting into the whole Greek thing? I mean, isn't rushing exactly about that?

SMITH: Yes. Yes, it is pretty much about that.

DONIN: I mean, how did you sort of shop around for a fraternity that felt right? Did somebody introduce you to this particular place?

SMITH: Yes. Well, I guess my Greek experience was also fairly passive, because I guess I decided not to pledge when I first could, my sophomore fall.

DONIN: Oh, you didn't.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: Oh. And you made that decision because?

SMITH: I had had some issues with drinking my freshman year and sort of wanted to hold off and just, like, wasn't ready to make that commitment, I think. And also, I hadn't really established, like, a good bond. I'm not sure that I would have, like, gotten a bid at any houses because I'm not sure I had developed close enough relationships, but I think it was more just, like, I didn't feel like it was the right— I needed to sort of, like, kind of get my life in order before I made that decision to join a fraternity, because I'm not sure—I don't think I was sure that I wanted to join one my sophomore fall.

DONIN: So you're allowed to go back and try again?

SMITH: Yes. So I didn't rush anywhere sophomore fall, but most of my friends did. And, yes, so then you can rush any time after you're—

DONIN: Oh, I see.

SMITH: —any time after your sophomore fall.

DONIN: Oh.

SMITH: So, yes, actually my freshman roommate ended up joining our fraternity his senior fall.

DONIN: Oh!

SMITH: Yes. That's very rare, but you can do that.

DONIN: So talk about being an outsider. All your friends were rushing, and you weren't.

SMITH: Yes. Well, I actually had one other friend, so I lived in—my sophomore year, I lived in Mid-Mass in a quad. And two of my roommates pledged Psi U and one of them pledged AD, so they all had pretty intense pledge terms in terms of time commitment and drinking and other—generally, it took up a lot of their time. But there was—three of our friends lived two floors down from us, and one of the guys in that room had to take a term off his freshman year, so he wasn't allowed to pledge until his sophomore winter. So I spent a lot of time hanging out with him while our other friends were doing fraternity stuff. And then having friends who are pledging sort of made it easier to hang out at fraternities, too.

DONIN: Ah. Yes.

SMITH: So it just made it a generally more comfortable place to be.

DONIN: So you're welcome in these places, even though you're not pledging or—

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: Oh.

SMITH: Yes. I mean, depending—yes.

DONIN: As long as you've got a friend there or something.

SMITH: Yes, yes. I mean, generally I feel like the Greek houses here are pretty welcoming places as long as you're not being hostile towards them.

DONIN: Right. So at that point, were you sort of weighing the pros and cons of being affiliated or unaffiliated, or whatever the term is they use?

SMITH: A little bit, but I think it was more just seeing—it seemed like my friends who were pledging houses were having a lot of fun, and they were developing really close bonds with the other members of their pledge classes. So I think seeing other people, my close friends going through the pledging process definitely made me feel like it was something that I wanted to do and I wanted to have these close relationships.

And being in a fraternity is—like, in terms of kind of being given a community—like, a fraternity becomes your community. Definitely it did for me, and I feel like it does for a lot of people here. So given the fact that I was shy—like, a fairly shy person, it was definitely something that I wanted to do, to have kind of this built-in network of support throughout the rest of my time here. So it definitely made me want it more. It was just a matter of figuring out where I wanted to go.

DONIN: And how did you do that?

SMITH: So I sort of had two houses that I was deciding between. Most of my friends from freshman year had pledged Psi U, and then a couple of them had pledged Alpha Chi, so I spent most of my time between—at those two houses, because that's where most of my friends were.

And it was weird, because I felt like, I guess, Alpha Chi was, like, a better fit for me in terms of personality—

DONIN: Of the?

SMITH: Of the brothers, sort of. Just the general feel of the house. But I had more closer friends at the time who had pledged Psi U. So my sophomore winter, I guess, I decided to pledge Psi U. I didn't think there was — one of my friends who was in Psi U told me that I probably wouldn't get a bid because some of the older brothers didn't like me because I basically didn't fit into, like, their idea of what the house should be. They were probably—they were right. But I did

have a lot of good friends there. But I decided to rush there, and I got a bid, which I was pretty excited about.

But, at the same time, I was still kind of struggling with this decision about where to join and whether to join. I didn't feel great about just how my time at Dartmouth was going, I guess, especially academically and also, being shy, that I wasn't—I felt like that was prohibiting me from sort of taking advantage of all the resources that Dartmouth has. And, you know, like not participating in classes and stuff like that. I would just kind of let that shyness govern my decisions a little bit too much.

So right after rush my sophomore winter, I decided to withdraw from Dartmouth. Like, I left Dartmouth for a term.

DONIN: Oh, really?

SMITH: Yes. And just decided that I needed to sort of, like, get things together and figure out basically what I wanted from Dartmouth—like, make sure that Dartmouth was where I wanted to be, that it was the best place for me, academically and socially, and if it was the right place for me, figure out exactly what I wanted to get out of my time there, the rest of my time there, I guess.

DONIN: How mature of you!

SMITH: Uh!

DONIN: So many students just go through because you go through, without any thought at all.

SMITH: Yes. That's kind of one way of looking at it, but it also—I think part of it, too, was kind of, like, running away from, like, these problems. Like, I had, a class where I was going to have to have to participate. Well, I was taking a class that term where I was going to have to participate in class a lot and there were a lot of upperclassmen and it was kind of intimidating. And so I almost—Sometimes I think that I was just kind of, like, running away from my problems, sort of, instead of actually having to deal with them, that I just decided to, like, drop everything and go away.

DONIN: So did it help?

SMITH: I think so, yes. Yes, I just went home for a term and I spent a bunch of time volunteering at a food shelf and just trying to figure out what I wanted to do. And I realized that I really missed my friends and that was kind of what made me, like, really sure that I wanted to come back and this was the place that I wanted to be. I didn't have a ton of friends at the time, but I had some really close friends, and I wanted to spend, you know, another two and a half or three years hanging out with them.

DONIN: You initially said you were attracted by the academics. How was that—I mean, aside from the fact that you were terrified of this one class, how was that working out for you, the academics?

SMITH: It was working out all right. I mean, my grades were fine, but I don't think that I was working—I wasn't putting a ton of effort into my classes, and I definitely—I was spending too much time, probably, drinking and on the social side of things and not enough of my energy on academics. And I think that that gave me less confidence in myself academically, that I started to become, like, a little bit intimidated by—you know. Because I was around so many other really, really smart students.

In high school I had pretty much always been, like, one of the smartest kids, and things were very easy for me. So things became a little more difficult. And, on top of that, I wasn't preparing myself as well as I could, so I had just kind of, like, settled into, not mediocrity but something close to mediocrity, kind of. Or that's how I felt about myself, that I wasn't really, like, trying as hard as I could and, like, getting the most out of it. Definitely not getting the most out of it academically.

And that contributed, I think, to my decision to want to leave, was just feeling, like, a little bit intimidated because of sort of the academic environment, not that it's a competitive environment. I think that the feeling was more like manufactured by my psyche than, like, a reflection of the environment at Dartmouth, I guess. It wasn't, you know, any actual interactions that happened that made me feel

intimidated by the academic environment or my classes. Yes, there weren't any real experiences that the feeling was based off of. It was more just—yes, how I felt sort of mentally and sort of like a cycle of—like, kind of like a downward spiral of thought, a downward spiral of thought process, sort of—if that makes sense.

DONIN: But you must be a pretty smart guy if you can just cruise along here and not work 100 percent and still do okay in your classes.

SMITH: Yes. Well, it's—yes, academics are kind of weird at Dartmouth. I feel like—people talk about, like, grade inflation with some of the Ivies or some of, like, the better schools. And a lot of the classes that I was taking, the professor would set the median grade at, like, a B-plus. So, you know, I feel like I took a bunch of classes where kids weren't trying very hard. It became pretty easy to get a median grade, and a median grade wasn't a bad grade. So it was kind of easy to get, like, decent grades without necessarily learning a lot.

DONIN: So when you came back, had your motivation level changed based on the fact that you wanted to be here with your friends?

SMITH: Yes. Yes, well, it's interesting, I guess. When I came back, I lived in a single in Topliff, which is kind of, like, out of the way. I wasn't close to anyone that I knew.

DONIN: Was that on purpose?

SMITH: Yes. Yes, kind of. I wanted to be able to—I decided—I'm pretty sure I didn't drink at all that term, and I just wanted to be able to focus on sort of doing well academically. And I didn't have—I remember that term—I don't think I had, like, my first choice of classes because when I came back, basically people had already chosen their classes, so I was like, [snaps fingers several times] just taking what wasn't full, what I could get into.

I don't remember all the classes I took that term, but I remember I took, like, an environmental studies class, which was the first environmental—ENVS class that I had taken.

And I got pretty into that academically. So that was kind of a new pursuit for me, or a new interest for me academically.

But—I guess I'm sidetracking a little bit, but, yes, I wanted to focus on academics. Like, not drink and just prove to myself that if I concentrated on doing well academically, that I could and that I, like, belonged here academically, too, I guess.

DONIN: So how did your community greet the new John Smith, who didn't drink and who was studying a lot?

SMITH: Yes. They—I think they definitely understood why I was doing that and were pretty supportive. A bunch of my friends lived in that quad in Mid-Mass. They were still living there. And that was kind of a room where we all hung out and played video games and stuff like that. So I still spent a fair amount of time hanging out with them, and I felt like I had a big enough group that my decision not to drink didn't really—I still had people to hang out with and that it didn't have that big of a negative impact on me socially. Yes, my friends were all pretty supportive of me and, like, realized that I had taken, like, a pretty drastic step in withdrawing from the college for a term.

DONIN: Now, you managed to make up all your classes, though, because you graduated on time, right?

SMITH: Yes. Yes, I actually—I took one less off term eventually.

DONIN: Oh, I see.

SMITH: But I could have taken another off term anyway. I took a few four-class terms, and I got some—I had a couple of AP credits, I think, coming in.

DONIN: Oh, I see.

SMITH: So that was—

DONIN: Right.

SMITH: Worked out for me in terms of the credits and satisfying all that stuff.

DONIN: So when did you finally—what do you call it? Rush?

SMITH: Not till my junior fall. So I was here—I came back to Dartmouth my sophomore spring, and then I was here sophomore summer, which is—sophomore summer is kind of, like, a weird time to be—it was a little bit weird for me to be here sophomore summer, thinking that I kind of should have been in a fraternity but wasn't, because most of my good friends—I did have a—I lived with a couple of good friends, who weren't in houses. But I felt like most of my friends were in houses, so it was kind of weird, because sophomore summer you're spending—you know, you all live together in the same house and develop really close bonds with your fraternity class. So I definitely felt a little bit weird, like a little bit of an outsider, sort of, that sophomore summer.

DONIN: Because they were all bonding in the fraternities.

SMITH: Yes. But, at the same time, I spent a lot of time hanging out with some of my friends in fraternities, and sort of over the course of the summer, it became clear that I definitely did want to join a fraternity and, yes, I wanted to join—not Psi U, where I had rushed before, but Alpha Chi, where I was just more comfortable with the people. I felt like they were—I had more in common with them, kind of, and just the general environment fit me a little bit better, and I was very comfortable there. It was not an intimidating environment at all, and that was really important to me, given sort of my social anxiety.

So over the course of the summer—yes, I just became pretty sure that I wanted to rush. I developed more relationships with some of the other members of the '09 class who were in this fraternity, and junior fall I decided to rush, which was a little bit weird because everyone else who was rushing was a year younger than I was. So some of the older members of the—some of the older brothers, like, didn't think that I should get a bid because it would be weird for the '10s who would be rushing to have a '09 in their rush class.

DONIN: Why?

SMITH: Just because—I mean, I didn't—normally, I feel like with pledge classes that they sort of already know each other; they're already a group of friends. And I knew no one else. I knew pretty much none of the '10s who were rushing this fraternity. So I feel like my rushing experience—both my—was very strange. Like, I rushed late, and I rushed twice, and I got bids twice. But both times when I rushed, it was very stressful, and, like, I thought that I might not get a bid.

DONIN: Both times?

SMITH: Yes, both times.

DONIN: It's bad enough to do it once—

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: —but to go through it twice.

SMITH: Yes, it was kind of stressful. So I was pretty excited when it was over with, my junior fall, and I rushed Alpha Chi and got a bid and began the process of pledging.

DONIN: And that's—I mean, in terms of Dartmouth life, isn't that sort of the ultimate insider experience, is to be welcomed into—

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: —the brotherhood, so to speak?

SMITH: Yes, I think so. Sort of—you know that for the rest of your time there, if you want to, if you want it, you have this built-in community that'll sort of support you. It's pretty easy to maintain or develop, like, close relationships with the other brothers in your class, if that's what you want.

DONIN: And did that remain your unit of community for the rest of your time at Dartmouth?

SMITH: Yes. Yes, it definitely was my main source of friends. And I actually became really close with the members of my fraternity class in the year below me, whom I pledged with. A lot of them are some of my best friends, still, right now.

- DONIN: So it's remained—I mean, this community that you developed here is still intact, so to speak.
- SMITH: Yes. Yes, it's obviously not as strong as it was when we were here, because people are all over the country, all over the world, actually, I guess, but—yes, they're my main—my closest friends right now, three or four years after I graduated, are, yes, the members of my fraternity.
- DONIN: What does the experience of going through that and putting yourself really out there to ask to be selected for this group and to have been successful at it not once but twice—how has that impacted you personally? I mean, even though it was stressful going through it, the rewards are huge, especially for someone who identifies as being shy.
- SMITH: Yes. Yes, it definitely—I mean, I felt like it was more just like a relief than anything else because it was something that I wanted so much, and there was just this uncertainty. And I guess at first—at first I did feel a little bit—as a pledge, I did feel like a little bit of sort of an outsider, just because I was a year older than all the other members of the class and most of them knew each other or at least knew some of the other people, but I didn't know any of them, really.
- DONIN: Within that group of Alpha Chi, is the identity more with Alpha Chi or is the identity more with the class that you're assigned to?
- SMITH: I think it depends. It depends on the person. Like, I think some people would identify more with, like, the overall organization and less within the class, but I think it's even more—I guess more with the class.
- DONIN: Really!
- SMITH: Yes, within the—like, even I feel like within a fraternity, I think oftentimes there can be sort of, like, conflict between classes. I know in our fraternity, like, there were some issues between the '09s and the '08s especially. I guess there were issues between—there was a little bit of animosity between the '10s and the '08s also. And I know that that seemed to be the case in some other fraternities also, that sometimes—especially classes next to each other sometimes don't get

along as well, that the bonds are stronger between members of the same class generally. I'm sure it's different for fraternities that have a lot of sports teams or, like, specific organizations, but ours wasn't really tied to any one organization or team or anything like that; it was sort of just a collection of regular people, regular guys.

DONIN: So what you're saying is some of the fraternities are known as, like, the lacrosse fraternity—

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: —or the football fraternity.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: Is it always—is the subset always sports related? I mean, aren't some of them known as, like, the computer geeks or the—I don't know.

SMITH: Like, a little bit, yes, but I think there are some fraternities that are generally collections of sports teams.

DONIN: Oh.

SMITH: And there are others—like, that's why those people are in that fraternity. And then there are some that are, like, brought together more by common interests or personality traits and things like that.

DONIN: And how would you identify Alpha Chi?

SMITH: I mean, we had—there were a bunch of ski patrol members in Alpha Chi, but other than that, it was just kind of people who got along and were friends with each other and fit—sort of fit together in terms of their personalities. Yes.

DONIN: So these subsets can really be the bonding thing, and the class identification or the fraternity identification can sometimes compete with one another.

SMITH: Yes, a little bit. I think—well, I think it happens more—I guess it's sort of like to the broader Dartmouth community, I think, like, the fraternity—the different classes would appear

more unified. But, like, within the fraternity there are definitely boundaries, generally by class. And for me, it was weird because I was a member of the '09 class, but I had pledged with the '10s, and I actually ended up being—staying—living in the house for the '10s' sophomore summer, so I was—it was my junior summer.

And I feel like that—being here in the summer, especially in a house, in a Greek house really has a big impact on you socially and really helps create much stronger bonds within your community.

DONIN: The summer experience.

SMITH: Yes, the summer experience, because you're—you know, it's pretty much just—you're the only members of the class—you're the only class who's here, and you have to sort of run the house, and you're the only people on campus, so—yes.

DONIN: So you were sort of a hybrid, then.

SMITH: Yes. Yes. Yes, they would sometimes [chuckles] refer to me as a hybrid.

DONIN: Oh, did they?

SMITH: Yes, yes, actually. Yes, it was always, always weird in terms of, like, identifying which member of the class. Like whenever our fraternity divided things up in terms of—by class, like, sometimes I would do things with the '10s and sometimes I would do things with the '09s. And, yes, it was an interesting dynamic, definitely.

DONIN: A different experience than most.

SMITH: Yes, it was definitely a unique experience.

DONIN: Was it a good one for you?

SMITH: Just based on, like, how it went for me, I would say yes, just because of the actual people involved. I became really good friends with the '10s, and I really enjoyed, you know, being here for their summer and, like, developing really close relationships with them. But then, like, being there for the

summer—it was definitely—it was definitely, like, a little bit weird because, you know, when I was here for my real sophomore summer, all the other '09s were here. Like, I knew other people, and I felt like I fit in a little bit more, whereas being a '09—you know, taking classes in the summer with—all the other people in my classes were '10s, pretty much. It was definitely a little bit weird, but—or a little—yes, a little bit different, but not in a negative way at all. I felt like I had—I guess given my personality and the fact that I'm not super outgoing, it forced me to develop closer bonds with the '10s, and I'm glad that I did.

DONIN: So you really had two—your community was sort of broken up into two sections, the '09s and the '10s.

SMITH: Yes.

DONIN: You were able to migrate easily between the two.

SMITH: Yes. Yes. And it was—it was definitely kind of unique. But even, I guess, like, you know, my—when I came back—when everyone came back for my senior year, whatever, sometimes I did feel like—at least within my fraternity—I didn't know the '09s as well, so within my fraternity I felt sort of like a member of the '10 class, because I had gone through pledge term with them, I had been there during the summer with them, and I felt like they sort of formed—they were more the basis of my community within the fraternity a little bit more than the '09s, because I hadn't gone through those experiences with as many of the '09s, even though some of my closest friends were '09s because I had known them, some of them, since my freshman year, I guess.

DONIN: Have you stayed in touch with—I mean, maybe it's standard that one does, but do you stay in touch with the Alpha Chi current brothers? I mean, is that the natural thing to do?

SMITH: Yes, generally. Yes. I did at first—you know, for the first few years. I guess immediately after, until the '10s graduated, I stayed in touch with them a lot and spent a lot of time at Alpha Chi, you know, with them. And gradually—it's been weird for me since I've actually been living, you know, pretty much since I graduated within, at the most, like, an hour and a half from Dartmouth, and most of my time I've been, you

know, within an hour or forty-five minutes of Dartmouth, so it's been really easy for me to come back.

So at first, when I still knew a lot of people and I had a bunch of friends in the fraternity, I would come back a lot, and I've gradually come back less and less. And at first—at first, I kind of felt like I hadn't—like, I was spending so much time at Alpha Chi and at Dartmouth, I sort of felt like I hadn't left yet. But, now I definitely feel like I've left.

DONIN: Cut the cord.

SMITH: Yes, and I'm definitely spending much less time coming back here and maintaining—keeping in touch with the current brothers.

DONIN: But this unique sort of double identity you have at Alpha Chi, as both a '09 and a '10—has that stayed alive since you've left? I mean, you've stayed in touch with both sets of classes?

SMITH: Yes. Yes, I've stayed in touch with both sets of classes. The identity now matters a little bit less.

DONIN: The '09 or the '10, you mean?

SMITH: Yes. Within my fraternity, it's more that, you know, I have this group of friends from the fraternity. Yes, I maintain connections with the people with whom I'm closest friends, sort of—leaving aside the class affiliation, I guess.

DONIN: So do you think this experience you had of, you know, working your way into this brotherhood—has that helped you with life outside Dartmouth, since Dartmouth, beyond Dartmouth?

SMITH: I'm not sure, I guess.

DONIN: Being, as I keep saying, someone who identifies himself as being shy—did that give you a set of skills you didn't have before you came to Dartmouth, in terms of, you know, establishing yourself in new situations?

SMITH: Yes, a little bit, I guess.

- DONIN: Outside the Dartmouth bubble, so to speak?
- SMITH: Yes. Yes, I guess probably I've had kind of like an interesting experience since Dartmouth in a lot of my—I've been farming, and I've lived—most of my time since Dartmouth, I've lived on the farm I've worked at with other people who work there, so it's almost—it's pretty similar, actually, to, like, living in a fraternity in that I've kind of had this community given to me again, in a place where I don't know that many other people. So it's kind of interesting because I feel like I—yes, I haven't necessarily been forced or, to a certain extent, like, had the opportunity to sort of, like, use any social skills that I may have gained. I feel like the experience has actually been pretty similar.
- DONIN: Similar.
- SMITH: Yes, which is pretty interesting.
- DONIN: And now that you're out and you think of the Alpha Chi community as your major community at Dartmouth, does it include—you know, if you come across any alum who's an Alpha Chi from Dartmouth, does that make an immediate connection for you?
- SMITH: Yes, I think so. It definitely did—it definitely did for me when I was a student, whenever other alums would come back.
- DONIN: Oh, yes, right.
- SMITH: There was an immediate connection, and I would—you know, we would engage on, you know, what things were like for them when they were there. And I think—yes, I think if I were to encounter, you know, another Alpha Chi alum that I didn't know at all, that it would be sort of like—it would be—it would help form a connection, just the fact that we had both been in Alpha Chi.
- DONIN: In the same—
- SMITH: Yes, that we would sort of be part of this community.

- DONIN: And—this is the last question. What has Dartmouth’s location have to do with any of this? Do you think the fact that we’re up here in this rather rural, isolated part of the country—has that had an impact on not just yours but the sense of community at Dartmouth because of where we’re located?
- SMITH: Yes.
- DONIN: Does that play a role in all of this?
- SMITH: Yes, I think it definitely plays a pretty significant role, just because—in terms of social outlets. Like, there aren’t a lot of other young people around. There aren’t—I mean, there’s a lot of, like, outdoors things to do or things to do outdoors, but if you’re not into that, then pretty much all of the social life is based, you know, around the Dartmouth community. And for me, that was definitely the case. Like, I did—you know, I spent some time hiking around and enjoying the outdoors around Hanover, but I think the fact that—I mean, that the Hanover community is pretty much based on Dartmouth—and that there is not a lot of other things to do culturally or at night sort of channels all the social energy into the Dartmouth community, whereas if Dartmouth were in a big city, you know, you’d go out and enjoy some of the amenities that a larger city would have to offer. So the fact that Dartmouth is relatively isolated in terms of people definitely focuses, yes, everyone’s energy into creating stronger bonds within this smaller community.
- DONIN: Now, did you learn to enjoy the outdoors because you came to Dartmouth, or was that something you’d already learned growing up?
- SMITH: Yes, it was something—I grew up in a rural area, like—in an old farmhouse with a bunch of land, open land around, so I was used to sort of getting outside for recreation. And that wasn’t really why I came to Dartmouth, because I was never a big skier. I hiked some, but I didn’t do any, like, classic outdoor recreation, generally. So that wasn’t a big draw for me to come to Dartmouth, but being here—
- DONIN: It was more or less like being at home.

SMITH: Yes, it was kind of like being at home, being able to, like, go outside and go swimming or hiking and stuff like that, just having that as an option whenever you wanted it, even if it wasn't necessarily, like, a focus of my recreation or leisure time, I guess. Yes.

DONIN: I think we're done.

SMITH: All right.

DONIN: Unless you have anything else you want to add.

SMITH: Not really.

DONIN: Okay.

SMITH: I don't think—

DONIN: All right, John, I'm going to turn these off, then. Here's one, and there's two.

[End of interview]