

Marilyn Ray Smith – Martin County, NC, SCOPE, Summer of 1965

I grew up in a small town in central Florida, the daughter of Alabama parents who moved to Florida in the 1930's. My father was a lawyer whose clients, many of whom were Black, had little ability to pay their legal fees, so he was always short on cash. My mother was a piano teacher whose income made a huge difference in our household economics long before the age of working mothers. Both parents were liberals in this conservative community. They were members of the ACLU and early supporters of the Brown v. Board of Education decision and the Montgomery bus boycott (which I saw in action as a child when we visited relatives there). I read lots of books and played the piano since there was little else to do before television and air conditioning changed everything. At age thirteen, I concluded that most of the smart women in America came from Massachusetts – remember Abigail Adams and Louisa May Alcott? – so in 1961, I set my sights on going to Massachusetts to college. Luckily for me, I received a scholarship to Smith College.

At Smith, the intensity and intellectual drive that had made me out of place in central Florida found a fertile environment for a young woman aspiring to break out of conventional molds. The path was not always smooth, however. I majored in history, and spent my junior year in Paris. Upon graduation, unable to decide between law school or graduate school in history, and fired up by the tragic events on the Pettus Bridge in Selma, in the summer of 1965, I joined the civil rights movement and signed up with the SCOPE project to go to Martin County, North Carolina, to organize grass roots support for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that was making its way through Congress.

As a young white Southern woman, I had a unique role on the SCOPE team. I could easily talk to both Blacks and whites in Williamston and the surrounding countryside, explaining our voter registration mission with a tone and accent that was familiar and not threatening. I met with a few sympathetic white community leaders to find out if there was any common ground, and I connected with Black families as we went door to door, announcing that we were from Martin Luther King's organization and asking if they were registered to vote. On two occasions, white farmers confronted us in back farm fields, at the end of dirt roads far away from the main highway. Their ubiquitous shotguns clearly visible in the cabins of their pick-up trucks, these farmers angrily challenged us to explain in a hurry why we were there talking to sharecroppers. When we responded that we were only trying to register Black people to vote and assured them that we were not union organizers, they were willing to leave us alone. They did check our voter registration papers, however, to verify that we were telling the truth. I asked one farmer, "Don't you believe Black people have a right to vote?" He answered angrily, "Of course I do, but don't you dare do any union organizing or you're in big trouble!" This was 1965 in North Carolina, not Mississippi or Alabama, and I never felt that our lives were in danger.

As one of three whites ordering food at a roadside diner, I helped set the stage for food service, to be followed by three Blacks who came into the diner shortly thereafter and also placed an order. With great hostility and many dirty looks, the wait staff served

us all, and we left together in peace. Singing “We Shall Overcome” in the many Black churches we visited that summer is a memory that will stay with me forever.

At the end of the summer of 1965, I took a job in Washington, D.C., as an administrative assistant for Upward Bound, one of President Johnson’s poverty programs designed to prepare talented low-income minority high school students for college by sending them to spend the summer at various colleges and universities throughout the country. Discontented with the lot of glorified secretary and aspiring to be a history professor, I applied to graduate school, and was accepted by Brandeis University, just as the market for history professors – especially women – was at a low point. One day, I looked around the classroom and saw that I did not have a beard, I did not wear a tweed jacket, I did not smoke a pipe, I did not have a chance. So I dropped out of graduate school and joined the women’s movement, serving in 1973 as the president of the Eastern Massachusetts Chapter of the National Organization for Women, the same year that the Roe v. Wade decision was handed down by the US Supreme Court and the Equal Rights Amendment passed Congress. By then, fired by the drive for equal rights for women, I was ready for law school; I graduated from Northeastern School of Law in 1976. Along the way, in 1968, I married Charles Freifeld, then a math professor and later a commodities futures trader, one of the early “quants” in the financial markets.

As a true believer in the early feminist vision to “have it all” – both career and children – I had my first son the second day of second year of law school, missing three days of classes. In 1978, just as I was finishing a two-year stint as an assistant public defender in Miami, Florida, and was ready to move back to Boston, my second son was born, followed by a third son two years later. In 1984, finding that private practice had few opportunities to make an impact on family law policy, I jumped at the chance to serve on a governor’s commission mandated by Congress to make recommendations for improving the Massachusetts child support enforcement system.

Opportunities that I could never have envisioned flowed from this experience. For 23 years as chief legal counsel for the Massachusetts child support program (including seven years as deputy commissioner and program administrator), I worked on state, national, and international commissions, task forces, and committees to develop laws, policies, and systems for effective child support enforcement for children whose parents divorced or never married. These have included child support guidelines to ensure adequate support awards; simple procedures to make it easy for unmarried parents to establish paternity in the hospital; automated systems to collect child support through attaching wages, seizing bank accounts, and suspending licenses; reciprocal agreements with other states and countries to facilitate enforcement when parents move across state or international borders; protocols so that victims of domestic violence can receive child support safely; and responsible fatherhood initiatives to help unwed fathers connect with their children, especially those returning to their communities after a period of incarceration. These programs, adopted throughout the United States, have resulted in establishing paternity for millions of children born to unmarried parents and in collecting billions of dollars of child support, a significant source of financial support for single parents. Through this work I forged friendships with like-minded colleagues from all

over the country and indeed the world – all joined in a common purpose to ensure that children are supported by their parents. Our work transformed the landscape of family law, obtaining legislation and creating systems to make sure that child support is the first debt paid, not the last. For this work, I was honored to receive the Smith College Medal in 2003.

Since retiring in 2010, I have pursued a variety of interests, including urban farming, piano study, and conservation of parks and green space in the Boston area. Currently, my energies are joined with climate activist organizations working to fix the gas leaks that pollute our air and kill our trees, and to move the Commonwealth beyond gas to the use of geothermal energy to heat our homes and businesses. To accomplish this, I am working with Mothers Out Front, a national organization of mothers and others working for a livable climate for our children; the Gas Leaks Allies, a collaboration of some 25 organizations spearheading this strategy; and HEET, a small non-profit setting the stage for putting these proposals in the ground. These efforts require working with the Massachusetts Legislature, the Attorney General's Office, the Department of Public Utilities, and other executive agencies on laws and regulations that will put the Commonwealth on a path to a clean, net-zero and just energy future.

Finally, I am blessed with good health, many friends, a happy marriage, and six beautiful grandchildren!