ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE FASHION INDUSTRIES

FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

BONNIE CASHIN

THE FASHION INDUSTRY LEADERS

DATES OF INTERVIEW

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INTERVIEWED BY

Mildred Finger
BONNIE CASHIN is one of our most innovative and creative artists, who has applied her ideas and skills to the design of apparel. She has worked in the fashion industry for many years, but in an environment which she has created to suit her own needs. She thinks of herself as a "practical dreamer"; first and foremost a person of ideas. Her most cherished project is her newest dream, the Innovative Design Fund, intended to be of help to the "practical dreamers" who plan to devote themselves to apparel, textile and home furnishing designs.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

BONNIE CASHIN

ORAL HISTORY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 4</td>
<td>Family background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - 7</td>
<td>Early design for movies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 - 12</td>
<td>Experiences in New York in the early 1950's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 - 16</td>
<td>Working in an environment she created</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 - 18</td>
<td>Designing for variety of accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 - 22</td>
<td>Description of some design variations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 - 24</td>
<td>How Bonnie Cashin designs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 - 26</td>
<td>Bonnie Cashin's clothes at Liberty of London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 - 32</td>
<td>Knits for the Knittery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 - 34</td>
<td>Plans for future business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 - 37</td>
<td>Living near the United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 - 57</td>
<td>Bonnie Cashin's newest project, Innovative Design Fund</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q. Of all the things that you have done -- and you've done a great many -- what seemed to you the greatest challenge? What have you enjoyed the most?

A. Ah... That's hard to answer, because I've enjoyed every plateau. Every phase that I've gone through. I love to paint. I started out a painter.

Q. At what age did you discover that you liked to paint?

A. Oh, I was this high.

Q. How high is that? Or, how old is that, I mean...

A. Ever since I was a kid I've drawn and painted. And I was very fortunate. I came from a very talented, intellectual family, so I was always surrounded by beautiful things, regardless of what our fortunes were. It was very up and down, because my father was an inventor of sorts, and we either had a lot of money or no money. But I didn't even think of those things in those days. It didn't matter to me at all. All I liked to do was...

Q. Where were you living?

A. California. I was born in California. I'm a third generation Californian, which is rather odd.

Q. That's very unusual.

A. So I've really been working practically all of my life. My mother, who was a great craftswoman and the greatest dressmaker I've ever known... I have never worked with anyone on Seventh Avenue especially who could even touch her. Of course, she'd had a custom dress shop and I grew up in that.
I grew up with beautiful fabrics to play with, for doll's clothes -- Rodier, Bianchini, all those marvelous... real lames and all that sort of thing. And those were the scraps that I played with, so I was really very fortunate. And she encouraged me. She encouraged me to draw. I pulled bastings. I would peek behind the fitting curtains. I would watch all of this going on and it was a wonderful, wonderful training for me.

Q. Where'd your mother get her training?
A. Well, she just always did it. I really don't know. Coming to think about it, I don't know.

Q. Was she born here?
A. Yes, in California. As I say, I was a third generation Californian. But she was really great, and, of course, she was my right arm, and she really was the one who cleared the way for me to do almost anything I wanted to do, and she was, you know, a real learning process for me. My father was very erratic, and his fortunes were very erratic. But he could do anything. He spoke several languages and he read a lot and he invented most things... As I remember him inventing things... I can't remember what, at the time, but I was always fascinated with, you know, the fertility going on and the intellectual climate of our particular home, and my brother, who died a couple of years ago in England, who was a speck younger than I am.

Q. What year were you born?
A. Do I have to say? Because I'm not a numbers person.

Q. No, but I've already got it in print...
A. 1915
Q. And your brother was born a year or two later?
A. Yeah... No, a year or two before. I mean... No... That's right. And he turned out to be a geo-physicist. And he... his creativity took that particular direction. He was one of the first people to explore the North Sea, for oil...

Q. Well, then he was very well ahead of his time wasn't he?
A. What?
Q. Was he ahead of his time?
A. No, he was working for Phillips Petroleum. He was the first person sent over to England to the North Sea by Phillips Petroleum in Oklahoma, and that was in the mid-sixties, and it was about the same time that the Ballantyne cashmere people had approached me and wanted me to do a job in cashmere, and so I happened to be going over there about that same time too, and it was very wonderful because he had two very small children then, and his wife, and so it was all very great. They still live over there, even though he passed away a couple of years ago...

Q. His widow and children?
A. His widow and children, yes. They're college age now, and they're turning out to be scientists too. I come, actually, from a scientific family.

Q. So you and your mother were the creative ones, in terms of...
A. Well, my father too, and my uncle, who was the biggest influence in my life outside of my mother, was a geologist, a mathematician--a futurist--and he was really my educator. Because I didn't go to college.
I thought I was "smart punkins." I got out of school very early, out of high school, and I knew what I wanted to do. And my mother was peeved at me because she wanted me to go on to college, and I said "I want to paint, I want to dance, I want to write." I loved poetry, I wrote poetry too, still do. And I said, "I know what I want to do." Well, after I had worked a couple of years, I realized how little I knew, even though I got out of school at 16. But the thing is, I still go to school. And I have an enormous library and I get fascinated with different kinds of subjects and so I do something about them, and I study a tremendous amount. But my uncle in California was the one who was my real educator. Because he had a marvelous mind, he was a born teacher anyway and he would... He really stretched my mind. And he was a "futurist," which I guess I am too. I think toward the future, and the conjecture to me is great fun. I love to think of how we'll look, you know 100,000 years from now.

Q. Were you ever a sci-fi...?
A. No. No. And... But I'm very interested in education. I'm a good teacher myself. Very often we have groups of college students who are brought here, you know, on their training trips to New York, and they'll ask if they can come over here. And we'll sit around and we'll talk. I show them film. I show them film of my own work, on slides, and we sit around and we throw the ball back and forth, and they ask questions, and they always seem to respond very well, so I'm very glad of that. And it's all very informal. So... I feel I was very, very fortunate in having the background I did. I feel that the great open spaces of California...
Q. What was California like... You were there until the early thirties, I gather. Right?
A. No, I was there till later.
Q. Well, when did you come to New York?
A. I came to New York in the forties and went to the Art Student's League. And I did some ballet things. I did some free-lancing where I got $25 here and $50 there... You know... I was very young. But my real impetus began-- and I did some free lance work, you know, as all kids do in school, and I was going to school at the same time -- I've always gone to school and worked at the same time. And I went to the Art Students' League, and I was drawing and I was painting and all of that, and then... When the war broke out, in the mid-forties, and I was in New York and I was doing a little bit of clothes designing and a little bit of ballet stuff and all that, I just decided I'd like to go home to California during those years because there were all sorts of restrictions here anyway. If you remember, there was all those L-85 things. So I got an offer from 20th Century Fox studios by one of the top producers, who had watched me when I was growing and thought I had talent. So here I had this opportunity, so I went back and... I tell you. This was my college. It was the best thing in the world for me because, first of all, we weren't bound by anything except limitations of location and the world. I mean, you couldn't make pictures...
Q. But you had no such restraint as L-85?
A. No, no. We could do anything. The only thing was it was hard to get certain fabrics. For instance, in "Anna and the King of Siam," which was
my very, very favorite picture.. (I think I am half Oriental or something)

But my hair was very, very black, and my skin was dark from the California
sun and I used to drive around in my little convertible with the top down,
and my hair. I'd pull it back very, very slick and tight with a top knot
and stick pins through it, just like the Siamese women wear their hair.

And I learned to drape a "Panung"...

Q. What's a Panung?

A. Panung? It's just a big piece of cloth. "P-a-n-u-n-g." Just

a great big piece of cloth, that you wrap around your waist and you tie, and

then you pull between your legs. And then I'd go around practically barefooted

or with sandals, just sort of like I am now, and I would be very, very happy...

This is the way I like to... I loved working on that picture. I loved the

team. I liked the producer and the director. The only thing is we couldn't

do it in color, because it was during the war years and there was some

problem about dubbing in certain authentic background film that they had

already had with the color at this end. So it all had to be done in black

and white. But it was... I lived on the sets. The sets were absolutely

marvelous. I lived in that palace. And I painted the fabrics myself. I

did all the design... I painted the designs on the fabric. I even designed

all the jewelry and we had it made out of wire and everything, you know, in

the tool shop. And I was so immersed in it that I remember one of the big

camera men there saying, "Oh, we'll be awfully glad when Bonnie gets a picture

with a college background where she'll get back to a sweater and skirt."

Looking like something out of the pages of an Orient Express catalogue.
Q. When you were in New York at Parsons did people wear...
A. I didn't go to Parsons.
Q. I'm sorry. When you were at the Pratt...
A. No. I went to Art Students' League for painting, only. That's what I did. And later I went to the New School for Social Research, when I came back to New York and more or less settled here, and used to take night courses there. But I never went to Parsons or Pratt or any of the art schools there. Anyway... The whole Hollywood thing was extraordinarily marvelous as a learning tree. Now, not only that. We had a fabulous library, and I'm a very good research person. I love to do research. And if I were given a period picture, I could do... It was just wonderful to be able to learn that much about a certain period. Then, when you do a contemporary picture, like "Laura," that had its fascination...
Q. "Laura" was your first...
A. Yeah. "Laura" was my very first. They almost didn't give it to me because Otto Preminger said I was too young, too unsophisticated -- which I was, and probably still am -- but I begged him. I said I had read the story, and I said "I know just where she lived, on Sutton Place. I know the street she lived on. I know the red door. I know the whole thing. I know what she would look like, because I was rather poor then." Quite poor, as a matter of fact. But I would walk across town from the Art Students League clear over to... I would walk from river to river, you know, looking... And I was always fascinated with the Sutton Place area, which is where her flat was, if you remember the story...
Q. Yes, I do. Where were you living by the way?

A. At that time I was living in a walk up -- it was sort of a loft really -- on Sixth Avenue. It was right near Carnegie Hall. And it was practically bare. And it was kind of a mess. It had a tree in the yard. I've always had...

Q. It was an interesting part of town.

A. Yes... I've always had... My nature needs to look at a tree, and that's why I'm living over here, because both my apartment, which is upstairs, and my office, overlooks the garden....

Q. Yes. And this is at 866 U.N. Plaza...

A. Yes. But the apartment entrance, you just have a key to go through... So I commute by elevator. And it's high up, so I can look out over the East River, and I can see all the elements of nature. Water, sky, earth, growing things -- trees -- and it's good for me. I just love that. Really love it. I go to Seventh Avenue, of course, when I have fittings. I have to go down to the factory section and I have to go down for meetings and for certain business occasions. But I go as little as possible. The telephone is a marvelous instrument, because you can keep in touch that way. We have meetings here a lot: And my colleagues that I work with, will come here. And we'll have picnic lunches in the studio. They enjoy it. I think it's good for them to get away from Seventh Avenue. I think Seventh Avenue, as an environment, is deadening. Absolutely deadening. And I made up my mind to that years and years ago when I first started working. In the beginning it was new and odd and different. The crowds were strange and
interesting and all of that. But after a while they... I felt closed in, and in 1950, when I came back to New York from my Hollywood stint, and worked for a while right on Seventh Avenue, and... I decided... I had to make some decisions about my life. I loved my work. I loved doing it. And I loved design. The art side... I really considered what I was doing less of fashion, because I thought fashion was a very temporary, ephemeral thing, and more as art... My way of expressing myself, as a painter. And I felt... I had very strong ideas about what I felt was right for the future. And they often didn't concur with what was the current thing on Seventh Avenue. And I felt that....

Q. The Dior "new look," for example, would never have been a part of your thinking, I would...

A. Well, not in that way. I mean, you're a child of your time. If you're young, I mean, everything impresses you in some way. You can't be too closed off. But what I'm trying to say is, I had to make a big decision. And you know who was wonderful in helping me? She was a wonderful woman, and I'll bet you knew her. At the Brooklyn Museum, her name is Michelle Murphy.

Q. Oh, yes. Sure.

A. Michelle Murphy... I didn't even know what... I was green behind the ears. I really was. I didn't know what Fashion Group was. I didn't know what the Coty Awards were... I'd heard it as a word, but I didn't know... I was surprised when I won it that first year. But Michelle, early on, had come to the manufacturer I was working for and asked him to meet whoever was in the back room, because my name wasn't....

Q. Who was that?
A. Adler and Adler. My name wasn't on anything, you see. I was just the kid in the back room. So... I met her. We liked each other immediately. And she said, "I like your drawings. I like what you put on paper." And she said, "Could you just give us a few, when you don't... when you're cleaning out, and want to?" So I did, and then shortly thereafter was when I went to Hollywood to work there.

Q. Incidentally... Excuse me... When did you do the costumes for "Roxy?"

A. That was at the same time. That was before I went to Hollywood.

Q. Was that at "decision making" time? Was it about then?

A. No, no. The decision not to work on Seventh Avenue but still do my own thing came later. No, those were my formative years, when I was working at the Roxy I was going to the Art Students' League. I was doing freelance work, you know, selling some drawings, like all kids do...

Q. Oh. So that was much earlier?

A. ...And all of that. And I had done a few things for this manufacturer—who is no longer in existence—and Michelle Murphy sought me out. And she told me about her work at the museum. She said, "Why don't you come over and see what we're doing?" And I had never been to Brooklyn, and I went over and I was very impressed with everything. But she was a marvelous teacher. So, I met her in that brief time before I started... I really feel my start was... Because that's the first time anybody knew my name was when it was on the screen. That's where people knew my name. Not on a label. Yet. So, when I came back to New York and worked for a while... Actually, the same manufacturer I had worked a little bit for before... We had
lunch one day, and I said "Michelle, I don't want my life to go on Seventh Avenue. It's too abrasive. My nature is that I enjoy, you know..." Not fighting back. I didn't mean that. But I'm not an aggressive human being. "And I do not want to be part of that. But I love the work and I like many of the people that I work with, but it's the environment." I'm very influenced by environment. I must have beautiful things around me. I must be able to set my eyes on something that I think is warming and beautiful and intriguing or engaging, you know. I must do that. I cannot set it on dirty streets and all of that. And I said, "There's a lot of other things I want to do. I want to paint. I like to write. I don't know what I should do." She was very wonderful. But I was having a little problem too, because I was going through my... the beginnings of my Oriental period, having worked on "Anna and the King of Siam," which was a big influence. And also having studied the philosophies of the East, which I was interested in and still am very interested in. And...

Q. At some point in this you had married. Were you going through a divorce?

A. Yes, yes, I was going through all of that... All those things come up. And that in a way was a wonderful thing. He was very creative. He was my teacher...

Q. Really?

A. Yes. And a good deal older, and all of that. Anyway, you still learn a lot, even though it's an abrasive period, you learn a lot. I don't care what happens if you learn from it. The only things I don't like is if you refuse to learn from it. So anyway... She was... I was unhappy about something flowering, which was one of my... It had a more Oriental but a
very modern look to it. And she said, "Bonnie, you stick with it." She said, "You have it better than most of these people on Seventh Avenue and you could be a great contributor to this whole scene." She said, "Stick with it."

Q. "With it" meaning Adler & Adler?
A. Yeah. This was in that period. But I did leave, and every time I've left anything my family would say, "Oh, Bonnie, you mustn't do that. We're in a bad economic period, you know." I always left what I was doing, apparently -- this was when I left Hollywood -- at a little low ebb in the economy. And I always said, "But I want to try new wings, you know, I have wings. I am a bird. I can fly. I don't want to be hemmed down because it's money." You see. So, actually, Michelle was a great teacher for me. She died, tragically, as you know. But... Bob Riley was her heir apparent, and that's where I first knew Bob. I hope he's doing a lot of writing now, because he's a very good writer... I must call him.

Q. Well, you know... Yes, why don't you call him? You know, he retired and he went on a long trip....
A. Yes. I know... He told me all of that. But anyway... That started me off. And I got to thinking, "Hey. I love my business. I love the whole world that I'm in. It's the environment that I don't like. What am I going to do about it?" So, I said, "If I had a place, maybe a studio in the country, where I could look at marvelous things, and I could feel the seasons and all of that, maybe I'd be happier." So, I bought a big old carriage house in Briarcliff, up the Hudson. And it had belonged to Dorothy McGuire, whom I had loved working with in movies. And she was my type of girl. She's the one I wanted... you know... We got along very well. So anyway... I got this big old carriage house. I got my mother to come out
from California, and I had a little experimental laboratory, as I called it, out there. And a couple of little ladies who would sew... To try things.

Q. Briarcliff....
A. It was just trying things. Then I had a great big area where I could paint in. And... So it became... It became a very creative sort of an outpouring during that particular time. And I kept my flat in New York, and at that time it was right opposite the Museum of Modern Art. A penthouse there. Charles Adams has it now.

Q. Oh, really?
A. Yes. But I used to look down in the museum gardens. And I also went to the... When the museum had a school there, I went to that school. And I used to paint. In fact, then, that's where I met Ben Grauer. He was going to the same class. He was very good. And so I kept studying and doing my painting. I painted out in the country...

Q. Now this is after 1950, but before you went to be with Phillip Sills in his business?
A. Well, it was just before, because I joined his company in 1953, when I left the other job. And I decided that what I would do was have my own place to work, and that I would work somewhat like an architect. I'd have my own set up, where I could work very, very quietly. I didn't want anyone around me. I don't want anybody... You know, nudging me, or anything. And that I would handle different accounts in different areas that I wanted to work in, because to me that would be a freer way of working, than doing one type of clothes for one manufacturer. When I worked for one manufacturer before, I had to fit into their price structure and into their look structure, and very
rarely could I try anything on the outside. And I remember at that particular
time, we snuck in one thing that later became almost a Ford, and that was the
raincoat with the purse pocket, you know, on the side? And they weren't going
to make it or anything. And I remember there was a wonderful woman at Neiman
Marcus... What was her name?

Q. A Couture buyer?

A. A sportswear buyer. Miller? Adele Miller?

Q. I don't know...

A. I don't know... I think that was the name. And one day she was
in the back room where I was, and I said, "Oh, I have this wonderful idea."
And, actually, I did the first one in California before I came to New York. I
liked to paint in the Hollywood hills and I would drive my car up there and
set up painting. And so I had my mother take a purse I had and sew it on my
jacket so that I didn't have to take a purse at all and my hands could be
free, and all I needed was my paint box and my little car. And I said, "It's
so handy. It's marvelous, when you travel. Even if you do carry a bag." So
I wanted to do this. And she said, "Oh Bonnie, that's a good idea." Well, I
got an outside person to make it for me. I didn't tell the man I was
working for, because he had put thumbs down on it. And I showed it at the
collection, and I showed it the very last, and this buyer, this woman, was
in the audience, and she started applauding, and they all started applauding,
and they said, "How much is it?" And I said, "Oh, it hasn't been priced yet."
And my boss came out and he was furious, because he had never seen it before,
you see. Well, he couldn't stay furious too long, because people came back
and said, "Well, if you price it, we'd like to... We think it's original, an
innovative idea." So what happened is that we got a patent on it -- except that I didn't get the patent -- It's in my name. It was in my name. A design patent. But I had to turn it over -- I didn't even know any better at that time. You just turn it over to the manufacturer. So that when I left there to go out on my own, I couldn't use my own idea until seven years had passed, and that's the dilemma that young people, who don't know what they're getting into and everything... However, I started my own... on my own... And I thought, I'll do the things I want and I'll just charge a fee for it, and that's all. One of the first ones was Philip Sills. And Philip Sills had a tiny, tiny little hole in the wall and he was doing mostly men's jackets of an ordinary sort, and he was about to go out of business. He was a very... He's a very smart... He's one of the smartest business men I've ever known.

Q. Really.

A. And he was... He could make money in any business. And he was thinking of going into the automobile business with his brother in-law, in Cleveland.

Q. And give up the ready-to-wear?

A. And give up the ready-to-wear. Until when I came along. And we liked each other, and I said I loved leather... Because I worked in California. My mother used to take me down to the tanning houses and let me, as a young girl, select my skins, and then she would make me a dress. And I remember... The proudest thing I ever had was a yellow suede dress. I remember, it was a bright yellow -- no pale, namby pamby colors for me. It was a strong yellow, you know. And I remember how I loved it and how my body felt in it, and all of that. And I had always had touches of leather on the clothes I did. But
anyway, I said "Oh, I really wanted to do it, and I said I could show them how to make them better. Because at that time they cut leather in a funny way. they cut it in sort of little zig zags, like this, to utilize every portion of the skin. And to my eyes, that was unaesthetic. And what I started doing, which hadn't been done, was to use the cuts in the skin as an integral part of the actual design. In other words, it would run into the pocket or run into a detail of some sort that would carress the shape of the garment, you see. So, anyway... Philip said he couldn't pay me right away. They'd have to wait until they sold it. But that's all right. I was poor too. I was living on a lettuce leaf, and he wasn't sure he was going to stay in business... So I went in there and with the aid of my mother, who was an unpaid assistant to me...

Q. She moved to New York?

A. Yeah. She came to New York and I had the studio in Briarcliff. And so I'd go home at night and she would... I said "They can't even put a little strip of leather or suede around a jersey dress you know?" So she would come down and show them how to... It was very ordinary, typical leather. So it became sort of a teaching job. But I enjoyed it. And I love the feeling of skins. I just really loved that. And Philip was very nice. He let me do whatever I wanted to. And the first season there appeared in Vogue... I had taken the coat to Vogue myself, and it was a black kid skin coat with a large collar, lined in alpaca. It was the first of the chic storm coats that didn't look like a state trooper or something. And the girls liked it very much, and what came out was a page picture which started this off. You know, it's the accident, almost, of getting a very good picture at the beginning of something that starts something off. Because you can get a bad picture and no one really
sees what it looks like. You must know that, having been in it so long. And anyway... Everything started building up. And we started getting noticed. And the little room, which was half this size, really. Just really half this size, had to expand. And it did. And each season we did a kind of a theme and a kind of a philosophy behind it. And gradually added tweeds and the jerseys and...

Q. Was he paying you by then?
A. Oh, yes. He was paying me by then... Not very much, I must admit, but he was paying me by then. And when I'd go over to Europe, to...

Go over for my Ballantyne cashmere job, I would accidentally bump into wonderful small tweedy mills, and we had tweeds that no one else had.

Q. Were you doing Ballantyne at the same time you were doing...?
A. No, not in the beginning. But... Yes, at the same time. I was doing other things too, you see.

Q. I see.
A. I was doing Coach bags...

Q. When you worked for Philip Sills?
A. Yes!

Q. At the beginning or later?
A. Well, a couple of years later I'd say. And, you know, they all came along. I was doing, oh, a number of things...

Q. So you really had your own way about...
A. I've always had my own office. There wasn't any room down at Philip Sill's for me anyway. It was... His premises weren't big enough. But it worked out very well. Because he really is a good, astute business man, and
we got along reasonably well. There's always differences. His big interest was not fashion, which was my interest. His biggest interest was, of course, making a business go. The bottom line department, which is as it should be. Somebody's got to take care of it. Yes. Somebody has to... So we were a good team. And we... I did a lot of writing in those years, because for every one of our shows I would write a bit of philosophy, more than anything else, and some of the girls on the magazines said they have kept every one of those from all those years. They said they'd get more words out of them and all of that. Like layering, because...

Q. Yes. I was about to say... Could you tell us something about things like layering, in which you really were so avant garde.

A. Well, the word was ours.... I sometimes regret it. Because today, anything over anything is a layering. And that wasn't the idea at all. This also came out of my studies of the Far East. Because, you see, in China, they wore different layers of shirts. And a typical expression was "Oh, today is a ten layer day." And they'd have ten shirts on, fitted over each other. And then a warmer day would be a three layer day, or a one layer day. And this always impressed me. And I thought, well it does make sense. It comes.. And then I was studying architecture, just for my own self, and it's exactly the theory of insulation, because between each layer is a layer of air, you see. So the first layerings that we did, which we won -- Neiman Marcus gave me my first award on that in 1950 -- And I remember that so thoroughly, because what it was.. We started with the simple little Jersey sheath -- and those were kind of rare in those days too, to have anything quite that simple. There were no darts; no tucks and things for the bosom and all of that.
They were utterly simple and pure. Good fabric of course. And then over that went what I called a shell, and the shell was a sleeveless garment. Very Oriental in feeling. You wouldn't know it. It had a completely contemporary look. There was nothing costumey about it. And then over that could go another garment, and then over the whole thing could go a cloak or a cape or another mantle that would cover the whole body. So, in other words, you could doff pieces as you needed to and you could add pieces as you needed to. And there are innumerable combinations. It's just exciting. It's just like so many notes on a piano, and yet there are so many different kinds of music. I could feel... There was so much music to be gotten out of this. Well, of course, much later, I mentioned to Mr. Marcus -- who I felt was a brilliant merchandiser -- I said, "But you recognized it first. But what happened is it never came to real fruition the way it should have, because everything is too departmentalized in the stores." And the buyer who bought the coat said she couldn't have the other part. So the poor consumer is the one who is lost. Now, if I had had my own custom couture.... Because I really wanted my own couture house. This was... I came out of couture. That's where I should really be to do all the experimental, exploratory things that I feel I've just got to do, and I'm still going to do it.

Q. But if you had just had your own shop, like the Anne Klein shop and the Ralph Lauren shop, and all the rest of it. You were very far ahead of the trend to give designers their own shops.

A. That may have been it... But I deplore this in our merchandising today. I think our merchandising has to be completely rethought. I really feel that they are 20-30 years behind the times. And they've gotten so big
and so departmentalized so this buyer can't buy this over here, even though it belongs in this department over here, because that's her resource, you know. I think all that silly jealousy is so dumb. And it's only hurting the overall structure of retailing. And yet it exists. You can't ... You might as well accept it. But it shouldn't exist. It really shouldn't.

Q. But it exists less in New York than in other parts of the country.

A. Less in New York?

Q. Yes. New York really does have a lot of designers' individual boutiques within the fashion floors.

A. Yet, if that buyer didn't buy a complete line -- which she never does, or he never does -- and it really... Whatever the idea is, should fit in another department. Maybe the active sports for instance. Or something. They will not allow that blurring of lines or crossing of lines. Which means that it retards ideas from getting to the public. But I'm not here to solve that. It's just a comment on the side, of what I think is one thing that is a hindrance... is hindering retailing. But...

Q. Tell us some of the other major fashion models you've created. The Noh-coat for example.

A. The Noh-coat was utterly simple, unlined kind of a coat, again inspired by my studies of the Far East. And one reason it came about was... I really had a thorough dislike of the usual linings that were used, you know, the rayon... I realize the reason for it, I'm not questioning that... cost... But at the same time, to me they were always ugly. They never quite matched, and when you threw the thing back over a chair, instead of being finished really
beautifully, as you do in a custom piece, which I was accustomed to, and my own clothes were made that way. They couldn't afford that kind of labor, so I understand that, too. But when you sent them to the cleaners, and the cleaners are absolutely... You know what happens when you get them back. They get discolored, and so you have these ugly linings. So I said "Let's get rid of the darned things. Let's not have linings at all. I want heavy, heavy materials that you can carve and sculpt a coat out of, and you can clean the seams up, and they look as beautiful inside as outside. I want the coat, when it's thrown back over a chair, to be as beautiful as the front part is." Well, we began this, and it meant certain kinds of fabrics, and I found a fabric in Ireland that was a very, very heavy Irish tweed, which I bought for myself. I had my mother cut it, and then I took it down to Sills, and I said "Will you put a leather binding around it? Now, here's the shape I want." So he did. And I wore it and wore it and got lots of compliments. And then one day I put that coat in the group that they were showing, and everyone was interested in it. So we did import the fabric. And in the beginning, when everybody thought it was too heavy, you never thought of heaviness, because it balanced on the shoulders, and it had no linings to clutter it all up, and I still wear the coat.

Q. Really?
A. Yes.

Q. If everybody could wear your clothes that long...
A. Oh, they do, they do. This is the funny thing. I get this constantly, all over the world. It isn't really here. I have had some of the funniest encounters in the world by someone who would come up to me in
some remote place and they had heard my name at the ticket counter... And then they'd tell me their experience with the coat. And I say, "Well give it to the....

End tape 1 side 1
A. ..."oh, no, I'm not going to give it away. I'm going to wear it all my life." And it's really kind of marvelous. I really love to hear that attitude. And I also get from women who call and say that a certain thing that she had, she says "I really can't wear it anymore. My husband says that I must get a new one. But I want another one, in a new color, just like this one." Well, of course, I can't produce it for her. Not right now. But I've had so much of that, you know. And the same thing with my knits. You know I've been doing hand knits for years and have quite a collection of them, along with my Ballantyne knits too...

Q. Bonnie, just take one second... As I remember, you start from sketching and then you go to fabrics?

A. Well, I try both ways...

Q. You try it both ways...?

A. But then I'm an artist so I like to start getting a feeling. That's why the drawings are done first. And I get a feeling of what it is that I want. Well, there is something that I've been playing with. So I get a feeling of it. Then I get the fabric, and of course when I had the studio and work room out in Briarcliff, I would constantly be draping the material this way and that way, upside down, jabbing a scissors into it, because I hate working with a pattern. I like just cutting into things. And with the aid of my mother who would... I would do part of it and then she'd grab it from me and get it so it would balance... I'd do one side. So we were a wonderful team that way. And I appreciated her so much. I've worked with so many other people on the Avenue, and they've had... I've found a few that are all right and good, but I'm spoiled. I'm absolutely spoiled. Because she was the best and she was my unpaid assistant. And
she only did it for me because she wanted me to get the effect I wanted. So she would try for all these different effects that I loved and...

Q. And when she developed the effect that you loved, that then became your first sample and...

A. No. I'd take it down to the manufacturer and I'd say "Now I want the neck to fit this way. Here it is. You see how it's dug out a little bit in back. It doesn't come up tight to your neck here." So, of course, at the beginning, I had the worst time getting rid of darts. Because all of Seventh Avenue, everything was darted. I wanted everything to flow naturally. I like natural fabrics, natural fibers. I don't want to torture fabric. I want it to hang as it should hang. And this, sometimes, is more difficult to achieve than it is when you have a rigid pattern on a table, and that's the way it's going to be, you know. And it was absolutely the opposite of the old French way of making clothes. It was, in my mind, it was torturing the fabric that they were pulling. I remember at one point when I was in London, I met with Mr. Arthur Stuart Liberty of Liberty's of London, and he had seen me in a sari dress that was all very finely pleated that I had made. I had tons of pleated dresses at that period because I had been in India working for the Indian government, and I had brought back these marvelous saris and I still have... In fact, this is the year that I'm going to give them to the Met... I must call them. But he thought it was one of the most beautiful dresses he had ever seen, and he said "Well, we have a department in the store for Oriental silks, and we have a custom department. Would you like to do some custom things? You know how to handle this material?"

Q. This was about 1956?
A. No, this was... That was about 19... no it was later.

Q. Because you went to India I believe in 1956?

A. '56 or '57... No, it was a little later. But the dress was...

He hadn't seen the dress. It was a little later than that. I think it was early '59 or '60, in there. Everything runs together. I can't tell...

You know, we were trying to date... I have a lot of photographs. I was trying to date them all. You know I can't tell one decade from another. They're all valid....

Q. But there were so many things that you made and then remade...

A. Yes. Exactly. They're all valid. And as wearable today as the day they were made. But the thing is, what I did was to investigate their work rooms and their work rooms were based on the old French thing... and then I started casing some of my friends in the embassy there who had had clothes custom made, and they said, "Oh, Bonnie, you'd go absolutely nuts standing for three fittings and all that." But they tortured these beautiful silks. This is what I didn't like. First they'd put a lining in them and then they'd fit them all, during that period. And, of course, my dress was simply very finely, irregularly pleated, and using the beautiful borders that they do on those materials... I have all the swatches, the fabrics we've collected... I'm going to give all of those to I think Cooper Hewitt Museum... And... Anyway, I declined. I said... Oh, and also. He said... When they made me an offer, and the offer was so small, as far as money went... And I was embarrassed. Because I usually get... Numbers embarrass me. So I said, "You know, Bud, I just don't think I have time to do them." Well, actually, I was in love with somebody there, and I didn't want to spend all my time in a work room. So I said "I don't
think I'll have time this trip." He wanted me to do a group right away. A custom group and they wanted to present them and all that. But I said, "If you really like my clothes, you can buy from two or three manufacturers that I'm working for." Well, I had a lot of clothes with me, because at that time I was going to a lot of different kinds of events and needed a wardrobe. Usually I travel with practically nothing. Very light. Very, very light. A few cashmeres that I roll up, that you can make long or short, whatever it may be. But at that time, different trips demand different kinds of luggage, I've learned. So, anyway, he came over to the flat that I had rented in London and he saw the clothes. I put them all on... He liked everything. He said, "Order us that, order that, and..." And they started their Bonnie Cashin Shops, and now they have a Bonnie Cashin Shop there, which has been for 20 years anyway. And they get a marvelous clientele, I'm told, regardless of what a funny looking little shop it is. You know what an Edwardian store looks like. And to me, they would do... It should have a look of its own. But they keep everything under lock and key, which we're not used to... But they have... They get a marvelous clientele. Lady This, So-and so this. I've met more friends from my clothes. The girls will say, "Oh, please call Lady So-and-so, she just loves your clothes. She wants you to..." Well, I'd get acquainted with this Lady, you know, and she would invite me down, and all of this. And they're all so dear and warm. And they're repeat people. They go back year... The buyer will call them and say "Now we have more of our Cashins in." And I've made some very good friends, whom I feel very attached to, on the Continent.
Q. Did you have to do special sizing for them?
A. No. No. Well, my clothes are all easy. Nothing really fits tight. Everything is very flowing and very easy, and nothing's tortured. So really, an awful lots of kinds of bodies can wear my clothes. So, anyway....

Q. You started telling about the Knittery....
A. Oh, the Knittery. I've always knitted. And when I left Ballantyne... I just loved doing certain things for them, but their merchandising over there is so funny, and...

Q. Did you design for them there or in your own studio here?
A. There. I went over there. In the summer. I spent every summer, for about five years, in Scotland. And, of course, I commuted to London, because I had lots of London friends. But.. And I loved it. I loved Scotland. I have some dear friends there too, and I loved it because at that time there was a wonderful man, who's now dead, who encouraged me to do a ... to absolutely change the color scheme, the color thing in Scotland. After he died, and I left, it went back to its old baby pinks and blues.

Q. You were doing interesting earth colors?
A. See that wall over here....?

Q. Describe some of the colors....
A. [Too far away for machine] So what was thrilling for me was to have an ally who said, "Bonnie, go ahead and do color." And, of course, these colors were pretty shocking to the Scottish market there. They had never seen... And yet they felt happy with them.
Q. The turquoise, and various types of purple?

A. Well, all the... colors... of the rainbow... brilliant colors. And of course, cashmere is one of my favorite, favorite fibers to work with. It has such a wonderful glow to the fiber itself that the colors will come out beautifully. For instance, if you dyed those same colors in rayon yarn, you'd never get the look. You just wouldn't. Because the basic structure of the fiber itself is not the same. So I loved working with it, but another thing that I loved working with was Intarsia. And there was a wonderful man there who was an Intarsia expert, because that's all handwork, absolutely all handwork. But what I could do, which is what I really enjoyed doing, was I could paint a sweater on paper, and I could take my yarn colors that they had dyed for me -- lab dyed -- and I could put them in the areas I wanted to. And I could work with this man and his little machine -- one man at one machine -- and what would come out would be really thrilling. And I was so excited by this technique. I still have all the drawings (they too will all go to a museum eventually, along with the original sweater, because it will be very useful for students to see the actual finger print of the artist upon it, you know.).

Q. Do they still do that kind of work?

A. They do it, but not like they did then. Well, they thought I was outlandish because they had never seen designs like this. They had seen... They used to do... like little pansies on a pocket, or... argyles of course, which are always good. They're classic, and I truly love them. But they did what we would call little fuddy-duddy patterns. They had never done the bigger, looser, more abstract, contemporary kind of a feeling. And some of them became almost fords, not quite, because even in those days,
they were very expensive. Today you couldn't afford them. They'd all be like $750, or something like that. And they were beautifully made. Because in cashmere, there are all kinds of qualities. And you read ads about cashmeres at this price, and all that. They're no good...

Q. They're Chinese cashmere...

A. Well, it isn't that the Chinese cashmere... The fiber itself is all right. But it's the way they're knitted. They're knitted looser, and there's no stability to the actual fabrication itself, you see. And then the finishes. You see, the finishes are the thing. There are all kinds of finishes. I happen to like a welt finish myself, because it gives a firmer edge and it's neater looking. And it holds its neatness. Whereas a rib edge is cheaper -- a little -- But it splays out, and the way they're sewn on the inside. And I'm a stickler for all that. Well, they were so surprised that a designer even cared about all of that, because apparently they thought you just draw pictures, or, you say, "Here's sort of what I want, darling. Go ahead and do it." But I was fascinated with the technology of it and to this day... I learned a lot from them and they learned a lot from me, and I still, when I go back, I love to go see my old friends there. Well later, after I left them, I had... I wanted to get back into the sweater thing, and people had offered me a liaison of some sort. And... But, as you go along you learn more about people, and I just decided they weren't for me or I wasn't for them, you know. Either one. And then one day, one of the merchandise men at Saks Fifth Avenue, who is now dead, came here and I was... I pulled out all of the Intarsias. I had them all over the floor. They were in a huge thing, and I was going through them. Because
I too get inspiration from my own work from the past. And he absolutely blew his top. He said, "Bonnie, I'll buy every single one and send them to China, or Hong Kong, to have them made." I said, "You will not." I said, "First of all, they will cost you a fortune, and they're really museum pieces. And second is, you can't just copy them. It's the sensitivity of the color that you like, and unless they dye the right colors, or unless someone..." I said, "Someone else can't interpret this for me. I have to do it. The artist himself has to do it. Otherwise you'll never get the look." And so I said I wouldn't do that. And he said, "Well, G-d damn it, you know more about cashmere than anybody else. You've done the best job. We miss you in the market. Start your own business." And I said, "You know, I really don't like business. If I had a good partner, it would be all right, but I really don't like the business end of it. All I want to do is design." And he said, "Look" He said, "We'll give you your first order." I did some sketches, and we went over them. Some ideas. And yeah, he liked them. So then I called up the man in Scotland, who is really the king of cashmere, whom I had known in my Ballantyne period--which was just recently, of course. And I said, "Which of your mills..." Because they had bought up all the mills in the borders, all those mills in all those darling little Scottish towns by the river Tweed, and I said, "I don't want a huge one that can't do small quantities. I want someone that I can work with, but I know how stubborn those people are. They think you're a nut if you do anything beside the twin step that they've always done." And I said, "I don't want that sleeve that to me doesn't look architectural enough. I want another sleeve. You know, whether they'll do it or not is the thing." So he laughed, and he said, "Look. I'll make all the
appointments for you. You come over and you case them."

Q. Bonnie, about what year was that?

A. This was about 1970. And so I flew over and he had a whole schedule made out for me and I cased all the mills and did a dossier on each one, whether I thought their technicians would even understand what I was talking about, or what, you see. And finally we set on one mill that I thought I could work with. And they were all kind of hungry then, because cashmere wasn't in the picture at all, you know. And we worked... Sometimes I had to have six or seven samples make of one simple thing, before I got a kind of look out of it, and the shaping, just shapes. And he... I remember this gentleman, whose name is Alan Smith, and he's the head of all the cashmere empire now. And he said to me... I showed him my book, all my notes from each of his mills, and he said, "You know more about the mills than I do. You really cased them." Anyway, we started out, me green behind the ears. I got a girl in here who did the selling. I found out that I really didn't like being with buyers. I didn't have the highest regard for their taste anyway. And I didn't like it and I wanted her to do it. But they would keep asking for me, you see. And so I found myself doing too much of the business and not enough sitting with my drafting board and my paints. Because that's really what I love. I... My chemistry is that way, you know. So then I thought, as long as I had that going, and we were successful -- in a small way, not in a big volume way-- but I didn't want to be. I wanted to sell the good boutiques, you know? And so then I thought, "Well, why don't I get back to my knitting? My hand knitting, because I've always hand knitted, since I was a kid. And so I got some yarns and stuff
together and we started that. First I had them made in Scotland and Northern England, because I used to go frequently to the mill. And so I found some little women there. But they were very irregular in delivery, and I had to eat a lot of sweaters that came too late.

Q. That's very expensive food.

A. It's very expensive food. And then this last year I decided to give it up. I said, "I'm not going to give it up for good. I'm just going to suspend it, until I get our foundation going. Then I want a partner. I want a smart girl who's a very good business person, who knows how to handle the stores and all of that. I don't want to see them. All I want to do is to do the ideas and the color and get them made."

Q. And you want to get them made here?

A. Well, these I've had... Yeah... Towards the end we had a group of women up in... old ladies, up in New York State... But they were irregular too. It was hard to control them. You'd think you were going to get everything and then you didn't. You know that old story. And so... I don't know. The main thing... You know what I really do want, and I really want to get back into doing the kind of clothes that I really love, which are beautiful fabrics. I want to do a lot of summer clothes. I love linen. I love fine cottons. I love all of that. And I think...

Q. For someone coming from California, I should think that would be very understandable....

A. Oh, yes. I'm good at that too. And color and simplicity and beautiful things. But what I think I want is, I think I'll have to have an angel. I know that. And I have to have a good business person. A good business person who'll manage the production and the selling, and who understands
how quality things should be handled. Not just, you know, like so many of
them do. And then I would like to sell them direct to the consumer.

Q. Really?
A. Uh huh. I'd like to have my own... I don't want to call it a
boutique, because that's too ordinary and they all look alike and there's
a million of them, but I have in back of my head... I have a structure all
envisioned right back here of how I want it to look and what I want it to be,
and it'll come. I know this. Knowing myself, it will come, when it's ready.

Q. Will you also be making the kinds of things you were making when
you were with Philip Sills?
A. I'll make the kinds of things, today....

Q. Because you are not now doing ponchos and capes...
A. Oh, sure I am. For my Weather Wear collection...

Q. Oh, of course you are.
A. I mean, Gee, that one poncho with the pile lining. I tell you,
Bergdorf is advertising it. Everybody has advertised it. And there've been
a million others without my name in them... But, I mean, everybody says,
"They're Bonnie's." They can tell. But the thing is, that I think... I
want it to be a very personal business... And I want it to be quality. I
only want to reach certain people. I don't want to please everybody. I want
to please myself first, because I know then it will be good. And then it
will please the coterie of people. And there are more than most people
think, you know. Lord knows, if it's only a 5% audience you have a very
good audience. I want individuals. I like dressing an independent woman
who has a brain, who's... Who really has a life, is alive. Has a light
burning inside of her. It's this type of woman I want to reach. She's a
doer. And there are so many of her coming up. We women are a lot smarter than we were fifty years ago.

Q. Would you not think of a group of boutiques in various parts of the country?

A. Could be. That could be. But it would start in one place.

Q. But there's only a small amount of production...?

A. Oh, I don't know. That would be up to the production man, the business person. But I can see this structure. The main thing I want to do is control the laboratory. I want to do... There are things... You know, if you wait too long, everybody else does it eventually. Someone thinks of it too. This is the way human beings are. But at the same time, some of the ideas that I've had in the past, that are still in the notebook. I have a huge book, a big fat book, and it has a big "Do," on it. And a tiny little "someday" by it. "Do someday, Bonnie." And some of them have already been done and others have not been done, and I want to do them. I want to go forward. That's what's exciting. It's like doing... a whole new thing. I'd get bored if I did the same thing over and over again.

Q. Bonnie, where do some of your inspirations come from, because I know you get ideas from all kinds of things. What kinds of things give you ideas?

A. Oh, golly. That's very hard to say. Sometimes just looking out of a window upstairs and looking at clouds. And I like music while I'm working. And, I don't know, it's the juxtaposition of something that my eye sees and something that my brain feels, and all of a sudden I get an idea out of left field. It's very exhilarating. You know, sometimes I feel almost larkey, that all of a sudden a marvelous thought comes to you
and I quickly rush to one of my many, many notebooks, and I grab a pencil and put it down. I must say that sometimes, I look at it a few months later; I wonder what I was thinking about, because I can't tell. But I try to capture it. I don't know. I know that when I'm in a happy mood I get ideas. Even when I've been in periods... traumatic periods... and we all go through them. A loved one dies... We've all had this happen to us. And they're traumatic. What I try to do in periods like that is try to work terribly, terribly hard, so that you're exhausted at the end of the day. And somehow it eases all of the hurt and all. Before you know it, nature, which is a marvelous accomplice to each one of us, makes your mind start going in very positive directions. Right now, I'm in a very happy mood. There's someone I love in my life, and it's... I feel... I feel exhilarated by this new project that we're working on, even though I want to get it going on its own.

Q. I want to hear about it next time.

A. All right. So that it can go on its own, and I can get back to what I really want to do, which is my drafting board and my paints and my color and all of that.

Q. Does it mean anything special to you to be right next to the U.N.?

A. Well, I love it, you know, because I love looking at different kinds of people. You know, the apartment I had before this was on the corner of 64th and Madison, in the middle of everything. And it was a wonderful apartment actually. It was two old apartments put together-- two fireplaces, two enormous bathrooms, 20 feet long, tall ceilings.... It was a wonderful place for parties, because there was all that space... and it was gracious...
and I have a lot of paintings and all of that. But, I used to come over to the U.N. occasionally, just to clear my mind from our own kind of work, and I would come sit in the General Assembly, with the earphones on, so you could hear all of the languages. And I'd love looking at the people. Because they wear the traditional clothing and all of that. And I saw this building going up, and I thought, "I better check into that, because that looks as though I might want to come over here. And it has all that glass and you have the sky." And also the fact that it was the first building that you could rent your office space and live above it. And when I first saw that it was in Japan, and I've always wanted to live over the store. And, of course, Bergdorf, Mr. Goodman, is the greatest of that. But, I thought, this is an opportunity. "I can buy an apartment in the building and I can rent my space down below. I'm away from Seventh Avenue, and it's a taxi ride right across when I have to go. I'll sell the studio in Briarcliff," which I did, and bought this place. And the place is full every day in the elevator of all kinds of ethnic groups. And this is what I enjoy. I like them much more than the types I see on Madison Avenue. I mean, I got so sick of seeing women who were so beautifully coiffed and who had just come from a two or three hour luncheon at one of the nice restaurants, and who had blank faces. And I said, "Hey, I'm getting uncomfortable in this environment. I don't like looking at these kinds of people. I want to look at a larger canvas. I want to look at people from all parts of the world. And so I came over here. Now that I'm here I go less to the U.N.

Q. Well, if you have them practically in your lap...
A. Do you know that practically every weekend there are demonstrations out my window, and I have glasses, because my apartment faces that way too, and I watch, and it's very interesting. You have a sense of the flow of people in our particular world, and you realize what changes we're living in. We're living in the greatest change in history. And it isn't just from watching that, because I think they're stuck in their seats over there. I don't think they're doing anything. But you look at the people and you know something's happening. And we're living in this. We're so lucky. Even though there's going to be a lot of dislocation, a lot of unhappiness, a lot of everything that's ugly in our lives, it still is a wonderful period to live in.

Q. It certainly is. I just want to check one thing....

End Tape 1 Side 2
Q. Bonnie, today, we're going to talk about your newest, exciting project, which is the Innovative Design Fund. So, please just start wherever you like and let's have you talking all about your creative idea.

A. Oh, golly. It's one of my favorite things to talk about. Actually. It's not a new thing with me. I've been dreaming of this for many, many years. I've always been interested in education, and why people turn out the way they do. Why they think the way they do. What channels of our society their thinking will go into, and all of that. And I've always called the project my "impossible dream." It seemed to... I seemed to take... I have a book upstairs in my apartment which is... It's a huge one. It's called "Do." It has a great big "Do," on it. Do someday. And these are ideas. I'm an idea person basically. And it has... It's full of ideas. It's full of ideas for modern living, for society. It has not just clothing, but all sorts of ideas. And it would rest my mind when I had had a hard day or have had tough problems to face and solve and all of that to come home, tuck into a big comfortable chair, put some good music on, and scribble in my book, "Do Someday." It was sort of a planning book, really. And one of my impossible dreams was a fund, a foundation. And I thought, "Oh, wouldn't it be exciting to get a thing like this going. Wouldn't it be exciting to be a prober or a discoverer of real creativity within our society?" This became stronger and stronger within my mind as time went on and I worked in the marketplace. Because I realized that a lot of creative talent was not coming into our industry. It just wasn't coming in. The truly creative person is a very different person. His chemistry is different from other people. And the truly creative person is an independent. He feels... He has
his own directions and his own philosophies and his own thinking, and he must probe and he must experiment and he must dream and he must do all these kinds of things. And very often the very commercial market that you and I are engaged in turns that type of person off. And it turns him off because he doesn't feel he wants to spend all that time on the hype and all that time on the extra-curricular things that most people engage in in our industry, which have nothing to do with designing. It has nothing to do with the actual act of designing. And I got... I know too many people like this, because I really talk to a lot of students. They come here, they call me, and they say "Can we come see you?" So we have little bull sessions and then, as you know, the colleges are all in the habit of bringing groups down to New York, and when I'm in town, and when I feel I can, I do have them here at the studio. I don't have them down at one of the factories or at one of the more commercial spots, because I feel we can talk better here, in a more creative atmosphere. And each time I've talked to these young people they seem to, to a great extent, open up, and they say "Look, it's wonderful the way you work here. We've been down in the marketplace, and this is the first time we've been excited about what can be done in the industry." And I said, "Well, it takes a lot of doing. I started out a poor young girl. I came to New York at a very early age, and I've not regretted working hard all those years. In fact I love my life. I've had a wonderful life. And I've delved into all facets of the industry, and I've learned a lot along the way, and I've given a lot along the way. "But," I said, "You can't just earn it by thinking of the glamour of the industry. You have to... It
has to be another kind of a goal in your heart." And this creative person that I see very often as a drop out from the industry is very often... puts their talent to another use. To another marketplace, let's say, or to another more compatible environment. And I think this is a loss for our industry. Even though I fuss a lot about the motivations and the habits of our industry, I basically love it. I'm so glad my life went into this. I'm so glad I didn't starve in a garret being a painter or a writer, which I also love to do. But I'm very grateful for having come this way. But at the same time I realize... You see, the creative person, Mildred, if they're really creative they don't need just our industry. They don't need just another industry. They will fuss around and cast around and explore until they find an atmosphere that is congenial to their particular kind of mind and they will come forth with wonderful ideas. For instance, I have always felt that certain levels of creativity can be in any profession. The sciences, for instance, I feel shouldn't be all by themselves so much. There should be interaction between the scientists and the artists, say, because they're both the same level of intelligence. They can both understand each other if they just try. They shouldn't be afraid of each other. But you see, we've been brought up in an age of specialization. You have to do this kind of designing or that kind of designing or that kind of designing, and I guess I've spent my whole life proving that you don't have to be in a little tiny niche, although my bread and butter was made in a certain niche. But I've done everything. Theatre designing, ballet—which I dearly love. I write. I do all those things. But I had to do those things on the side because I had to support myself, and I did very well, I'm glad to say. But
there are so many creative people who really are shunning our industry. So I thought, wouldn't it be marvelous to give them an open door; to listen to them. We're sort of going to be a listening post. And if we think they have an idea that is truly conceptual—not buttons and bows; that will get along by itself. In fact, our whole industry is buttons and bows, ups and downs, and junk really. And it isn't design talent. You know, Mr. McLuhan was absolutely right. The medium is the message. And he was brilliant. He really is. His book is still as valid as it was back a number of years ago when he wrote it. But, that isn't what we're all about: We're about design. We're about the creative personality within a particular kind of an industry. Now, I thought this would never come about. I always called it my impossible dream. And every time I went out to California—which is very frequently; I keep my roots out there—I had an uncle (unfortunately he died a couple of years ago), but he was my great mentor. And he was a scientist, he was a geologist. He was in the oil industry. He was a futurist. And I used to go out there, in Pasadena, California, and sit in the back patio, and we'd discuss everything. The future, what the world was going to be. Philosophy. Everything in the whole wide world. And he stretched my mind. All my life my uncle stretched my mind. And he one day said to me—this was just a short while before he died, actually—He said, "Bonnie, I want to tell you something. Every time . . . For years I've tried to say 'Down, Cashin, down,' because you're flying on cloud nine all the time and you had all these ideas, ever since you were a little girl. But let me tell you, kid, some of them have come true. Some of those dreams have come true, haven't they?" And I was very touched, because he was proud of me. He was glad that I... I flew
maybe the wrong way in the industry, but it germinated the industry to a great degree. And so he said, "You always talk about your impossible dream. This fund, for creative young people, or old people." I said I didn't care what age they were. You could be old and be young too. Have a young mind. And he said, "Why don't you do it? I said, of course, "Good heavens. I'll never have that kind of money. I've never been money oriented. It's never been my primary goal. Although, again, I'm very grateful for having made a very good living for myself. But it wasn't my goal. It wasn't my objective. The objective was the idea itself. The doing itself. And so I never will make a lot of money like a lot of the moguls do in industry. On the other hand, I think I have a happier life than they do. A much happier life. I've had more freedom, I should say. Anyway, he said, "Well, now, look Bonnie. You don't realize it, but you've gained a lot of stature in the industry and you know people. Why don't you get some people to help you, to get this thing going. This doesn't have to be your money, all your money, (although I've put quite a bit into it by now.)"

Q. That's called seed money, and then...

A. Yeah... And so I thought about that. And I said, "Well, I don't know how people in my industry will feel. But it doesn't have to be everybody in my industry. It can be anyone who feels this way, because I think there's a universal philosophy, and this can be in any kind of human being, whether he's a writer or whether he's in... Whatever field he may enter. A mechanic even, or a dentist... I remember my dentist once telling me of the wonderful idea he had for the clothing industry, and I said, "Why don't you do it?" And he said, "No one would listen to me." Anyway, after
being very naive about how you put a foundation together, which sounds very awe inspiring, it was to me, I can tell you. So, he fired me up to do something about it. He said, "Do something about it. Now is a good time to start." Well, with fear and trembling I got an introduction to a very high powered law firm who deal in huge foundations and huge educational funds of that sort, and asked if they would listen to my story. Well, a very nice man came over one day for cocktails and he listened, and he said, "I have to catch a train." And then he stayed for three hours...

Q. He caught a later train....

A. Well, it's terribly interesting. He said, "I don't know if the IRS would understand this. Because, you know, usually most of the foundations are for a specific thing. A dance group or a musical group or saving architecture, or for open spaces, or whatever. Or for general education. But this is a very interesting concept. There's absolutely no foundation that we know of -- and there are specialists in that field that have this. But let us try. It will cost you money." So, I said, "Well, let me know how much, and then I'll decide." So he phoned me in a week or so and said that it was interesting. It was touch and go whether the IRS would allow this to be organized, and everything. And he told me how much it would cost to try, and I gulped a bit. And then I said, "you know what? I'd rather do this than have a new painting or a new car or anything. Or a new home. I would rather do this. This would be very exciting to do." So I told him to go ahead. Well, it took a long time. It took a year and a half. And in the meantime I had talked to other people, and one person I had always learned a lot from but didn't really know is Buckminster Fuller. I had gone to all
his seminars and all, and still can't understand him; he somehow excited me. This is what good teaching is, you know. It's not telling someone what to do but exciting them to go ahead and do their own. And every time I've gone to a lecture and have come away from the lecture, I've been stimulated. It was... as though every little nerve end in my body was stimulated and I could approach my own specific work with a clearer mind, let's put it that way. So I wrote to him and told him about this and we made a date. He came to New York—he was coming anyway on a lecture tour -- And so he came over for lunch one day. And I was never so thrilled and so nervous in my whole life. There's this wonderful man, coming over for lunch...

Q. That must have been very exciting?

A. Well, I was worried about what to feed him... I called his secretary in Philadelphia, and said, "I heard he only eats steaks, and I'm not very good at making steaks." Besides that, you have to stand over the stove. And she said, "Oh, no. He's changed all that. He doesn't eat steaks anymore. The doctor said 'No.' He likes very simple things." She said, "He likes fresh vegetables and salads and things." So, that was right up my alley. Being a Californian, I'm good at vegetables and fruits and all of that. So I got a lunch together with plenty of variety so that the dear man could have whatever he wanted. And asked a couple of other people who were interested in our project. Well, he was wonderful. He was very... He said he would accept being an honorary director, because I thought this would kind of set a tone. And also, he couldn't afford to give us much time, obviously. He's travelling around the world constantly. He's based in California and Philadelphia, as you know. Anyway, we were thrilled with the meeting. He's helped a lot in that.. You see, originally I wanted to include architecture. You see, I'm interested in the design environment.
Q. About how many years ago did this actually begin to get off the ground?

A. Seventy-nine is when we first started getting the legal part together. It takes a long...

Q. Yes, it does.

A. And I'm also busy... I can't spend 100% of my time with it. Although I dream 24 hours a day, I can't spend all that physical time. So gradually we got some other people together. We excluded architecture not only because it was spreading itself too thin... So what... And we changed the name to "Innovative Design Fund" from "The Impossible Dream Fund," and there was some argument against "Impossible Dream."

Q. Well, "Innovative Design" does sound rather more concrete and probably more attractive to people who are very business oriented.

A. I think so, too. It's still my impossible dream. I hope it won't be impossible with help from the industry. But anyway, we decided to zero in on our design environment, and that includes... You see, I've always thought of... I don't think of clothing as buttons and bows and another little promotional idea -- which is all fine; it's all part of it, but it's a minor part of it, in my thinking. I've always thought of it as our first environment. It's how we look. It's how we look on earth. It's what you put on your face, it's what you put on your hair, it's what you put on your head, what you carry with you, the way your body articulates. And, obviously, the covering that goes on your body. To me, this is design, and it's always been fascinating.
Q. So, when you say it "includes," you mean it includes...

You didn't finish that sentence..

A. Oh, I didn't?

Q. You mean it includes all of the things relating to one's self?

A. No... Yes, it does, in a way. Yes... You put it all right.

I didn't think of it in those terms. It includes everything we put on our body. First environment. Second environment, all the things we use in our "surround." Our homes and our offices and our public places. The things we select to surround ourselves. That includes the home furnishings industry, and it includes the textile industry, which is geared to both the home furnishings industry and the clothing industry. So, really, we embrace creativity in all those areas, stopping short, as I said, of the architecture itself. But the important thing, I think, is that, you see, you can build all the big, tall, wonderful, interesting buildings and public spaces that form our environment on earth, in our city or in our community, but the people in front of it, who use that, there's not enough interaction there. I have found that architects, for instance, never think of the human being in their buildings. Or, to a smaller degree than I think is necessary, let's put it that way. And what we want to do is pick up where architecture leaves and come to the more personal designed environment. So, the "Innovative Design Fund" embraces that area. Now, what it actually does is... Part of it is educational, where we're going to...

Q. I'm sorry. When you say "we," you're using the editorial "we?"

A. I'm using the editorial "we." Well, it's the team. It's the Board. Did I give you a list of that?
Q. Well, could you just tell me how many people?

A. Well, there are six people on the Board, and then there are about 20 on the advisory team, and we're still forming this you see. We were advised to keep it small in the beginning, until we sort of feel our...

Q. Who are the six people on the Board then?

A. I'll give you...

Q. If you'll just mention their names...

A. All right. Well... Buckminster Fuller is our Honorary Director. Dona Guimares of the New York Times has been with us from the beginning. She believes very much in this. Dr. Russell Taylor, who used to own the Russell Taylor Company, that I worked for, but is now a professor. He sold out, you know, and he is now a Professor of Economics and Marketing, and is a very intelligent gentleman that I've known many, many years. Curtis Keller is a lawyer, and he's our pro bono lawyer now, for the group. And he has just retired from Mobil Oil Company. He had charge of all their overseas contracts and arrangements and all of that, so he's had wide experience. Gerard Peal, who is a marvelous man, who is publisher of The Scientific American.

Q. Oh! My favorite magazine.

A. It is mine too. I'm so glad to hear that. I've been getting it for years. And I'm so glad he accepted to be... He liked the idea that we're trying to get... High minds. High type minds. And all the skills.... All the sciences. All the arts, together. Get a fusion of all of this. We think something healthy is going to come out of the whole thing. And...

Who else? Oh. A wonderful man. Henry Grady. He's with the U.S. Trust Company. And he is in charge of ... for the U.S. Trust Company... of endowments and investments and all that kind of thing.
Q. He's a financial...

A. Yeah.. He's head of the financial committee, as a matter of fact. We're having a meeting next week on that. Then we have a lot of people on the advisory... Stella Blum of the Met, is right with us. And Claudia Kidwell, of the Smithsonian is right with us. And.. Oh, there are a whole group. I can't think right now. But I'll give you that list, because I think it should be on file in your archives at the library at F.I.T. And they're not all in our industry particularly. They're others... They're in different ones. There's Ralph Kaplan, who is one of the directors of the Aspen Conference, who has written the copy for our brochure which will be out very shortly. And there's two other members of the board of the Aspen Conference who are on it, the Aspen Design Conference, that is. And there's really an impressive group. The lawyer who got us our IRS clearance said, "You really do have an impressive group of people." What we need now is more people from our own industry and we need more business people. Men with really wonderful brains, because we have to raise enough money to have capital funds to be able to support a staff. A small staff. We're using my office. We have our meetings here, which is great, and that will go on for at least six months more. And.. Because I may not stay here. I may get a much bigger studio, and I may get that out of New York City. I'm not sure... So, it needs a home. It needs good office help who will be with us permanently, and it needs a Director.

Q. And then what is it that you...?

A. And then what we will do is to invite... When we get our little nut together, is to invite all creative people. "We'll listen to you," you know? "Send us in an application of what you want. Now, we only do one thing.
We will fund a prototype. We don't do general education. We don't give a scholarship, for instance, to send a student to wherever they want to go. We don't do that sort of thing. We do... If they have a brilliant idea... Say an artist has an idea, and he has it all on paper and he says... And we say.. Our committee gets together... We are drawing from people from the industry. Really top minds. These are not lightweights, these are really top people. And we say, "Gee, that sounds like a good idea. Why not let's try to get him to get that idea together?" The thing that I found when I was a young girl, Mildred, when I first came to New York... It was very hard to explain my ideas to people, to a manufacturer for instance. Because our chemistry was different. He didn't understand it. He didn't understand what I was trying to do, and he was only thinking of the bottom line. So the important thing was to get prototypes made so you could say... You don't have to talk at all. Here it is. Look, it works. It fits into this kind of a niche, you know? It has a real reason for living. And it was very difficult getting that done. Now, in my early years, I was fortunate, because my mother was a great craftsman and she was a custom dressmaker and she had a shop in San Francisco. And fortunately, she devoted her whole time to doing prototypes for me.

Q. She was very good - she did a very good job.

A. I was just lucky, you know. She opened the door for so many things. So this is where a young person has difficulty. He doesn't have the money. And it may be very small money, but he can't afford, say, $2,000 to make a... I don't know, a "solar chip fabric," for instance, which I keep dreaming about, that I want someone to do. Or, it may be a new construction
for a shoe that will allow us human beings to walk. We can't keep living in the '20s and '30s in our shoe industry, with those damned pointed toes and those stilt heels, you know. I mean, this is back.... We women are different today. We're not little puppets, you know, that go around... with little bound feet like the Chinese did. Which is just as bad...being on those heels. But the construction of the shoes. Nobody's thinking about that. They're just thinking about putting another applique on; or another bow; or another material maybe. Which is quite all right. We need embellishment. We human beings all need that. This is part of, you know, just the instinct to scribble on a wall and do a painting. This is normal. But... What we do is conceptual. We want conceptual design. And there is so much out there. You see, we're living in the greatest change in history. Absolutely the greatest change. And our little industry has its head in the ground. It really doesn't realize what's going on in the world. And it's so exciting. It's so stimulating to any creative person. But it takes a long time to get any stimulating, new ideas through. They only understand what has been done and what has made money in the past. Well, you can't think that way anymore. The past is past. We're in this great change in thinking. It's backview window stuff. And we want to get away from the rear view window stuff. Also, we don't want to do what some of the industry has tried to do occasionally, to throw their minds to year 2001, and they come forth with ridiculous things which are cosmetic again. They have nothing to do with anything. They don't work any better. They just have a kind of cosmetic look that makes people think it's avant garde. It's not avant garde at all. It is just as complicated as a Victorian thing. But anyway. This is the
person we want to help. We feel that the truly creative person within our industry (this includes home furnishings and the textile industries) does not want to come into our industry, because they have to be part of what is already there. They cannot do any experimental thing. And I remember, you have to produce right away. It has to be the bottom line in our industry. This season. Well, you know, creativity doesn't work that way. And I always remember an IBM story I read -- and I admire that company enormously. They had an efficiency expert come through the whole place -- wherever it was; I don't remember -- and he said... He gave his report. And he said, "So and so, in that big office down there... Every time I go by, he just has his feet up on the desk." And one of the exec... I don't know if it was Mr. Watson or who, but... "The man who has his feet on his desk... He said, "has developed one of our most important concepts which is just now coming to flower, and is one of the big savers of our whole economy." And he said, "We pay him to put his feet on the desk and dream. The dreamers..." What we're trying to do is back the dreamer. The really creative dreamer. And it's not going to be easy. We know that. We know we're going to stumble, because very often you can be... A person can be a dreamer but they don't have... You have to be a practical dreamer. And this is what we want. We want the combination of practical and dreamer. But it can be done. Now, of course, that does come true... People will say, "Oh, don't all the industries try to do that?" Well, they try to do it, but a lot of the big industries are so big that the younger or newer or the little person is submerged, and he's submerged to his immediate peer, who may not understand what he's talking about. And so he needs to do a mock-up. We would like to do the mock-up. We would like to do that.
We would like it in any of the fields that touch our lives. Any of the design ideas that touch our lives. It can be little or it can be big. For instance, the safety pin, I think is one of the greatest inventions of all time. We don't actually do inventions. We're not in the patenting business or anything. And we're not into the marketing. We already have people who have written to us. I have a whole stack of...a whole file, of letters of people who have... inventors... who have an idea and they've had it patented already, but they don't know how to market it. But that's another kind of thing. So we very gently have to tell them we're not into that. We're in at the very inception. We're in on the head. Now if that person... Say we get a marvelous artist and we want the craftspeople and the artist -- we have links with the Museum of Contemporary Crafts -- we have links with Caltech out in California -- we have linkage with MIT up in Cambridge -- and there are a whole group of others. In fact, I'm casing all the schools and I find this very exciting. Some are...we're grading them. The ones we think have a high level of creative impetus to them... And we particularly... But we don't know where we'll find these people. They may be dropouts. They may not be any part of a school. You know... Listen, Bucky Fuller was kicked out of Harvard three times. Mr. Einstein - the most creative man of our times - was considered an idiot. No one understood him, you see. And... so.... I think Edison... I don't think Edison went to school at all. I think he was a dropout. So, the hard part will be beating the bushes for the really creative person.

Q. You haven't made any contacts with the fashion schools themselves?

A. Yes, yes. MIT... I mean F.I.T. knows about this. Parsons...

Sure... But those are mostly merchandising schools.
Q. No... They include lots of design.

A. Well, they do, but it isn't creative design, really. They don't... That isn't their role. They are teaching practical approaches to an industry. And in my view, a lot of the most practical approaches are not always the most creative, because the practical approaches do not take into account sociology enough. I mean, they don't stress that. The social thing is a changing thing. And I wish I could quote... Maybe I can. Hans Selye. The psychologist. You know.

Q. No, I don't. How do you spell his name?

A. Hans H-a-n-s. And S-e-1-y-e. And he's brilliant. And he's written many, many books. Very well respected. But he has a quote which I'm not sure I can quote exactly... Which I must write in a book that I'm doing. And it's that oftentimes the most practical is not the most practical in the long run. And that's what IBM is working on, you see. They're smart enough to know it. I have respect for all the sciences and all the technological field. We're not using them enough in our industry. We're not using them enough because we don't have minds that really care about that so much. All they care about is promotion. And actually, what we want to do... If we find this creative artist who has it all in his head and on paper, but he says, "I don't know how to get it done." Then we will contact one of the technological schools, or the science department, or whatever it needs. It may need chemistry. It may need a chemist to work with it. It may be kind of a substance that you put all over your body that insulates you and allows the body to breathe, and you don't have to wear heavy clothes at all. I mean, this may be the next step to our first environment. A salve or a lotion or a something that is.... it may need chemical help. We will try to put them
together, so that the scientist and the artist work together to perfect this. And if it needs.... We'll try to be the liaison to get the idea that we think is ready to be born but doesn't have any means to be born.

Q. Right.

A. And it may be that all we can do is afford very little money at the beginning, but you know, a lot of those things don't take a lot of money in our terms, but it's a lot of money in a young person's terms. And I remember... And my problem, when I was 16 years old... Trying to even buy fabric to have things made, or to find a fabric that would lend itself to what it was that I wanted to do. Whatever cut or shape or anything. And as I say, it can be a simple little thing. It can be a new closure. The zipper was the greatest thing in the world. Velcro is great. It may be a new way of closing ourselves into our clothing. Or it can be a way.... In the textile field, I see vast ideas that could go into the textile field. I see great, great new innovative thinking there. And home furnishings. Look at Charles Eames. Charles Eames.... It took him years to get his thing manufactured, that wonderful plywood chair, which we all adore. And it's spawned a million of them in the market. I can tell them in a minute. I can tell. My eye tells me. A lot of this is art education. And, of course, we're going into that too. We're hoping to do a series--later on, when we can afford it, because right now we have little money in the coffers. We hope to film. Do films that will capture the creative person working on these grants that we give them. So that you can see the actual hands doing it. So that you can see the mental process that goes on in developing this. This will be invaluable to future students.
Q. Who conceived... Who will be doing the selecting or approving of the projects that will be brought into you?

A. A group. And we all know enough people. For instance, a wonderful man, who was head of the Henry Dreyfus office when Henry died - Neil Differant - who is no longer there; he has his own business in Connecticut.... But it's that kind of person, who is really very high calibre up here, and who will call them in as they're needed. As we need more advice. But it'll be the group. You see, we'll have a big group. And we'll pick people... And it doesn't even have to be anyone in the same field, because a good mind can see an idea that's in another field, and can judge it, maybe, even more impartially, about whether it works. As I say, we want practical dreams. This is what we're after. The practical dreamer. And there are a lot of them out there. We are wasting our greatest national capital, which is the creative person, because we don't know how to deal with him. And in the rush of making money... And of course, we thoroughly believe good design is good economics. Again, I'm back to Charles Eames. That chair has been a great moneymaker for the whole furniture industry, not just Herman Miller Company, who produced it and produced it beautifully. And... But it took a long time to get them, even, to understand. I knew the man, who died a couple of years ago, who loved what we were trying to do, because he was the man who was the liaison between the young, creative furniture designer and the manufacturer way back. And they under... They said, "Nobody will buy it." Well, look what happened. And the same thing with a lot of stuff I've done in my own life. "Who will buy that?" Instead of responding with a whole new way of thinking in the industry. And it was a way that was away from the ordinary way of seeing clothes
as they came out of Europe, and all that kind of thing. It was for a
different kind of life. I do think our backgrounds have a lot to do with
what we produce, and my background was big open spaces in California... I'm
very grateful for all that. It was sky... big sky... It was a larger
canvas. And so I'm glad to have been spawned in that particular hunk of the
world. And I don't discount the other. Because there are all kinds of
people, and if they want that that's what they want, and you never can argue
about that. It's just that, if you're an individualist and you have wonderful
dreams and all of that, you want to try to express them. So, I've expressed
some of my dreams. Not all of them. There's a whole pile in that book
upstairs...called "Do Someday." Do someday. Well, of course, some of them
have come about, and a few of them have been done by others, by now, because it
is true, different people get different ideas at the same time. You can't
eliminate that...

Q. But "The Innovative Design Fund" is really your project of the
moment and for some years to come?

A. Yes, except that I'm not going to run it. I'm not a good
executive. I don't even like it. I don't like to be an administrative
executive. So we have to raise enough money, hopefully from the industry. We
have to have pledges of people who say, "Golly. We know this will come back
to us. We know that good design is good economics. We know that this will
eventually come right back to us and strengthen our industry which needs to be
turned around. It's in a turn around position in history. "So we need
forward thinking people. We need imaginative business men. And they can be
just as imaginative. We want it to be practical too. We have no idea sitting
up on cloud nine. And we want young people to realize the excitement of coming into an industry that will be more receptive to creative ideas and not another promo. And not another jazzy thing that falls apart, because nobody wants to buy it. You see, I think part of the bad economics of our particular industry, Mildred, is not just (it's part of it) the interest rates, it's not just hard money to borrow. It has to do with the product they're putting out. Women don't want it. You'd think that they'd have gotten the message a long time ago. But they keep pouring money into promotion which they should be pouring into development.

Q. Research and development.

A. And this is not what they're doing. And so this is shortsighted. This is shortsighted business. And, you know, there'll be casualties. There are bound to be casualties in the industry, but it's got to be for the good of the whole industry. Because I think the last figures I read (and maybe you might correct me) is that the clothing industry -- and that includes men, women and children and it includes textiles and all types of clothing and the things we use on our person -- employs more people in our country than any other industry except food. Food comes first. It used to be, I think, third in employment.

Q. Well, I think in New York State is certainly the first.

A. Well, in New York State it's first. There's no doubt about that. It's first. And this is where all the industry is located and where the marketing is done and all of that. Although this is changing too. And I think it behooves New York State, instead of just saying, you know, coining prases that say "We're the great...." To do something about it.

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