CANNELL: Good afternoon. I’m Karen Trivette Cannell, head of Special Collections and FIT Archives. And this is another conversation in a series of oral histories that we’re taking to document the modeling industry as it affects fashion and beauty industries. We are teaming up with Ford -- the Ford Modeling Agency -- and -- today, which is August 8th --

SICULAR: April.

CANNELL: -- so sorry, April 8th -- I’ve done that at least three times today -- April 8th, 2010, roughly two o’clock in the afternoon. And today I’m here with Karen Bjorgenson Macdonald.

BJORNSON: Bjornson Macdonald, yes.

CANNELL: Bjornson Macdonald. Thank you.

BJORNSON: That’s OK. [01:00]

CANNELL: And thank you so much for allowing us to talk to you about your career. The mission of my department is really to document the history, and various stories within the history, of the fashion industry. And of course modeling -- it wouldn’t be anywhere without the models to bring form to what fashion and beauty brings to all of our lives. So
I just have a few questions, just to get, you know, things rolling here. How did you get started in modeling, and how old were you when you started?

BJORNSON: I was in high school. I was actually a junior in high school. And I was on a department store fashion board. And we would do informal modeling in the store and fashion shows. And then I won a contest. I was Miss Ingénue Cincinnati. And was brought to New York for the photo shoot. And [02:00] then after I stayed for a week and saw the agencies, and Wilhelmina saw me, and I formed a relationship with her. And she said, “Go home and finish high school. Because you can’t really go back to high school. You can go back to college, but you can’t go back to high school.” And I thought that was the best advice for me. So I went home and had my senior year, and would mail her pictures, and she would comment on, you know, “Don’t use eyelashes,” or whatever. Whatever I was doing she would send a comment back. And then came back and started that fall.

CANNELL: OK. So then I guess roughly you were 17 -- 16, 17?

BJORNSON: Right out of high school.

CANNELL: Now what is a fashion board?

BJORNSON: A fashion board -- you know, it was -- every high school was represented in the store.
CANNELL: Oh, OK.

BJORNSON: So our pictures with our high school’s name underneath it was in the teen department.

CANNELL: Ah, very good. Had [03:00] you already been attracted to modeling, as a sense of profession, before...

BJORNSON: I think that really -- that did it. Being on the board, and being around the clothes. And then an agent saw me, and I started doing local work.

CANNELL: Now you said...

BJORNSON: Selling bread and (laughter) things like that, [Lutron?] Electronics.

CANNELL: I’ll bet a lot of bread sold that year.

BJORNSON: (laughter) I don't know.

CANNELL: I remember reading in your biography that Veruschka was a huge influence. Now, did that come at that time or a little later?

BJORNSON: That was at that time.

CANNELL: OK. Yeah.

BJORNSON: There was a photographer that I worked with, and he had the magazines that I would be thumbing through and seeing her photograph, draped in a tree, and (inaudible) probably it’s photographed by Norman, right?
CANNELL: I also wanted to touch a little bit on your coming to New York. Now, when you came here, did you get a sense that this was where you belonged?

BJORNSON: I loved it, right off the bat. I loved it when I came my junior year.

CANNELL: And how long was that stay?

BJORNSON: It was one week of photographs, and then I stayed another week.

CANNELL: So that was long enough to get the bug.

BJORNSON: Yeah. Yeah.

CANNELL: I think it happened similarly for me. So when you get to New York after you’ve graduated high school, what was your trajectory then? And how -- so you were about 18?

BJORNSON: Mm-hmm.

CANNELL: OK.

BJORNSON: You’re sent around to beginning photographers to get your photos and your book, and I was doing that. And they called me a junior sophisticate, which didn’t really fit into places, I think, because I wasn’t really sophisticated enough to be in Vogue, but I still wasn’t a junior type. And was running out of the money that I’d saved. And a friend of mine who was also a model knew about Halston, who she said made hats, and that he needed a house
model. So I got the number and went up and he hired me, and I started the next day. So...

CANNELL: Oh my God. Had you heard about him before?

BJORNSON: No.

CANNELL: Wow.

BJORNSON: No.

CANNELL: That’s so exci-- and so this would be what -- roughly what years?


CANNELL: Oh my gosh.

BJORNSON: It was on 68th Street. It was one floor. And [Lo?] Donghia had done the decorating.

CANNELL: Oh, wow. I even know Donghia. (laughs)

BJORNSON: It’s so funny because my husband later when he came to New York started working for Angelo. So it is such a --

CANNELL: Incredible.

BJORNSON: -- a small world circle.

CANNELL: The world can really shrink.

BJORNSON: Yes.

CANNELL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So being a house model means what?

BJORNSON: [06:00] At that point it meant doing everything. It meant -- because it was -- the work room was on the top floor, and Halston’s salon was the fourth floor. So we set
up the chairs for the shows, we delivered packages at Christmas, we helped the ladies --

CANNELL: Oh, you mean everything!

BJORNSON: -- we did everything. If there were ladies coming for lunch we helped serve lunch. We helped the ladies in the dressing room get dressed. And -- whatever needed to be done we did.

CANNELL: I haven’t talked to, you know, dozens and dozens of models yet, but this is the first I’ve heard of that kind of dependency, really.

BJORNSON: It was a little family (inaudible).

CANNELL: Yeah, it sounds -- but it doesn’t sound cold. I mean, it does sound like a very warm unit. Unless I’m misinterpreting

BJORNSON: It was very warm. And you never knew who was going to walk through the door. One day Warren Beatty and Julie Christie walked in, and we were just... [7:00]

CANNELL: Oh my God! In the early ’70s, at that. Hello.

BJORNSON: Yes. And Jackie Onassis was a client. She brought Aristotle once. And Halston said, “Go put on the blue suede hot pants!” So...

CANNELL: What else would you wear for Aristotle?

BJORNSON: That was what he wanted me to put on. So that’s what I wore, when he was there. And then Jackie had her
fitting. So -- Babe Paley was a client. I remember her coming once in this feather vest that was --

CANNELL: Babe Paley in a feather vest? Now that's --

BJORNSON: It was absolutely beautiful.

CANNELL: -- that's -- my world has just been a little altered there. OK. Wow.

BJORNSON: It was magical.

CANNELL: It would have to be.

BJORNSON: And then the friends. It would be Loulou and Joe Eula, and the lunches that we'd have. It was -- it was a very special time in my life.

CANNELL: Mm-hmm. So -- I mean, he hires you the next day after meeting you. How long were you with [08:00] Halston?

BJORNSON: I was there about two years. Nine to 5:00.

CANNELL: OK. Now, two years...

BJORNSON: Or 9:00 to 9:00. Whatever the time -- (laughter) whatever we needed to do, we did.

CANNELL: Right, right. Now, tell me about your career with him, in terms of the longer.

BJORNSON: It was my lifetime. He made my wedding dress. I spent the summer in Montauk with him when he stopped working. It was -- Halston was my mentor. And it can be my Barbara Walters moment, so...with tears.

CANNELL: Now, it's...
BJORNSON: We’re being motioned to --

CANNELL: OK. I’ll -- you can see the cues, whereas I cannot.

BJORNSON: -- lift the book cover.

CANNELL: Yes. This is a lovely picture of you -- and I do think that --

BJORNSON: There’s -- there’s [H.?.]

CANNELL: And I do think that your being in this particular gown is just magical. And I’m not sure what was behind the setup of that.

BJORNSON: And there’s actually -- there’s no construction.

[09:00] It’s just tied in the back. There’re no -- the way strapless dresses are made up now, with all the construction?

CANNELL: Yeah. It doesn’t look like there’s boning or anything.

BJORNSON: There’s no boning. Exactly.

CANNELL: And that’s why I think it’s just so magical. I mean, you can tell that it’s you, in a lovely piece of fabric.

BJORNSON: I had to keep excelling to wear it. (laughter)

Exhaling, not excel.

CANNELL: Now, who took that picture?

BJORNSON: That’s Scavullo.

CANNELL: And how often did you work with him?
BJORNSON: A few times. I did one Cosmo cover with Francesco. And it actually turned out to be the Burt Reynolds centerfold issue. It was April 1972. So it’s -- I’ve bought it on eBay.

CANNELL: Oh, very good. It’s like you have this little star above you, following you, I think.

BJORNSON: Kind of. Kind of. And then one day it was on Ellen Degeneres. She held up -- [10:00] because he was a guest. So I thought, “Oh my gosh!”

CANNELL: Do you feel sometimes like you’re watching someone else’s life happen? Or when you talk about it now?

BJORNSON: I’ve got -- because of Patty, I’ve been up to the attic, and I’ve got all my photographs on the dining room table, and interviews. And it’s -- it’s fun. It’s fun to see my life on the dining room table. (laughter)

CANNELL: Well, tell me -- OK --

BJORNSON: My prior life.

CANNELL: -- well, but you’re -- as you’re living this life -- with Halston, especially -- what’s going on personally, at the same time?

BJORNSON: Personally?

CANNELL: Or can they be divided? Your personal and professional life?
BJORNSON: I had some boyfriends. I mean, I don’t know what sort of personal life...

CANNELL: I didn’t know if marriage came along, or...

BJORNSON: Marriage -- I got married in 1977. Actually, my personal life -- when I was the house model, Stephen Sprouse was his [11:00] design assistant. So Stephen and I became the best friends. We were -- Halston called us Gloom and Doom. We would work all day and then go dance at night. It was -- it was really fun. Stephen would make clothes for me, and we’d play grownups.

CANNELL: Well, as long as it felt like play.

BJORNSON: It was, because we weren’t. We weren’t grown up. But we were also establishing a life away from home. We were -- we were young. We didn’t have -- I mean, Stephen went to RISD, but I think just for maybe a semester. So I’m not sure what that -- that fact, I don't know. But I think your friends become your family. And Stephen and I were -- we were family. We had my first Thanksgiving away from home. We went to Lüchwow’s, and it was growing-up time. [12:00]

CANNELL: Yeah. Yeah. Because I also recall reading some biographical information that you grew up with a love, or at least some sort of kinship, with clothes being made.
BJORNSON: Well, my mom sewed for me. I had ruffled dresses. A lot of ruffles growing up, so...

CANNELL: But it must have been something imprinted on you to have the appreciation for that art and craft from such an early age. And then have that be a part of your entire adulthood.

BJORNSON: Well, when I was working with Michael -- and to see the workroom with all the ladies, and the handwork that they did, I had a true appreciation, because I'd watched my mom with her sewing machine and her patterns. And it's a very special and artistic part of the industry, that -- the ladies are all getting older. I don't know the -- who the young seamstresses [13:00] and tailors are going to be, because it doesn't seem like that's a career path.

CANNELL: Well, we're trying to keep it alive here at FIT, on some level. But certainly it's a shifting industry, like all --

BJORNSON: Well, you want --

CANNELL: -- manufacturing and making.

BJORNSON: -- you want the apprentice, I think. And I don't see -- I didn't see the apprentice there. And the mentor -- I was lucky to have Halston as a mentor. And these tailors that -- I mean, at last they were in their 70s, so...there
was not the young tailor coming along. So hopefully you do that.

CANNELL: Yes. Yes. I can’t take any responsibility or credit for it, but I do know that we have a very robust curriculum here at FIT. And it does -- it brings someone like myself who -- whose mother didn’t make clothes -- but it makes me -- there’s a sense of comfort that that’s [14:00] still happening, that that tradition is still with a pulse of some sort. I wanted to ask you -- before we left Halston, necessarily -- I wanted to ask you about, when you were working with him, the different photographers. I know Scavullo, but what other photographers did you -- did you work with while you were with him?

BJORNSON: Well, pretty much I didn’t work with photograph-- I was working with Halston. I was standing and being fed. When I left Halston that’s when I started working with different photographers. And I worked with Arthur Elgort. And I had one sitting with Irving Penn, which was very special for me. And I arrived, and I was not so good. I stayed out probably too late the night before. And -- but when you’re that age you’re immortal, and --

CANNELL: Yes, of course. (laughs) [15:00]

BJORNSON: -- it doesn’t -- and got there, and my shot was with a magnifying glass held up next to my eye. (laughter) I
thought, “Oh no! I hope those -- the late night doesn’t show up too much.” But it was -- I’d actually just bought some of his photographs. I’d bought the Guedras, the covered figures; and Colette; and his wife, Lisa, with the roses on her elbow. And he said, “You don’t have any men. You have to buy -- you know, why don’t -- why...” And so we decided -- we got the Hell’s Angels.

CANNELL: Oh, perfect.

BJORNSON: So -- yeah. But they’re still --

CANNELL: A little -- a great dose of testosterone.

BJORNSON: -- they’re above my computer. Yes. But my daughter -- there’s one woman sitting, and my daughter always says, “That’s Mama!” Because she had -- she thought -- “No, that’s not Mama.” (laughter)

CANNELL: Very good. Oh my gosh. [16:00] So when was it that you happened to meet Eileen and Jerry Ford?

BJORNSON: Well, I started with Willi, and then I switched to Zoli, which was, I think, one of the first boutique agencies. It was -- he had a lot of male models. And, like, Apollonia was there, and Pat Cleveland. So I switched to Zoli. And then I switched -- I think in the mid-’70s I went to Ford.

CANNELL: And how did you come to know of the Ford agency?
BJORNSON: Oh, I -- it’s -- I think I went to Eileen when I first came to New York. But I -- my experience at Wilhelmina was better. Maybe I didn’t meet Eileen, it was a cattle-call day that -- it -- I wasn’t noticed. I was a “junior sophisticate.” (laughter) [17:00] I didn’t fit in. Who knows? But I was very happy to, you know, end up at Ford, and then to be there again. I feel extremely well-taken care of there.

CANNELL: What was -- what were those earlier years like, as you first started with Ford? Does anything stand out in terms of who you worked with, or were you roommates with anyone in particular?

BJORNSON: No, no, I was on my own. I actually had an apartment. I pretty much always lived on my own. I don't know how I did that, actually. To be that young. I mean, I think of my daughter now, who’s 23 in New York. But I was very determined. I wanted to be a model, so...I was very lucky to meet Halston, and have him guide me and train me.

CANNELL: Well, I can sense the determination even now. I can only imagine, you know, as you’re starting out. [18:00] Did you have a -- I don’t want to call it a plan, necessarily, but, like, certain -- well, a certain plan. A certain set of expectations that you wanted to fulfill, when you decided, “This is -- this is my career path”? 
BJORNSON: No. (laughter) Not a good answer, but no --
CANNELL: That’s OK.
BJORNSON: -- I think that I was happy to work. And when it started, I worked every day. It was great.
CANNELL: I know I’ve heard some -- some interviews I’ve conducted, the women have said that they would be on cliff’s edge not knowing if the next day they would have work. But it sounds like you had a greater sense of comfort, or...
BJORNSON: I think -- I did -- I did everything. I did shows. I did print. I did commercials. So -- I did catalogs. I was -- I did -- I did everything, so... [19:00]
CANNELL: Well, and that was a question I was going to ask a little later, but since you’ve introduced these different forms of the work -- print, commercials, etc. -- runway -- what -- for each of those, do any stand out? In terms of, like, print or commercials?
BJORNSON: I think it’s like the seasons. It was really nice when it was runway season. And when I started there really were runway models. There weren’t the print girls doing -- the print girls came in -- I think Calvin Klein was the designer that started bringing the print girls to the runway, who really didn’t know how to walk or show clothes. (laughter) And it became groups of girls going out at once.
When Halston did a show there were maybe 13 girls altogether. Or s-- I’m not sure how many. I’d have to count. But [20:00] you would have a whole season of exits. You’d start with your day clothes, and then you’d move into evening. It was fast changes. (laughs)

CANNELL: Yes. I can only imagine.

BJORNSON: But I think the print girls came into the runway business in the late ’70s. I think that’s -- or the ’80s.

CANNELL: I never realized it was so segregated. Interesting. Did you have a preference for one medium over another?

BJORNSON: No. No. I loved it all.

CANNELL: Did you have certain clients that -- well, obviously Halston, but other clients that spoke to you in terms of the suitability for, like, your physicality, or your look?

BJORNSON: I worked -- I worked for Vogue Pattern a lot. I did my first trip to Morocco with them. And Steve Horn and Lin-- Linda Horn [21:00] was the editor, and Steve Horn, her husband, was the photographer. And they would pack up whatever and chairs and tea-sets, the whole set, and bring it into the middle of a date -- date trees in the desert. And, I mean, (inaudible).

CANNELL: That sounds sublime.

BJORNSON: Well, it was -- it was a challenge my first trip.

Because also somethi-- I -- Steve had given me all of the -
- they had cassettes for the music, all of the music for the trip, and I went to the bathroom, and I don't know how I -- but I dropped all the music into the toilet.

(laughter) And about died, because it was...

CANNELL: I can see you still haven’t gotten over it.

BJORNSON: No, no. It was -- it was the...

CANNELL: See, this is why I do this. This is just...

BJORNSON: No. Well, my room I had [22:00] everything all strung out. It was -- everything wound up again, thank goodness.

CANNELL: Oh my goodness!

BJORNSON: And the music was fine.

CANNELL: Well, good. We were -- you know, I’m just hanging on, waiting for you to say. Holy cow. Well, I mean -- so you’ve mentioned Rome and Morocco. So obviously travel was...

BJORNSON: I’ve traveled all over the world. Which was part of the draw of being a model, I think. From those first Veruschka pictures, and seeing her in all these exotic locations.

CANNELL: So the picture she was in didn’t remind you of Cincinnati or anything.

BJORNSON: No, no. I think that the makeup, the clothes, those early photographs of her were magic, for me.
CANNELL: Yeah. And for a lot of people. As are pictures of you. There was one trip I wanted to make sure we talked about, and it has to do with Versailles. I’ll let you [23:00] expound on your trip to Versailles.

BJORNSON: Well, the American designers and the French designers produced a show at Versailles. And the French designers went first. And I don’t know -- I have to look at who all did they have. They had Josephine Baker and Nureyev and (inaudible), Jane Birkin, and a-- there were -- so each one of the French designers had a huge star. I mean, and -- actually, standing in the wings, you’re standing with Josephine Baker right next to you. There are some amazing pictures that Bill Cunningham took of that. So I’ve -- if he ever makes a book, I hope that that would be included. And then we went second, with Liza Minnelli, and Kay Thompson was choreographing. And Joe Eula did the set. [24:00] And we sang, “Bonjour, Paris!” and each designer presented th-- Stephen Burrows had these amazing, like, insect antlers coming out of the girls’ heads with his jersey dresses. And at the end we had a standing ovation and the -- all the programs were thrown on the stage.

CANNELL: I can just imagine the scene.

BJORNSON: And my friend Bill Dugan has a program, so maybe you should contact him and have it --
CANNELL: Yes. That would be --

BJORNSON: -- photocopied.

CANNELL: -- quite lovely. Yeah. Just amazing. Because it is these items, typically on paper --

BJORNSON: Hist-- the historic...

CANNELL: -- that represent...

BJORNSON: Exactly.

CANNELL: Yeah, yeah.

BJORNSON: That are...

CANNELL: They represent these activities that, like, nothing else can. I mean -- and luckily, thanks to you and others, we’re getting some idea, beyond what the paper would present, [25:00] to sort of transport us.

BJORNSON: So then after the show we had dinner in the Hall of Mirrors. And I felt like Cinderella.

CANNELL: How could you not?

BJORNSON: It was pretty magical to be there.

CANNELL: So after a show like that, you have dinner plans in the Hall of Mirrors. I just have to ask you, do you remember what you wore?

BJORNSON: I had a white dress with ruffles, and it was very --

CANNELL: Lovely.

BJORNSON: -- pretty. Ruffles again. (laughter)
CANNELL: Yes, I -- if you weren’t going to mention that, I was.

   (laughter) Oh, it just must have been incredibly --

BJORNSON: It was an amazing --

CANNELL: -- magical.

BJORNSON: -- experience.

CANNELL: Well, now, did you ever take time off from modeling?
Or has it been pretty consistent over the decades?

BJORNSON: Well, when I was on a trip to London I took the QE2
back, by myself. So if you’re on a location that’s
interesting you can stay. I didn’t do that too often. But
-- [26:00] I just wanted to get home.

CANNELL: So do you consider New York home now?

BJORNSON: No, I live in Connecticut.

CANNELL: Oh, OK.

BJORNSON: We did -- we had our two daughters. And we did the
15-mile radius, looking for good schools, so...

CANNELL: And when was your first daughter born?

BJORNSON: Nineteen eighty-three.

CANNELL: And so you were -- you were still modeling at that
time?

BJORNSON: I was still modeling. And I went back to work after
Laura. We were still in New York. And then I had Maggie
in 1986. And I remember going to Perry Ellis for a
fitting, and I was just getting a bit thicker, and the -- I
hadn't really told anyone. But it just -- it wasn't looking -- you know, he was looking at it, and it was a wide belt, and I said, "You know what?"

CANNELL: (laughs) That's the equivalent to your magnifying glass.

BJORNSON: (inaudible) I said, "You know, I think it's not --" -- it -- you don't -- you want it to work [27:00] perfectly when you're there for a fitting, and it just -- you could see the way they were looking at it. (laughter) It wasn't working perfectly. So I said, "I'm -- you know, I'm pregnant. So I don't think it's going to be good for the show." But I loved working with the designers. I loved doing the shows, doing the different shows. I would go from Calvin to Bill Blass to Perry Ellis, and Stephen Burrows.

CANNELL: Wow. Just -- I mean, I can only think of the words i- - word "iconic," really, in terms of American elegant but classic and still sporty clothes.

BJORNSON: I have another story to tell you.

CANNELL: Oh, please tell me.

BJORNSON: So, Halston had signed a contract to judge a beauty contest -- or -- I guess that's a beauty contest. So he had to be away for the fittings right before a show. And so it was Stephen and I [28:00] in charge of the fittings.
And I’d gone off to do Stephen Burrows’s show. And it was coming out of — what’s the building that goes like that, on — across from Bendel’s? Is it number five, or nine, right next to Bergdorf’s?

CANNELL: Yes, yes. I’m struggling right now.

BJORNSON: So we were coming out of the escalator and onto the street, and so...

SICULAR: I think it’s Nine West 57th Street.

BJORNSON: Nine West, thank you. So we’d -- I did the show, and Stephen came and watched. And then the clothes were shorter. So we went back to start fitting the models. And everything looked a lil’— it didn’t look right. And so we took it upon ourselves (laughter) to shorten everything. And then Halston got back, and was not happy at all. And I stood for all of the clothes to be lengthened again.

CANNELL: Oh my gosh. Oh. How long did that take?

BJORNSON: Till it was done, [29:00] I don’t remember.

(laughter)

CANNELL: You sort of blocked it out, it seems.

BJORNSON: And I was crying the whole time, probably. I used to cry a lot. (laughter) “Oh my God!” I -- you don’t -- I didn’t want to make a mistake, I think. When you’re that age, you just don’t want to make a mistake.
CANNELL: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I wanted to just touch on another beautiful object that you’ve brought in today, and that’s these multi-leaved pieces here. Tell us a little bit about what’s going on here.

BJORNSON: I was booked by Valenti-- Valentino, actually, I didn’t do the collections in Paris. That’s one of my regrets. And I think -- Valentino was the only designer. And he flew me to Paris on the Concorde, and I did one show, and then I was also booked to do these illustrations by Antonio.

CANNELL: Just beautiful. [30:00] Wow. It’s almost like your Veruschka moment.

BJORNSON: Well --

CANNELL: There’s something here that just has that --

BJORNSON: -- they were --

CANNELL: -- kind of appeal.

BJORNSON: -- they were inspired by the -- he’s an illustrator -- or an artist. Leon Bakst, and the ballet costumes that he did. So we had the poses from that, and then Antonio did the drawings. And just to stand for Antonio and have a blank piece of canvas in front of him, and watch him -- this was the postcard that’s from that -- create these incredible drawings. But any of the illustrators. Joe Eula getting two or three lines, and he’s got the -- and
Kenneth Paul Block, another one that would be coming for womenswear.

CANNELL: And we have all of those represented in the collection. And you’re right, [31:00] I mean, each one obviously has its own personality, as do the illustrators themselves. But some of the economy of line, it’s just -- I think the word “covet” comes to mind.

BJORNSON: Well, it captures --

CANNELL: Like, I wish I could...

BJORNSON: -- it captures so much with a stroke.

CANNELL: I’m jumping around a little bit, because I don’t want to neglect any important topic or anything. But --

BJORNSON: This has been very nice, actually.

CANNELL: Good! I’m so glad. I’m so glad. You seemed comfortable, so good.

BJORNSON: Well, you’ve made me feel very comfortable.

CANNELL: Good. I’m glad. I’m glad. Did Eileen make you feel comfortable?

BJORNSON: Eileen was great. She actually -- she actually had a shower for me when I was engaged.

CANNELL: Oh, how lovely!

BJORNSON: She was -- she was a wonderful agent.

CANNELL: How much interaction did you have with her, in particular?
BJORNSON: Not that much. I really was relating to my bookers.

So I --

CANNELL: And who were some of your [32:00] bookers?

BJORNSON: I am so bad. Deirdre was -- I don’t remember their names.

CANNELL: I’ve loved the stories that...

BJORNSON: I feel -- I feel I should have looked in my diary.

CANNELL: Not to worry. Not to worry. What I also love is --

would be the stories that some of the models have told about the relationship with the bookers, and how -- I mean, the glue.

BJORNSON: Well, I think from -- maybe if I was with one agency for my whole career span, then it would’ve been a different relationship. Maybe. But by changing agencies...

CANNELL: So yours with the booker at Ford wasn’t necessarily --

I mean, I’ve heard analogies to niece and aunt, mother-daughter.

BJORNSON: I think mother-daughter. They take care of everything. They -- you know, they make it right. They make it right.

CANNELL: I also -- [33:00]

BJORNSON: Patty organized --

CANNELL: -- oh, sorry.
BJORNSON: -- a wonderful luncheon for Eileen and Jerry, at their house in New Jersey. And it was so great, because the models spoke that actually lived in the house. And Carmen stood up with a toast, and just said how they protected her. And that she’d started -- what was she, 16?

CANNELL: Very young. Yeah, I think younger than what was normal at the time. Maybe even 14.

BJORNSON: Maybe.

SICULAR: Fourteen -- 14 sounds...

BJORNSON: Fourteen. Oh.

CANNELL: So, yeah. I mean, golly.

BJORNSON: But she just -- it was a wonderful toast. And then someone else stood up and said that they thought that they put the squeak in the step (laughter) so that they were sure that no one was leaving when they shouldn’t. because there was a different squeak in the stairway. But...

CANNELL: The tattletale. (laughs) [34:00] That’s really sweet. That hasn’t come up yet. Although some others have talked about living with the Fords. I think it was their 78th Street townhouse. And it just -- I think -- it just says so much about how much they cared about the success in general. Because if the models were successful, then they would be. The agency would be. And to nurture that success, the way they did in such an intimate way. I mean,
you could -- from the stories I’ve heard so far, the investment, emotional and otherwise, that they put into the agency...

BJORNSON: Both -- both of them.

CANNELL: See, I knew very little about Jerry when I first started this series of interviews. And I feel like I know him now. And what I know is just delightful and elegant and calm. Can you contradict or support what I just said?

BJORNSON: I support what you said. I think -- he was always dressed beautifully. He was very dapper, with probably a carnation and a pocket square. So -- and he was handsome. He was -- so having that support, (laughs) it made you feel special. So.

CANNELL: And that’s got to help. You know, I would think one of the strongest attributes of being a successful model is having a certain level of confidence, and security. And this is a continuing thread as well, is that they seemed to infuse confidence and security in the models that worked for them.

BJORNSON: Well, they protected their girls, so...

CANNELL: So -- and you mentioned a little earlier that you’ve come back to Ford?

BJORNSON: I have come back to Ford.

CANNELL: So what happened? You left.
BJORNSON: I -- we moved to Connecticut. I became a soccer mom. I drove the [36:00] kids everywhere. And I love my life in the country. I have a garden. I play tennis. I still do that. But Ralph Rucci called and said, “Would you do my show?” And I hadn’t worked, and I thought, “Well, OK.” Maggie was a senior in high school, so I was going to be having an empty nest soon. And I thought, “I’m 50. How flattering to be asked back.” So I did his show in New York, and then he took me to Paris to do the show there.

CANNELL: You got your Paris show!

BJORNSON: I got my Paris show. Exactly. It was -- it was terrifying, because the heels were that high, and we had to go down a marble staircase. But it all -- it all worked out. And it was wonderful. And then I think Michael Vollbracht contacted Ralph and [37:00] asked me to work with him. And in the meantime, J. Crew had called and wanted me -- and then I needed an agency. And Patty -- we were walking after dinner -- I saw her on the street, and she was like, “Come back! Full-time.” Not full-time, but full-time part-time. (laughter)

CANNELL: So what are your days like now? Now that you’re back with Ford? I mean, are you -- what’s next for you, as of today?
BJORNSON: When they call, I come into the city and go on castings and work if there’s work. And it keeps me fit.

CANNELL: So there’s nothing in the queue right now?

BJORNSON: Not right now, no.

CANNELL: OK. I’m sure it’s just a matter of seconds. So I also noticed something of a [38:00] theme as well, except for Valentino. You seem to really have been most active with American designers. When you mentioned Ralph Rucci I think, you know, the bit of couture that’s left in terms of American effort. What is it like to work with him?

BJORNSON: He’s a wonderful designer. Everything you look at -- the quality of the fabric, the intricacy of how it’s put together, the knotting and the spacing, it’s -- you could just look at the clothes on the hanger. They have hanger appeal, I would say. (laughter) You don’t have to put them on. You want to put them on if you see them on the hanger.

CANNELL: There’s just been so few designers that have produced [39:00] a silhouette or a substance...

BJORNSON: The quality.

CANNELL: When I think of him, I think of a substance, you know, that three-dimensionality. And the beauty of it. It’s just -- it’s been in the last -- I would say 10 years, for me, personally. And so to meet someone who’s worked with him...
BJORNSON: Well, he -- I went to the Met Model as Muse, and he made my gown. And it had a por-- an Italian -- a silkscreen of a bust of an Italian. It was so pretty. He said, "I think that would be perfect to go to the museum, to have this dress."

CANNELL: Just, I mean -- again, I think there's just real genius at work there.

BJORNSON: That's the perfect word.

CANNELL: He is. He is. And please tell him I said so.

(laughs) I'm going to sort of pull the lens out again a little bit. In the time that you -- especially since you left for just a little while the industry, and now that you're back, how has modeling changed [40:00] in your opinion? Since you first started, both in good ways or bad ways?

BJORNSON: Well, I think for print it's the digital camera. I think before when it was film it was more of a relationship with the photographer. There was a Polaroid taken and then given to the art director and the client, and everybody looked at the Polaroid, and then you did your photograph with the photographer, and it was magic. You didn't know if you were going to get it. And now it's -- everyone is looking at the computer and seeing if you need to have a different accessory or different hair or -- so it's a
different kind of photograph, I think. And I don't know
what -- you know, is it better; is it worse? I don't know.

CANNELL: I guess there's maybe --

BJORNSON: It's just -- it's different.

CANNELL: Yeah. Yeah. In ter-- in social terms, have you

[41:00] noticed a huge difference, whether it be the age or
the look of models, how that changed over time?

BJORNSON: Well, I think different eras have their models. I
think the -- my era I'd say was the '70s. And the '80s
came, and the supermodels arrived. And they -- you knew
what their names were. I think I was more anonymous. I
think the industry would know, "That's Karen Bjornson," but
the public didn't know Karen Bjornson.

CANNELL: That's a different -- that's a different time, isn't
it? I mean, because now, we...

BJORNSON: I mean, I'd say -- Cheryl Tiegs was a name. There
were names, in my era, but generally, you know, they didn't
know the girls' names.

CANNELL: That's a good point. Because now they're -- they're

[42:00] celebrities.

BJORNSON: Well, now they're brands, I think. They've been
branded with their careers. And great for them! (laughter)
I think -- I think it's more influential, if they're doing
-- but also, the privacy, I’ve felt -- I don’t know about the privacy. I’m more private.

CANNELL: Do you feel -- well, and that’s a good point about there being, you know, a brand. Something we think we know when we see it. Do you think that your cohort of models had a certain influence over who was, you know, looking at you at the time? I mean, now you have, you know, young women looking at, say, Kate Moss. And maybe thinking, you know, “I want to be just like her.” And they think they know her. But do you think [43:00] the same impression was happening with the viewers at the time you were modeling in the earlier days?

BJORNSON: I think everyone had a favorite model. I think people have favorite models. I think -- say, Halston’s shows. You know, you felt like you were wearing the blonde clothes, and Pat Cleveland was wearing the more exotic clothes. So people relate to their type, in a way. Or they’re, I would say, inspired. By the brunette.

CANNELL: Do you think -- well, first, let me ask -- you mentioned favorite models. As a model, is it impossible for me to ask if you have a favorite?

BJORNSON: No, no. I have favorite models, absolutely. I mean, Veruschka --

CANNELL: Of course.
BJORNSON: -- and now, I think, Kate Moss. She’s a chameleon.

   You just don’t know what she’s going to be [44:00] looking like.
CANNELL: It’s so true. I mean, she can look like an ingénue on one page, and then a femme fatale a few pages later. It’s true.

BJORNSON: And she’s inspired artists. She’s -- it’s not just the modeling industry. And she’s designing. So --
CANNELL: That -- yeah.

BJORNSON: -- she’s doing it all.
CANNELL: Do you think...

BJORNSON: And I like to s-- I like -- I like her eyes, you know, physically. I like seeing the composition of her face.

   And other favorites, I -- Christy Turlington.
CANNELL: Oh. Admirable on many levels.

BJORNSON: There’s a serenity with her. She’s lovely. Daria is another favorite, and her eyes that wrap around her head like sunglasses. She’s...
CANNELL: Stunning.

BJORNSON: Yeah. So I enjoy looking at other models and their pictures.

CANNELL: If -- if you [45:00] had to declare, like, one pinnacle moment for you, in your modeling career, what would that moment be?
BJORNSON: I think getting my job with Halston, and working with him. That was a very special time for me, throughout -- I mean, we became friends. It was -- it was -- working for him, and then the next stage, in being his friend later.

CANNELL: Excellent. We’re almost out of time. Is there anything...

BJORNSON: Oh dear.

CANNELL: I know! Can you believe it?

BJORNSON: Let’s just keep doing this.

CANNELL: I know. (laughter) I was going to actually say, if -- I’d love to maybe have part two. Because I would like to know more about -- about Halston too.

BJORNSON: God, the world tour. No, we went on the road, and we went to Japan, and China, and then across the top, go--

CANNELL: Is that a yes? For part two?

BJORNSON: That’s a yes, for part two.

CANNELL: OK. We have millions of witnesses now. No, just kidding.

BJORNSON: Uh-oh. (laughter)

CANNELL: I just want to thank you, so much.

BJORNSON: Oh, well, thank you.

CANNELL: And I very much look...

BJORNSON: You made me so comfortable.

CANNELL: Oh, good.
BJORNSON: So, I’d be...
CANNELL: And I very much look forward to part two.
BJORNSON: OK. Thank you.
CANNELL: Thank you. [46:13]

[post-interview conversation] [46:27]

END OF AUDIO FILE