SICULAR: Hello, my name is Patty Sicular and along with Professor Karen Trivette Canelle from New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology we’d like to welcome you to our series of conversations with various people in the fashion, beauty, photography, and modeling business. Today we’re so lucky to be interviewing Antonia Steffens who’s an editor with German Vogue. We’re in Culver City at The Vault and today’s date is Tuesday June 21, 2011. So thank you so much for joining us.

STEFFENS: You’re so welcome Patty. For you, always. Danke schoen. (laughter)

SICULAR: OK. Ready? OK. So Antonia, where did you grow up? Where are you from?

STEFFENS: I’m from Germany, from the north close to Hamburg. I grew up at a little North Sea town called [Kuchshaben?].

SICULAR: And were you interested in fashion as a young girl or beauty?

STEFFENS: I was. It was like [0:03:00] as I was little I was like about eight nine years old, I remember my first Vogue I had because my mother was reading Vogue. And I was going through and what I did is I cut out the dresses that I
liked or models or iconic photographs that I really liked and did collages with that.

SICULAR: Really?

STEFFENS: Yes.

SICULAR: And I know that [Eura?] started [0:04:00] at approximately 1996 when you started working.

STEFFENS: Yes, that’s true. After that as I was a child, I didn’t go into fashion.

SICULAR: Is that your phone? Should you get that?

STEFFENS: Yeah.

SICULAR: OK.

STEFFENS: We should actually do this again because you will hear it. Danny, it’s in the red bag.

SICULAR: Why don’t we bring the bag by you so you can have it by your phone.

STEFFENS: Thank you, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry for that.

SICULAR: That’s OK. We’ll just start over. You need to take it?

STEFFENS: No, I’m just going to --

SICULAR: Hi Antonia.

STEFFENS: Hi Patty.

SICULAR: Thank you so much for joining us. I know the year you start is approximately 1996. So going younger, as a young girl, where did you grow up?
STEFFENS: I grew up in Kuchshaben which is a little North Sea town in Germany and about 20,000 people are living there, maybe now 35, and very quiet, sedate, and it was a pretty quiet off Germany.

SICULAR: And did you come from [a fashion background, your family?

STEFFENS: Not at all. My mother though was always very interested in fashion. And she has probably today I think three closets full of clothes and could never throw something away. And I still have clothes from her, from the ’60s -- ’70s. I’m still wearing them today. It’s quite funny. No, not at all. But as I was younger I remember going through the Vogue magazines. We had Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, and Madame which is a German fashion magazine.

SICULAR: And with the Vogues is that German editions or American or French?

STEFFENS: German editions only. And I was running through them and cutting out the fashion that I liked and the models that I liked and make collages. And I wanted to be as pretty as they are. And it was -- I remember that quite vividly.

SICULAR: And how old were you then?

STEFFENS: I would say 9 -- 10 years old.
SICULAR: And how did you get into the fashion business?

STEFFENS: I slipped into it, so to say, because I’m a writer -- author and being here in Los Angeles as a correspondent I always wanted to write for Vogue magazine. So one day I submitted my interview ideas that I had and I submitted my first interview. They liked it and then I was with Vogue.

SICULAR: Wow, what a dream. I mean any teenager would love to work with Vogue, did you think you’d be winding up there?

STEFFENS: No, not necessarily, but I think -- I believe when you really want something I think you should go for it. Certainly it takes -- it takes a certain age though I always believe. I mean, it took a little bit longer just because and I think in general writers have to fight with their insecurity because you never know if your text is as good as the other side perceives or you think it might be as. So it always is kind of sabotaging yourself included in this action of submitting your article.

SICULAR: Do you only write about American culture since you’re living here?

STEFFENS: Mostly, yes, I really have to say because as I’m working for German Vogue and other magazines, that’s where I’m based in Los Angeles and that is really where my focus is on. American culture.

SICULAR: In Los Angeles, like in California.
STEFFENS: Yes and many celebrity culture. So I’m very specialized in celebrities at large. And it doesn’t matter if it’s sport, music, theater, or cinema.

SICULAR: And going back, I know you love reading and loving German Vogues. Do you have favorite photographers that you would see over and over again that you can recognize their photos.

STEFFENS: Yes, very much. As I grew up in the ’80s -- ’90s it was of course -- Herb Rits was one big influence in my visual education. I loved David LaChapelle. I must say, he is very pop culture, very iconic for me. And there are a lot of art photography I enjoy. One of my big influences being to aesthetics was Richard Mapplethorpe and --

SICULAR: I did things with him when I was younger. You get on the --

STEFFENS: You did?

SICULAR: Yeah.

STEFFENS: Beautiful. I love his aesthetics in -- very beautiful.

SICULAR: So do you get to pick out photographers or other people that you are impressed with and then do stories on them?

STEFFENS: It depends. Yes if this is a photographer that has something that we might be interested in reporting in,
definitely. For shoots that I’m producing, it depends, either Vogue chooses the photographer or I recommend photographers or I bring my own photographers to the set and produce my own shoots and then sell them. That could be a possibility too.

SICULAR: Do you prefer working with the same team, the same photographer, the same hair and makeup, the same stylist because you have a sense and a feeling?

STEFFENS: Yes, very much so because after a while when you come to a set -- mind you only have one opportunity in this, so you only have one shot. When you’re working with a celebrity, it’s hard to get to the celebrity at all, to find the time in their busy schedule, and then of course you don’t want to leave it up to chances. That is the biggest problem, it’s the timeframe. And therefore you don’t want to give it a chance there might be a younger photographer, [0:09:00] more unknown photographer, or an inexperienced because everything has to sit right. I’m going to work. I bring my film crew in and my photographer plus assistant. So it’ll usually work about nine to ten people on the set.

SICULAR: And I know you work with celebrities and models. So when you work with celebrities, is it often the case where
their publicist tells them the photographer, and the hair
and makeup, and stylist they choose to work with.

STEFFENS: Yes, very much so. It’s all about what they want.
And it’s fair enough because they have their team as I have
my team, but especially hair and makeup, it’s a very vital
point for any celebrity and should be and it’s right so
because iconic faces, I would say, as a celebrity with
perfect hair and makeup is, for me, Jennifer Lopez. I
think she has a great team around herself. And they work
together for over ten years now and right so because she
can put all her trust in the hands of these professionals
and they really make her look good. So I would not take
any [0:10:00] chance of having a dissatisfied celebrity on
the set and by pressing on him maybe out of cost another
makeup artist, no.

SICULAR: Do you prefer working with celebrities or models or is
it just different depending on what you do?

STEFFENS: It --

SICULAR: Do the celebrities take directions as well as models
because models, that’s their job.

STEFFENS: I would say celebrities, at large, in film are not
used to take direction by, let’s say, a producer. It’s
really -- their focus is a director. Now for them to
accept that a journalist or a producer comes in and that is
their direction, it’s very difficult for them. For model may be easier because they are used to it as you said but, in general, I believe that all of celebrities and producers [0:11:00] have one thing in common, they want to have a great shoot and it’s a teamwork.

SICULAR: I know in fashion for instance if you were doing an editorial shoot for German Vogue, you would get a few shots and maybe one shot you’d have to get the shot with everything whether it’s every seam, every button, every pocket, every zipper, every hem seam. And then after you get the shot then you can be more creative. But with a celebrity, do you have to show the goods the same way, make sure you get that shot (inaudible) cover yourself.

STEFFENS: Yes, you have. And as well not only in picture, but as well in the spoken sense. When I do my interviews for example, I need my quote. I need the headline in my interview. If I can’t get them then I know I’m missing something. And for the photographer it’s the same. When he prepares himself for the shoot, we run through possible layouts. We run through possible ideas in what we want to portray the celebrity [0:12:00] which goes along with what I’m writing. So it becomes all one package.
SICULAR: And what’s your favorite part of it? Is it preparing for it, is it the actual shoot, is it when it’s edited and done and handed in? What’s your favorite part?

STEFFENS: I think my favorite part is first the research I must say because it’s very interesting to meet people you don’t know and you research them in depth. And you develop by that feeling. It’s almost like preparing for prey. You study their habits, what they say, how they are portrayed in other articles or in photography, you get a feel for them.

SICULAR: Do you have to submit questions beforehand?

STEFFENS: Yeah, sometimes yes.

SICULAR: And then are you told certain things are not allowed?

STEFFENS: Yes, of course.

SICULAR: Like certain angles or whatever?

STEFFENS: There are always some restrictions. It’s rare that somebody is like completely without saying, “Oh yes, go ahead.” [0:13:00] Mostly that happens when they are, let’s say, established celebrities in the sense of they’re actors or actresses because they know by then how they behave, how to shoot, what to do, what to say. So they’ve been through this process many, many, many, many times.

SICULAR: I know I can attest to who some of the most difficult but who are some the easiest or nicest?
STEFFENS: Some of the easiest? I would say the younger they are, the more difficult it is because the sense of insecurity is very high. When they become established they get the sense of to be too much in the open so they restrain themselves too much. And as they are becoming beyond fifties, everything is good.

SICULAR: That’s good to remember. When you were growing up who were some of your style icons from any era?

STEFFENS: [0:14:00] Style icons in the sense of fashion or beauty or --

SICULAR: Fashion or beauty or what you thought was so beautiful.

STEFFENS: I think one of my -- well there are two models. One comes to mind is Claudia Schiffer because she was quite [a trend at that time being so Bridget Buttle like?]. And then of course being German, being discovered in a Dusseldorf nightclub and Cindy Crawford I always found very attractive which I think comes along as well with these iconic commercials she did for Coca-Cola and I found her quite beautiful. Christy Turlington because she always reminds me of my friend. She looks like they could be sisters.

SICULAR: If you could put together a dream shoot from any era -- you can cross over eras with models, photographers, hair
and making, wardrobe, who would that be? What would that be, a perfect shoot?

STEFFENS: A perfect [0:15:00] shoot from a model and a team?

SICULAR: Yeah, any photographer from any era, any model.

STEFFENS: I would take --

SICULAR: Who would be the photographer?

STEFFENS: David LaChapelle.

SICULAR: Who would be the model?

STEFFENS: I’m just thinking if it would be Kate Moss or maybe it’s too out there. Maybe Kate Moss.

SICULAR: And it would be fashion?

STEFFENS: It would for W or i-D magazine because I find them quite daring and I enjoy their photography very much.

Editor, difficult.

SICULAR: With fashion who would be the designer and what era for the clothing?

STEFFENS: I really have to think about it. I think we have to shoot this again because you are missing so much time in between you’re like editing stuff. [0:16:00] I think the fashion, it would be minimum fashion. I think there would be hardly any fashion because David LaChapelle is so good in making with no fabrics something.

SICULAR: (inaudible) New York (inaudible) house.
STEFFENS: Yeah, I quite enjoy that. So shall we do this question again and then I put it all together?

SICULAR: Sure, OK. Do you want to wait a little bit?

STEFFENS: No, you can let it run. OK, ask the question again.

SICULAR: If you could go crossing any era, what would a perfect shoot for you to be if it’s any photographer, fashion designer, models, and so on -- location?

STEFFENS: I would have David LaChapelle photographing Kate Moss with probably the prospect of no clothing but not being nude. But I know David LaChapelle is very good in wrapping. He has kind of crystal wrapping ideas of models which I quite enjoy. In an environment, it would be up to him but I like models in the nature. I like this environment together. I think that would be very interesting to see that for I-D magazine or W as they are quite daring.

SICULAR: And if you could’ve worked in a different, say the ‘50s or the ‘60s or the ‘70s, or maybe going in the future, what era would you have liked to try, which era?

STEFFENS: I think the past is not for me. I think I would be too opinionated for that especially being a woman as we’re just still fighting for our rights. I think it will be in the future rather. And I think I would do exactly that what I’m doing now, [0:18:00] interviewing people and
finding the essence in their soul. That’s what I enjoy most.

SICULAR: I know you worked post at the German Vogue to edit the articles. Did it appear in any of the other Vogues around the world?

STEFFENS: Yes, they get picked up through our syndication department and I’m publishing my articles and they’ve been everywhere, in France, in Portugal, Australia, London.

SICULAR: Is it exciting to see it in different publications?

STEFFENS: It is. Yes, it is. I mean it’s good to know that people take notice of my articles and I just learned as well that a school friend who I haven’t talked to for 20 years -- Facebook makes it possible -- that she is following my articles in German Vogue. I had no idea. And she’s one of my most avid readers so it’s nice to hear. And it’s nice to get as well mail from the magazines that get reactions of the readers.

SICULAR: Really?

STEFFENS: Yes, yeah. Yeah, it’s very common. So that’s very nice. You know, the readers they read it, they feel they have to comment on certain things. And I just had a four page spread on Rodeo Drive and I took myself shopping. It was kind of a report as a Vogue editors going to Rodeo Drive and just spent a whole day there. And yes
it got a lot of great reactions. And it was really fun reading.

SICULAR: When you go and you do work, do you do it anonymously or do people know that you’re Vogue editor because of that treat you a lot differently now?

STEFFENS: No, they know I’m a Vogue editor and it’s funny that a lot of people that hear that I’m coming, maybe interviewing them, choosing them, or whatever, they have quite a perception of the person who is coming through that door. And until now, I did not fulfill it, I must say.

SICULAR: Why is that? What do they perceive?

STEFFENS: They perceive always somebody [0:20:00] who is more -- I want to say almost a little bit nastier. They always have this picture of a nasty portrayed editor who is rough and brutal, who’s not frankly forthcoming, open, might walk barefoot through the door, no, it has to have high heels and red lipstick and perfect hair. No, it’s not always like this.

SICULAR: What’s the best part of your job?

STEFFENS: The best part of my job is meeting people and being able to travel and to go behind the curtain, to look to the inside of what many people -- when many people just see the outside. That’s the best.
SICULAR: Who are some of the great people who you’ve gotten to interview and then photograph?

STEFFENS: It runs down from A to Z. Oh gosh, a lot of people. I just spent five days on the set with [0:21:00] Heidi Klum because we had a special edition -- not a special edition, our June edition was only about Heidi Klum. We did five photo shoots in and all around Los Angeles. And so I spent with her on the set, wrote the cover story, and we had incredibly fun. She’s a very not only talented but also charming woman. She is really, really down to earth which I believe her face shows. She has this extreme aura of happiness. And she really is that. She’s very cheerful frankly. Everything that you can want from a girlfriend sitting at a bar sharing a beer really. Very professional, actually all talent I really have to say, so far, with whom I have worked and it runs down from Julia Roberts, Cameron Diaz, Tom Cruise to [0:22:00] -- very professional, Tom Cruise, as is Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, very much so, I enjoy these two very much. And a lot of names out there, as I said earlier Jennifer Lopez we had a great time together on set.

SICULAR: When you interview do you keep a tape recorder also so you can go back?
STEFFENS: Always because in older times, a lot of journalist are -- writing on a -- it’s a shame because it distracts you really from your interview and noticing little nuances in your interview. And so it’s great. In the time of iPods you just put it on the table and that’s it and it’s great quality.

SICULAR: What’s the biggest surprise of your career?

STEFFENS: The biggest surprise of my career is actually that I am a writer because thinking back in school I had terrible grades in writing. In German my -- German was so not my subject and I got terrible, terrible reviews of everything that I wrote. And my teacher was Ms. [Robby?] she was called and I remember I was fighting for -- I had to write a book review -- I chose Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. And I was giving my best to write this book review and I was working so hard on it and I got an F. I mean, whoa, completely slammed under the table. And I was so sad. I was crying and then I was standing up for myself. And I said, “No, but this is wrong.” And I think that’s the biggest surprise. I think for her it is as well the biggest surprise. My mother met her a long, long time in Kuchshaben and she’s still living there. And she said, “What is Antonia doing?” And [0:24:00] she said, “Well actually she is a writer, an author.” And she
couldn’t believe it. She said, “She is what?” So I think it’s as surprising to her as it is to me.

SICULAR: Do you have any last thoughts before we end the interview, anything you’d like to add?

STEFFENS: Yes, I’d like to add something for everybody out there who would like to do something but is yet insecure because I think that was my difficulty as I’m looking back and I could correct something, I would say that I would’ve hoped for more security in myself to maybe I could’ve accomplished more at this point where I am now. Not that I have not enough accomplished but yet there is always something left to do or wish for. But don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid of anybody. Just go and do what you feel to do and take your chance. It’s very important that you take your chance [0:25:00] no matter if you believe that you get laughed at, fail, or anything. All you have to do is close the door and go to the next chapter. But at least you took the chance.

SICULAR: Thank you.

STEFFENS: You’re welcome.

(break in audio) [0:26:00] [0:27:00]

SICULAR: Hi my name is Patty Sicular. Along with Professor Karen Trivette Canelle from New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology we want to welcome you next in the series of
interviewing professionals in the fashion, beauty, photography, and modeling industry. Today is Tuesday June 21, 2011. We’re at The Vault in Culver City, California and we’re very happy to be interviewing Mr. Jan Gonet whose era spans from 1978 to the 1990s. Jan ran the elite division, the men’s department as the director. And from there he started his own boutique men’s agency in New York City and that [0:28:00] was called Nitro. So welcome to the city Jan.

Gonet: Thank you Patty. Thank you.

Sicular: And cut. Hi Jan. I’m so happy to be interviewing you because we started at the same time and we worked together at Elite.

Gonet: We know all the dirt.

Sicular: I know. And where all the bodies are buried.

Gonet: That’s right.

Sicular: (inaudible) So Jan where did you grow up?

Gonet: I grew up here in Los Angeles.

Sicular: And how did you find your way into New York?

Gonet: In 1978 truthfully I had just quit a job at the bank and I was walking down my street in Los Angeles and out of nowhere a voice says, “Go to New York.” And I looked around and there was no one there. And I remember thinking to myself, “I can’t go to New York, I don’t have any
money.” But the voice went, “Go to New York.” So two weeks later I ended up in New York with [0:29:00] $300 and a temporary place to stay with a friend and I thought, “What am I going to do now?” And very quickly I got a job at a magazine which I quit a month later.

SICULAR: Which magazine?

GONET: It was called Auto Laundry News, the magazine of the car wash industry and it had ads in it of girls in bikinis -- wiggling in their bikinis with huge paper-mache screws and the copy would read, “I just love my Acme Screw.” And that was what the magazine was about. And it was sent to car wash dealerships and that demographic and like that. So I quit after a month. I really wasn’t learning anything and I thought, “What am I going to do now?” And about two weeks later I was in a bar in uptown New York and I had just walked into the bar and a man comes right up to me and looks at me and he says, “You should be in TV commercials.” And I thought, “No, no, no, no, no, I was a theater major but that’s all over with now.” He goes, “Well [0:30:00] I work on Wall Street. Let’s have lunch tomorrow and talk about this.” And I’m like, “OK, why not?” I had nothing else to do. So I went down to Wall Street and no sooner had sat down to lunch with him when he said, “You have an interview tomorrow at nine o’clock with Wilhelmina.” And I
was just stunned and it turned out that this gentleman was an investment banker whose job was to help very wealthy people invest their money in the arts but on the side he loved finding talent. And that’s what he thought I would be. So the next day I went to Wilhelmina for the interview and spent a half hour in the gentlemen’s office in the talent agent’s office, not a clue how lucky I was, had no clue that spending a half hour in an agent’s office in New York was a gift. I had no clue. And he said, “You need to take the voice lessons, the acting lessons.” And I had done all that but I wasn’t interested. I had come to New York to try to get into banking. And he got very angry at me after about a half hour and said, “What are you doing in my office then?” And I told him, “I have nothing else to do.” And he goes, “Oh would you like a job here?” And I went, “Doing what?” And he goes, “Being an agent.” I go, “I don’t know anything about that.” He goes, “You’ll learn.” So he made a phone call to [Kay Mitchell?] who at that point was vice president of Wilhelmina and said, “Blah, blah, blah.” And the next thing I knew I had an interview the next morning at nine o’clock at Wilhelmina. And I asked, “Should I bring a resume?” “No.” And the next morning I walk into Wilhelmina and there was pictures of Willa all around the office.
SICULAR: She was still alive then. She’s so beautiful.

GONET: She was still alive but I knew nothing about the modeling business. I didn’t know who Wilhelmina was. I knew nothing, zero. And I went in for the interview and it was pretty quick. It was kind of a don’t call us, we’ll call you type of interview. But I thought that was it, that was done, that was my experience.

SICULAR: What division was it at Ford, did they tell you?

GONET: Nothing, it was just a very quick interview and, “Who are you?” And, “What’s your story?” [0:32:00] And [Kay?] was very nice and all of this. And that was it. And I went home. And about five o’clock that afternoon I got a phone call and it was Kay Mitchell and she said, “We would love for you to start tomorrow at nine o’clock. Your salary will be $140 a week. You’ll start in the test board. Do you want to do it?” I said, “Sure.” And the next morning I started at nine o’clock. I knew nothing about the business and they told me your job was to interview people to be models. And I’m like, “Wait a minute here.” I said, “I know more about brain surgery than I do about modeling.” I knew nothing. And they said, “Oh, just one moment.” And they brought me into Wilhelmina’s office and they introduced me. And she was a very handsome, beautiful woman and her office was filled
with roses and she was fiendishly smoking. And there was smoke everywhere and they introduced me. And they said Willy, this is John. He’ll be introducing the new [0:33:00] models, interviewing them. She said, “Good luck.” And again I said, “Wait a minute here. I know nothing about any of this.” And she looked at me and she said in this Dutch accent because she was from the Netherlands, “Oh, it’s very easy darling. They have to have one of two looks, come marry me or come fuck me. And if they have both, you have a star on your hands.” And I’ll never forget that. That guided me.

SICULAR: Was that the best piece of advice you ever had?

GONET: The best piece of advice I’ve ever gotten. And I went back to the office and I had met this girl who was going to be working with me named Nancy. And I was just in shock and I said, “I don’t get this. Two days ago I had nothing about the modeling business and here I’m sitting here interviewing people to be models.” And she went, “Welcome to the business.” And I never looked back, never looked back. I had some rough spots. We all did in that business but for the next 23 years, I lived this golden life [0:34:00] that most people dream about. It was the dream job. It was great. It gave me the world. It gave me my outlook on the world. It completely changed me. I met the
most incredible people. I went to incredible dinners and parties, travelled the world, interviewed over a half a million people.

SICULAR: And how many became models?

GONET: Less than 1%.

SICULAR: And let’s just talk about Wilhelmina a little bit John because so many people don’t realize how beautiful she was. She modeled with Eileen and Gerald Ford and then she opened Avon Agency. Do you remember working day to day with her?

GONET: Well they had interviews every morning Monday through Thursday for --

SICULAR: You’re talking Wilhelmina Models?

GONET: Yeah, ten to 10:30 and I would look at the pictures, open calls, and anybody could come in. And I would go through these books and anybody that was remotely interesting I’d say, “Please take a seat.” And then after that was over I would take all the books into Wilhelmina’s office and she would flip through the books and decide, “Yes, I want to see that one. Oh that one’s interesting. Oh, forget that one.”

SICULAR: And did she ask you your opinion after a while, what you thought?

GONET: Very rarely which was kind of a problem towards the end of my career there because I had gotten caught in the
middle of a political storm within the agency that I had no idea that I was in the middle of. And they had brought this girl into be interviewed -- to join the agency and her secretary just handed the girl and her book to me and she had the same name as another model. And I told her that maybe we need to change the name and she blew up at me. And the next day I was called into Wilhelmina’s office and called on the carpet for doing that because that turned out was one of [Victor Scorbneski’s?] finds and really had fought to get that model. And she read me the riot act and actually said who was I to [0:36:00] interfere. And I said, “She’s right.” But I knew nothing about the problems and if someone had explained that to me from the beginning then I would’ve understood. And she goes, “Now go back and do your job and without comment or opinion.” And I said, “Well that’s a little tough given that I’m the one that interviews the models.” She goes, “Do it without comment or opinion.” And for the next six months, it was pretty brutal on me. She wouldn’t even acknowledge my name.

SICULAR: Really? Surprising, that’s a first. I’ve never heard of that. She might’ve been sick then too.

GONET: Yeah, she died a couple years later. So I’m sure she was going through --

SICULAR: The following year I think.
GONET: Something like that, pretty quick. So I’m sure she was going through brutal times and I didn’t help. But I didn’t know at the same time.

SICULAR: Right and you were young also.

GONET: And I was young. I was 25. I couldn’t really --

SICULAR: And then so who were some of the people that you discovered or worked at Wilhelmina when you were there?

GONET: [0:37:00] Sela Ward, the actress Sela Ward.

SICULAR: Patty Hansen.

GONET: Patty Hansen who already was a star and Gia and [Julie Foster?] and there’s a woman named Donna Dixon who’s Dan Aykroyd’s wife. And a lot of people who have gone on to do bigger and better things.

SICULAR: Yourself included.

GONET: Including myself.

SICULAR: Because after Wilhelmina then where did you end up?

GONET: Then because of the problems with Willy, I was hired at a smaller agency that opened up, that Uva Hart, who had been a male model, had opened up. And that was an interesting experience, not a great one --

SICULAR: And that was with men or women?

GONET: That was both. But they had financial problems and a lot of fighting back and forth. And the one thing that was interesting about that -- it lasted about six months --
interesting about that job is that one day a woman walked in named Frances Grill, this is before she had started

[0:38:00] Click. And she walked in --

SICULAR: She was doing photo work, right?

GONET: Photo work, right.

SICULAR: Demarchelier among others.

GONET: I don’t remember who she’s with but I remember she had just gotten out of that and she wanted to become an agent. And one day she walked in with this kind of small skinny guy who was very shy and she just had Xerox copies of his pictures and said that he was going to be the next start photographer. And we all looked at him and he had no presence and we didn’t know what she was talking about and kind of took it all with a grain of salt and it turned out to be Steven Meisel. So that was my -- I find that kind of interesting. And I had a run in with the owner there and got fired. I got fired because one of the models complained about me who has gone on to become a successful actor will remain nameless. But that’s OK. And I called a friend up at Elite and said, “I’ve been fired. Do you know anybody who’s looking for a job?” And she goes, “I think [Jane Michael [0:39:00] Bloom?] is,” who was a big Elite recruiting agent. So I went up there and got an interview and went back and forth for a week and they finally hired
me. And two weeks later they fired me which I was really stunned over because most of my working life I had always gotten promotions and raises. And why was I being I fired? I asked the woman. She goes, “It’s hard to explain but you can either stay here or there’s a job opening up at Elite because they’re here for the rest of the day or you can go up to Elite for an interview.” And I wasn’t going to stick around. So I went up for Elite for an interview. And I met Lisa [Herzog?] who is the director of model management and she brought me into Johnny Casablancas’s office and she introduced me to Johnny and I said to him, “Well you’re the notorious John Casablancas.” And he just loved that. He loved the fact that I called him notorious because you must remember in those days he was the devil incarnate according to Eileen and Wilhelmina and everybody else. And because I was raised in Wilhelmina, [0:40:00] I believed it all.

SICULAR: You also have to understand because he had an agency and he promised not to open up any retail store.

GONET: Right, not to open up, but at that point Elite was just booming. It was really great. Anyway, I got the job. I worked in model management and I learned in one month more than I had learned in the previous two years in the business there at Elite.

SICULAR: They run a tight ship there.
GONET: Yes, he had a great staff, very dedicated to him, very professional. And that, what I learned at Elite, really carried me through for the rest of my career.

SICULAR: And it’s great because he was (inaudible) every day.

GONET: Hands on every day, top of the lot. Very grateful that John Casablancas --

SICULAR: What is the best piece of advice he ever gave you?

GONET: Best piece of advice? I wouldn’t say there was one piece of advice he gave me that I remember as far as [0:41:00] managing models and booking models. It was just the everyday learning experience. But I remember towards the end of my career at Elite --

SICULAR: Which is when?

GONET: End of ’86, from ’80 to ’86. I had gone from model management into the Elite division, was there for about a year, and then I took over the managed division, they offered that to me which was a joke at that point. But I made a lot of mistakes but I learned a lot about the business. Towards the end of that career, I went out to lunch with him to thank him for everything that he had done for me. And I said to him, I just have one question John -- because at that point he was becoming very notorious with the girlfriends and everything. I said, “How do you handle the sex thing?” He looked at me and he said, “What do you
mean?” I go, “You get yourself in so much trouble. How do you handle it?” And he goes, “Let me tell you something, never once did I ever get in trouble for having an affair [0:42:00] with one of my models. What I got in trouble was for their ages.” And I’ll never forget that. That’s the thing about the modeling business is that you could be whatever you wanted to be, however you wanted to do, whatever you wanted to do, you could be really -- live a debaucherous life, let’s put it that way, every night. But if you got up in the morning and did your job, nobody cared. It’s just the way it was.

SICULAR: I want to speak to that working at Elite because I work there too so we can have this conversation. I find it’s a really tight ship and you never make the same mistake twice. You make a mistake once, they told you what to do, and then if you made it twice you’re out the door.

GONET: Oh, I don’t know if that was -- I made a couple of mistakes.

SICULAR: But it was pretty -- they ran a really, really tight ship. You had to clock in on time. You didn’t leave early. You worked really hard. [0:43:00] John was there every day and I always remember him with that big loop around his neck with the light on it because if you look at the problems and he was really -- he was one of my favorite
bosses. I love Ilene but I really did love John, he was a very nice respectful man to his own staff.

GONET: Not only that though, there was a whole European ambiance to the place.

SICULAR: We used to call it the French mafia.

GONET: Right, and it was a whole different way of looking at life and doing business. So from this naïve dumb beach kid that I was in Los Angeles all from being thrown into this really Parisian way of doing things. It was a great experience.

SICULAR: But I used to find that he encouraged his models to be larger than life. He always travelled by car and the chauffeur and always with the flowers and the champagne. I worked at Vogue also, those girls were expected to show up on time, and to show up, and to be prepared. But John, they’d come in, almost like movie stars, [0:44:00] larger than life. And with personalities like Janice Dickenson and Debby and Joan Severance, [Cali Nickburg?]. They walked into a room and you looked and you knew that they were an Elite model. And there was a distinct difference between working at Ford and working at Elite just like I’m sure there was for you. And if you got to work at a place like Ford or Elite in the ’70s or ’80s, you were top of the heap.
GONET: I had discussions about that with friends is that having worked at Willy and then Elite and then open my own agency based on those theories of doing business, for the entire time of 23 years in the business I always worked at the top with the top clients, top photographers, top agents, top everything. I’ve found that after I closed my agency down, that was not the standard for the rest of the industry and it was very difficult to make that transition from the top [0:45:00] to a second way of doing things.

SICULAR: And a lot of agencies are like that. They just want to slap things on charts and they don’t care about the models.

GONET: They care about the models. They didn’t care how they presented themselves. There was a lot of -- I was just really taken back by it. That’s why I didn’t get along too well afterwards.

SICULAR: Who were some of the models that you worked with?

GONET: Iman who was the best in the world. Iman was amazing just with the most professional -- Iman, Kelly Emberg, Nancy Donahue, Beverly Johnson, Carol Alt, a lot of them, and the most beautiful woman in the world that I have ever seen that probably the average person doesn’t know their name. When I met her she was totally -- more at the end of her career. I asked [Monique Pilard?] who was the vice
president about her and said she is the classiest model.

Her name was Gunilla Lindblad.

SICULAR: Did the other one come in with like a cape and
whenever she took a booking, [0:46:00] she would take out a
fancy book with a gold pen and she came in larger than life
than the other models.

GONET: But she didn’t try to be larger than life. She was
just this amazing woman. And I remember -- and she was
very quiet and like that. And I can remember once being in
Southampton at my [Grind Hearts?] restaurant with some
agents and models. And it was on a weekend in the summer.
And she walked in just to go to dinner. And I’ve never
been in a place when all of the sudden the whole restaurant
just shut up just to watch this woman walk in the door, the
most beautiful woman that I ever saw in my life, to this
day the most beautiful.

SICULAR: Now I still remember when she used to come into the
Elite -- into the living room and she was very quiet, not
in a way but really classy to notice. She had -- and star
quality.

GONET: Right.

SICULAR: And then when you took over the men’s division, were
you left alone to render it as you saw fit?

GONET: Sure, I made tons of mistakes.
SICULAR: Like what?

GONET: Took on people who should no way be models, took on bookings that I should not have taken. But because Elite technically they said didn’t care about the men, they really let me make a huge amount of mistakes.

SICULAR: And did you make a lot of money for them and bring in stores?

GONET: No, not really.

SICULAR: But it was well thought of.

GONET: It was well thought of but the other agencies were much better than -- it just was not -- they didn’t put money into and it was very much left on my own which was all right and I worked up from one corner of the Elite division by myself in a little desk to having my own office with a couple different bookers.

SICULAR: I used to stop by to say hello every time.

GONET: Right, and I learned a lot about management and the way people operated. It was a great experience. And I will always be grateful for Elite for allowing me to do that.

SICULAR: And then you transferred to (inaudible). And why did you open up your own agency?

GONET: Because as I got more into the men’s business I realized what was possible. And plus the business was
starting [0:48:00] to change for men, it was starting to expand. But Elite was a women’s agency and they just did not see what I saw. And I’d asked them on several occasions if I could expand and it wasn’t going to happen. And eventually I opened my own agency. And that was a very scary moment, I’ll never forget it. Here I was, I had been the stupid, dumb, naïve, beach kid from California who fell into the modeling business, knew nothing about it, and just worked their way up -- his way up, and then eventually it was time for me to open my own agency. And you must remember in those days it was still Elite, Ford, Wilhelmina, and Zoely?. Click had opened up but if you weren’t with one of those top agencies, it wasn’t going to happen. So I was taking a big risk to do it.

SICULAR: You had one of the first boutique agencies. And you handled men only and you’re one of the most famous to the day.

GONET: And I opened it up with my partner, [Ronda Denicio?], in her home on 17th [0:49:00] and Broadway. And one week after we opened up, right before Thanksgiving -- I opened up the week before Thanksgiving and the day before Thanksgiving we closed the agency and there was a knock on the door and I opened it up and the gentleman said, “John Gonet?” And I said, “Yes?” And he handed me a $5 million
lawsuit for (inaudible) models. They were out to destroy me.

SICULAR: (inaudible) IP?

GONET: No, but they accused me of stealing confidential information. What I had taken was some booking charts and all like that. But I learned what confidential information was through the legal process that that’s like a (inaudible) formula. Anything that you can get from somebody else is not confidential information. Anyway, they went from $5 million down to the point where now they had to be, have depositions. And I knew Monique would never do that. And the day before that happened she called me and she goes, “We’ll settle for $3,000.” So I went -- and I said, “From $5 million to $3,000, I’m a little insulted here Monique.” You know, I could kid with her. But their whole thing was a little intimidation. And I said, “I’m not going to pay you a penny. I didn’t do anything wrong.” And they dropped the case the next day.

SICULAR: And did you get to see Monique after that socially or?

GONET: One day, a couple years later -- they had moved to their new offices on 22nd Street. And I went over there with flowers and I said, “Monique, it’s time that you and I become friends again.”

SICULAR: Was she happy?
GONET: Yeah, she was happy. Our relationship was never what it was at Elite. But I remember one day being in Miami at a model search and Johnny Casablancas was supposed to come. And I remember I was sitting on the stairs just waiting watching people walk in, walking in the front door. And I just -- and he walked right in the front door and the first thing out of his mouth is, "Where’s Jan? I want to see Jan." And he came right up to me and said, "I just want to congratulate you for having a really good agency."

[0:51:00] He was a class act.

SICULAR: He was. I really liked him. He was one of my favorite persons ever.

GONET: Yeah, absolutely. And that agency lasted 13 years.

SICULAR: That’s a nice run.

GONET: It was a great run.

SICULAR: And who were some of the models that you handled and some of the campaigns you --

GONET: I had Scott Benoit who did [Fem D?] campaign. I had John Adams. I had John [Enos?], many people know him. I had Ty Pennington who’s big on television. I had Josh Holloway who was big on "Lost". I had a lot of people who went on to do -- got out of the business and became like producers or actors.

SICULAR: Are you still friends with any of these people?
GONET: Well that’s one of the downsides. I knew the day that I would get out of the business that 99% of my very best friends would not have anything to do with me again.

SICULAR: Because you couldn’t help them.

GONET: I couldn’t help them. I couldn’t do anything for them. And that’s exactly what happened. The only one that I remained very close with was Scott Benoit who I started the business -- and he lives [0:52:00] here in Los Angeles. I’m the godfather’s two kids who are just gorgeous. The daughter’s four and is a cross between Jane Fonda and Brigitte Bardot. She’s going to be a stunner. She’s just going to be a stunner. And his son is two who already has girlfriends. He will just be a classically good looking man.

SICULAR: Did you ever think -- you worked in the era of the ‘70s and ‘80s which I think was a great era. Could you have been happy, you think, working in other eras like in the ‘50s or ‘60s?

GONET: In the modeling business?

SICULAR: Or in the ‘90s -- 2000s.

GONET: Well I love the modeling business. What was great about it is that there were no rules. Everyone took risks every day. You were around incredible people every day. It was -- any era would’ve been great to be in it because
the nature of the beast is to be an incredible experience.
One of the most difficult things that I’ve had to
transition from was going from that world into [0:53:00]
the real world where people are afraid. They’re just
afraid of taking risks. They’re afraid of everything.
It’s just a whole different way of doing business. And
it’s very difficult for me.

SICULAR: What are some of the -- what do you think are some of
the great things about you that made you a great agent?
GONET: I haven’t a clue. I really don’t have a clue.

SICULAR: Do you think it’s luck or do you think it’s hard work
or do you think you’re born under lucky stars?
GONET: I ask -- I think about that all the time because when
I moved to New York and went to my bar, my luck went like
this. And it just kept going up. I mean, there were tough
times, don’t get me wrong. But it went up. The day I
decided to get out of the business, it went like that. And
it’s been brutal for the last 12 years. I can tell you, I
really do miss the modeling business a lot. I really do.
I’ve been trying to find something that would give me half
the joy of that business. I always said that working in
that business at that time ‘70s, ‘80s, ‘90s, was probably
like working in the movie business [0:54:00] in the ‘20s,
'30s, and '40s. It was a golden era. It was a very small group of people. Everybody kind of --

SICULAR: It got a lot smaller.

GONET: A lot smaller. I don’t want to say the word elitist but for lack of a better term, everybody knew each other. There were much tougher standards of what it was to be a model.

SICULAR: And a booker.

GONET: And a booker. I think the photography was much, much better than it is now.

SICULAR: I have to tell you an interesting story. I had lunch with Ilene and Jerry and about 14 models from the '70s -- '60s and '70s and everyone told their favorite stories at lunch. And they all said the same thing. I said, “What was some of your favorite memories?” And every single one of them -- not one said, “Oh a Vogue cover” or during [the questions.” Every single model said I love going into the agency and seeing my booker, seeing my -- someone in accounting. It was like a family to me. We were taking care of the next. It’s what everybody said of that era. And that was their favorite -- those were their favorite memories that if you went into a model agency [0:55:00] or a studio or whatever, it was a very small world.
GONET: Or if you met somebody out in the real world who was in the modeling business, there was an instant connection and everybody knew what you were doing, how it was operating.

SICULAR: And also in the business it was so small that we never used last names. It’d be Jan from Elite or a guy from [Nitro?]. “What’s your name?” “Jan from Elite, [Jan from [Nitro?]].”

GONET: I remember once about a year after we opened up, I was talking to a photographer and he said, “How’s it going?” I go, “It’s going great.” He goes, “Well you have a lot of fans in the network.” And I’m like what network is he talking about. I was just very -- I just loved -- it wasn’t a job to me. There was no agenda on my part. I just loved getting up every morning and getting to work and at the end of the day I would always laugh no matter what horrible thing that happened or dumb thing or great thing, it was just, wow, every day was a wonderful, wonderful [0:56:00] experience. And when I ran the agency it was 24/7 for years. I mean, there was no day off. If you weren’t working nine to five or something like that at New York, you’re out on the road scouting at different model searches around the country. So you would work for months without a day off. It was great. And I loved interviewing
people. That was my favorite thing to do was to interview people. I just was fascinated by it and I would be like -- after a couple of years when I realized I was good at the interviewing, I’d interview anybody. I didn’t care who you were. I didn’t care if you had pictures. I didn’t care if you could foot the bill. I just wanted to sit down and talk with you and people would say to me, “How can you say no to these people?” And I’d go, “It’s not personal, it’s just business.” I’d rather be straight with them up front than start a fully relationship and then down the road have to break their hearts.

SICULAR: What does Jerry Ford say, “Only God makes models.”

GONET: Yeah, and they were very unique people. One of the things I love -- I wanted to know no matter who you were and I interviewed people from all walks of life, from all parts of the world, from all socioeconomic backgrounds, all different types of people. I just wanted to know why you thought someone should pay you money to take your picture. What was it about you that you thought was so wonderful --

SICULAR: And what were some of the answers.

GONET: Well I was -- I wouldn’t ask that. I wouldn’t say that. That was in the back of my mind. But it was funny how when I would turn people down they would be just
stunned and I’d say, “Well why do you think you should be a model?” And they’d all give me the same answer, “Because everybody says I should be.” And I say to them, “But are those people in the modeling business?” And they go, “No.” And I go, “Then why are you listening to them?” I learned that. You only listen to the people who know what they’re talking about.

SICULAR: But I always when I turn someone down I was hoping they wouldn’t be the right height because I’d say, “Wow, you got such beautiful eyes but you’re just not tall enough.” So at least they left Ford thinking, “Wow, someone at Ford thought I had beautiful eyes or someone thought I was so pretty but just not tall enough.”

GONET: I gave a great interview. People would always say, “You gave me the best interview.” Because I understood how important it was to them. For me, it was just another interview but to the vast majority of people, this was it. All of their life they’ve been told, “You should, you should, you should.” And all of the sudden they come up against the brick wall. I understood at a very early time in my career how important that initial interview was to these people. It was just fascinating.

SICULAR: And it’s nice that you treated it respectfully because a lot of people didn’t. They’d go, “Oh you’re not right.”
GONET: I saw a lot how people treated other people. I was really taken back by that.

SICULAR: I’d always try and give them something to take back, something positive.

GONET: I’d always say to them as they go, “Maybe you’re not right for me but you need to try another agency and if everybody turns you down you could be great for acting just because you’re not right for the modeling business doesn’t mean [0:59:00] you’re not right for --

SICULAR: And I’d always suggest that they work at a studio or something.

GONET: Yeah, and I’d always shake their hand. I’d go, “Thank you.” But I’d always say to them, “You can always send me pictures. I’ll be more than happy to look.” Everyone who ever sent a picture to an agency, they got a written response from me. It was still a form letter but I was always like that has to be answered because if nothing else they knew from me, there was an answer. It wasn’t just up in the cosmos somewhere.

SICULAR: People used to say that I was nice but I have to say honestly, you were way nicer than me.

GONET: No, I loved doing it. I just loved doing it. And how -- you know what I always ask every model at the very beginning no matter who they were, man or woman, no matter
what, the same question and how they answered that question
told me exactly if they would succeed or not. I would
shake their hand -- first of all, I notice who would offer
their hand first, me or them. If it was me, then I
[1:00:00] knew they had a lot to learn because anybody that
goes in for an interview should always offer their hand
first, always. And they should ask you how are you. And
then I would ask them, “So tell me, what can I do for you?”
And how they answered that question told me so much of what
I needed to know. And then I would look at their pictures
and the very first picture would tell you your answer. All
the rest of those pictures were just confirmations of those
answers. And people would apologize, they’d go, “Oh I
don’t have the portfolio.” I go, “All you need is
snapshots because a good agent could tell if a person was
good or not.” And that’s what bothered me when I went to
the other agencies after I left my own agency was how bad
the interviewing process was. They had no clue of how to
interview people. They would let them sit there for two
hours.

SICULAR: I know, it’s just -- it’s not very respectful and it’s

GONET: No, you have to respect the person that comes in.

[1:01:00] And I notice that when I have gone for different
jobs here how bad people are interviewing. They don’t know how to do it.

SICULAR: (inaudible) Hi Howard.

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