SICULAR: [00:00] Hi. My name is Patty Sicular. I’m director of Archives and Special Collections at the Ford Model Agency and we’d like to welcome you. Today is Tuesday, May 25th, 2010, we’re at the Ford office in New York City and we’re about to continue with our archiving history videos and our partner at FIT is Professor Karen Trivette Cannell, who’s their director of Special Collections and Archives. Today we’re going to interview Carol Oliveto, who was an art director, creative director at Strawbridge & Clothier in Philadelphia and then she moved onto the west coast with multiple other clients and the first New York agency she ever called was Ford, but I’ll let her tell you about that. So, (laughter) welcome, Carol.

OLIVETO: Thank you. (laughs)

SICULAR: So when did you start working in the business?

OLIVETO: I was 19, I did a co-op in a photo studio in New Jersey.

SICULAR: In New Jersey, and what was that for?

OLIVETO: The studio was [Bob Jun Dominiquez?] Photography Studio, he did everything from little [beam?] porcelains to [01:00] building two-story houses.

SICULAR: And this was what year again?
OLIVETO: Nineteen-seventy-nine.

SICULAR: And then when did you start at Strawbridge & Clothier in Philadelphia?

OLIVETO: Nineteen-eighty-two.

SICULAR: Nineteen-eighty-two.

OLIVETO: Mm-hmm.

SICULAR: And how did it come that you came to work with Ford Models?

OLIVETO: Well, I used to do both things for Strawbridge’s. I would draw and I would be on the photo set and it got to the point where I could actually explain things better than most people, as far as “Here’s what you can build, here’s what you can draw, here’s how much time it’ll take,” so I ended up the director there and that’s when I started calling modeling agencies and realizing I might as well just call New York instead of just in Philadelphia. So I called Ford Modeling Agency, the first agency, talked to a woman named Rusty on the phone who pretty much hung up on me and said, “When you get your act together call me back,” and I did. I pulled out my whole list of what information she’d probably ask me, called back and ever since then I’ve kind of been like really good friends with her. [02:00] Now she’s retired.

SICULAR: She was a great agent, one of the best.
OLIVETO: She was great.

SICULAR: Nineteen-fifty-eight to 1993.

OLIVETO: Yep. The most fun person to talk to on the phone.

SICULAR: I had a similar experience with her also, when I started booking the first time. She hung up on me the first, too, and then I learned by the second, so you learned with the rest --

OLIVETO: Oh yeah, yeah, you learned really fast --

SICULAR: She was the best.

OLIVETO: Yep.

SICULAR: And how did you ever, to get to meet directly with Eileen and Jerry Ford? Or interact with them?

OLIVETO: I met Eileen once at one of the Christmas parties they used to have. I actually invited her down to have lunch at Strawbridge’s, but unfortunately it never happened. Would have been very fun.

SICULAR: I’m sure it would have been.

OLIVETO: Yeah.

SICULAR: When you were a young girl, what was it that you wanted to grow up to be?

OLIVETO: I basically told everybody from the time I was five years old I was going to art school.

SICULAR: Oh, you knew at that early age.
OLIVETO: That’s all I did was draw. Didn’t write much, but
drew everywhere, on the walls, the floors. If you gave me
something to draw with or just a pencil, pencil, pen, it
didn’t matter, I was drawing.

SICULAR: And you started working [03:00] you said in 1979
approximately.

OLIVETO: Yes, that was my co-op or internship.

SICULAR: Did you have to have any special training to become an
art director?

OLIVETO: I think you need a lot of special training. The thing
is they don’t really teach it college, so it would be nice
to see a course in how to do this, how to communicate
visually. What I learned from my co-op was something they
don’t exactly teach you, which is you draw it two-
dimensionally, but you have to make it work three-
dimensionally, back to a two-dimensional image. And it’s
an interesting thing and back then, when you had the
camera’s with the film, the image was upside down, so you’d
see everybody throwing their head, trying to actually
understand what they were looking at, and then still trying
to compose it. And I’d sit there and say, “How did this
art director get that job? I could do that. I can do it
better,” and I started saying to people, “I can do this,”
and eventually somebody listened to me.
SICULAR: What was the first booking that you worked on that you saw in print?

OLIVETO: It was a menswear ad. They gave me a mod—two models, the photographer [04:00] told me to go outside in Philadelphia and shoot it somewhere. And that’s what I did. I told these two guys to hang out and talk on the street corner. We shot the ad, it actually showed up in print and after that it was like, what else can I do? Where can I go? How much bigger and better can I make this?

SICULAR: And how did you get your inspiration?

OLIVETO: Well, for catalogues you sit and you listen to the buyers, you listen to how intense they are about the buttons or the collars or what’s in for the season and from there you come back and say, “This is how I can make your product look better,” or “Here’s the studio vision of that,” or “Here’s the location vision of that.”

SICULAR: So when you, I know I used to work in catalogue also, I started out, so would you always get the shot first showing every suit and every button and then after that try and be creative or? But would you always go and get the shot. To be covered.
OLIVETO: When there’s film we would say, “You know, the first role is for the client or the buyer. After that it’s us to make pretty pictures.”

SICULAR: And which one in the end, usually?

OLIVETO: Nine times out of ten my [05:00] boss picked the ones we liked, which was a little more lifestyle, a little more like “I’m not pointing at my collar,” kind of thing.

SICULAR: Were your parents autistic?

OLIVETO: My dad was, my mother was not. My dad studied a lot of art in Italy. He was born there and then he moved here.

SICULAR: And can you explain a little bit what an art director and a creative director does? Is it one in the same position pretty much?

OLIVETO: Usually a creative director has more people under them, an art director has less, but when you’re on the set, there’s always going to be this whole crew of people that you have to get to have the same vision as you. The opposite side of that is you go to a CEO meeting, you listen to what all the people want, as far as budgets and what they need to sell, but they don’t know how to explain it creatively. So you are basically the translator. You explain right side, left side, brain thinking and then do it in reverse when you’re out on the set.
SICULAR: And can you explain to the people basically how many people are on a set? Once you come up with an idea, how many layers of people you have to go through, whether it’s a booking team, art directors, buyers and so on.

OLIVETO: There’s at least 25 to 30 different people you deal with before you get that model in an image. You start with here’s the concept, now you’ve got buyers to approve it, you go from the buyers to the people with the money. Once the budget’s approved, then you put a crew together. There’s the makeup artist, there’s the stylist, there’s the photographer, who wants his own set of assistants. There’s the food because if you don’t have food nobody’s doing anything. If you’re on location there’s a van, very important, van driver. Make sure he knows where he’s going or you lose the whole day. Once you’re there you have to make sure you have the permits and the lighting’s right, because if somebody didn’t scout the locations right, then you’ve got a other set of problems. And then makeup and hair starts and the stylists start and you get everybody out on set and you have to go through your list of schedules for the day.

SICULAR: And how many shots will you try to get done a day?
OLIVETO: Depending on who you work for, sometimes it might be 12 shots with variations, [07:00] it might be 30 or 50, it just depends. You know, if you want really pretty, nice images, then you’ve got to slow things down. If all you’re looking for is the, you know, just make a category of them, that’s different.

SICULAR: What’s the craziest scenario you ever came up with to shoot?

OLIVETO: I actually wanted to go shoot on the Orient Express.

SICULAR: And did you?

OLIVETO: No. The company stopped, but the Orient Express said yes. And I thought that would have been quite entertaining to actually try to shoot on a train.

SICULAR: Why did they stop you? My gosh, that would have been fabulous.

OLIVETO: I didn’t really get the best explanation, so I don’t know. But I did want to do a Christmas catalogue.

SICULAR: That would have been fabulous.

OLIVETO: Mm-hmm. My boss, however, wanted me to shoot with a bunch of wild, exotic animals, which you don’t want to do.

SICULAR: No, I know.

OLIVETO: Birds get territorial. Lions get a little bitey, nippy, you know.
SICULAR: Did you prefer shooting in a controlled environment, like a studio? Or did you like going out on location?

OLIVETO: I like both for the opposite reasons. Studio is easier, you can control the lighting. You can control what goes on during the day. But then if you go outside, you just never know what could happen or something looks better than you thought. They’re both just as equally fun. Just different challenges.

SICULAR: Can you walk us through a typical day on set, when you were shooting?

OLIVETO: Let’s see. You show up with your van, you set up, the stylists are doing, you know, setting up all their stuff. The hair and makeup starts. The photographers are usually out with me and we’re saying where we’re going to shoot things. If I haven’t seen the location. If I’ve seen the location and they’ve got a schedule in front of them with Polaroids and they know where they’re going, because the light changes too much not to know where you should be. And then once things start, you just, the crew kind of moves wherever the shoot is. If you’re smart about your production, you’re not having a photographer run from here to here to here, you just move it gradually so he ends up back at the van. It saves a lot of time, you get a lot [09:00] more shots done. So.
SICULAR: And while you’re doing that, you’re getting ready for the next. I know, speaking to, knowing you for so long, that’s only one part of your job because when you get home you have to get everything packed away and then get ready for your next booking, the next shoot, and then think of shoots coming down the line.

OLIVETO: Right. Usually there’s, you’re editing the last shoot, you’re working on this shot and then the next job is being thought of and talked about as you keep going. It’s a never-ending, juggling ball thing.

SICULAR: And what’s your favorite part of the process?

OLIVETO: Seeing it all work, is the funnest part of all the talking, all the collaboration, all the people actually focusing in on the same thing, and then actually watching it work.

SICULAR: And did you prefer working with the same team all the time? Or did you like different people, meaning the same creative team, the same hair and makeup artists, the same caterers, the same models, the same stylists? Or did you like to mix that up?

OLIVETO: It’s easier if you keep working with the same people in some ways, because then the expectation level, [10:00] I don’t need to explain things as much, but then, artistic people tend to get a little lax sometimes, so if you don’t
mix them up, sometimes you lose the energy or the chemistry, so it’s good to do it both ways and I know that’s not exactly answering it, but it helps to mix it up.

SICULAR: And do you find especially on location that certain things would go wrong?

OLIVETO: Everything goes wrong. There’s too many bugs. There’s too many clouds. It rains. It doesn’t rain. You know, the table that was there two days is gone. You name it, you can find something that’s gone wrong.

SICULAR: When you used to book models, did you find that you booked it by the agency or by the model?

OLIVETO: I usually go after the model. Because the CEOs, the people in meetings, you’ve already presented cards. They get very fixated on that certain look, and then if I can’t produce it, then they feel like you, you’re trying to pull something on them. Because they get this image in their head, “You promised this girl in this outfit.”

SICULAR: And when you said that you liked, in the [11:00] last question you like working with the same team. Did you find yourself liking, preferring to work with the same booker at every agency?

OLIVETO: There are people that you get along with better anywhere, so yes. There are people that were easier to work with.
SICULAR: And then when you had that booker, someone would say, since you trusted them, “Look at this girl, I think she’s really fabulous,” would you really kind of believe what they said or take their word for it?

OLIVETO: Yes.

SICULAR: Because even that relationship --

OLIVETO: Yeah, they’re not trying to sell me on somebody I know I can’t use.

SICULAR: Right.

M: What would you say the hardest thing?

OLIVETO: The hardest thing? You actually have to trust all the people to do and say what they’re going to do at that specific time. Because I’m the person that has to go back and sit in that meeting with all these people that don’t understand and explain to them why it didn’t happen, if I promised it would happen. And I don’t go back on my word. And basically what I promise you is what you get. But if somebody doesn’t do their part, it’s really hard. So there’s this huge trust factor that goes on. I’ll give you an example. [12:00] I go to the Philadelphia train station to pick up a girl we were supposed to shoot, and we’re doing all these hairpieces, because it’s Christmas. She shaved her head. I’m like sitting there dumbfounded. I’m like, like what do you say to that? Like the whole point
of the shoot was all these hair things, (laughs) she shaved her head. Nobody told me.

M: And what happened?

OLIVETO: Well, we worked around it because at that time we never booked one model at a time, there were three. So she’s the model that got all the hats that day. But --

SICULAR: Did you call the booker?

OLIVETO: Oh, I did. I was like, “Did you know so and so did,” and they didn’t know it either, the girl just decided to cut all her hair off the night before.

SICULAR: I know it wasn’t one of my models. I would have remembered that conversation.

OLIVETO: No, it wasn’t one of yours. But you know, there’s, like I said, it’s a huge trust factor. I trust you’re going to show up in the morning. I trust that if you’re the model you didn’t stay out all night and, you know, you look bad. I trust the photographer knows what he’s doing. I trust they actually put film in the back of the camera.

[13:00] I’ve had that happen. You can always tell on a photographer’s face when they’ve forgotten to put film in the camera.

M: (inaudible) (laughs)

OLIVETO: Yeah. They’ll get this look and they’ll go, “Um, I think we should try one more roll of that,” and I look at
them and I go, “Mm-hmm,” meaning there was no film in the camera, yes.

M: So you’ll actually say it.

OLIVETO: I -- depending on who the photographer is, sometimes you can joke with them, but when they’re really upset, you don’t want to go there. Because the whole mood of a photo shoot has to be upbeat. If I start like honing in on you, like “What did you do wrong?” and then you get upset and then everybody else gets upset.

M: And who controls, who sets the tone for the set?

SICULAR: Art director.

OLIVETO: Art director. Yeah, that’s my job.

M: So it’s all you. So if the photographer’s crabby, the model’s crabby, you’ve got --

OLIVETO: I just keep going.

M: You’ve got to like keep that energy up.

OLIVETO: Yep. And I’ve worked with some really strange photographers that, you know, you’ve just got to keep going. No matter what they say. [14:00]

M: You know, you said you starting drawing early on. How did you, how did you [shape?] that? I know you started asking people like, you know, “I can do this,” but how did you take it to the next level and what was that process? You know, for those people that are watching and think, you
know, “I’d really like to be an art director,” what is that process?

OLIVETO: It’s partly intuitive, partly, mentally, I should say, visual. It’s listening to you and hearing like, you have a white shirt on with a black tie. What’s the best way to shoot that? Or what’s different about how you wear it? What’s different about how it looks? What’s different about how can I sell that so it’ll be noticeable in a photograph? And you take all these bits of information and the thing with me is, because I draw, I’ll make a million doodles. I used to sit in the [15:00] meeting with the CEO, he used to pull the sheets out from under me because he’d sit there and want to see what I was drawing. And then he’d say, “Can you make that happen?” and I would tell him, “Yes, I can make that happen and here’s the steps that make it happen,” when you can’t actually say that to somebody that has no visual sense, that’s when they get nervous, that’s when they pull the plug. But because I am more visual, I can say to you, “This is what it’s going to cost. This is the amount of time I need and I will produce it for you.”

M: And how long did it take to sort of, felt you could say that?
OLIVETO: It kind of started at Strawbridge’s, because I’d started doing everything. I started doing a little bit of styling, a little bit of assisting. There was a woman that was director or photography and I would watch her and I would ask if I could help. So I went from steaming the clothes to organizing the clothes to starting a schedule for her and then I eventually kind of, in my very kind of Upper Darby attitude, “You know I can do your job if you don’t want it,” [16:00] and I said that to her and she kept saying, “Well, we’ll see,” and I’m like, “No, I’m serious. If you don’t want your job anymore, I want it,” and eventually she moved and she told the company, “This is the person you should give it to,” I had that happen twice.

Same thing, it happened at Mervyn’s. The woman that was above me went to a meeting and she had these layouts and I said, “I know you don’t know me, but you don’t want to go in there with that layout,” and I know creative people, she got really mad at me and I said, “My job, because I work under you, is to back you and support you and here’s what the buyer is going to say about this layout. And the reason why I’m telling you this is so that you are prepared, because I know you want this thing to go through creatively, you just need to have answers for why this is
going to work,” and she walked away in a huff and I’m thinking, God, she was so mad at me. She came out of the meeting. She put the layout down and she said, “How did you know that? Tell me what you know and how did you know that because now [17:00] they’re going to let me do it and they were really mad in the beginning,” and the part is to listen. You listen to what people want. You try to take away part of their fear. I used to make jokes, I should have gone to psychology school. Because if you start talking to a buyer about the lighting and it’s backlit or it’s front-lit, not that they don’t care, but they don’t care. What they care about is they spent 10 months in Europe making sure that collar looks the way it does. If it has buttons on it or it doesn’t have buttons, whether the button has two holes or four holes. They spend a ton of time on the front of the blouse knowing whether there’s 10 buttons or three buttons. That’s important to them. If you don’t talk about the agenda that’s important to them and the 10,000 units of that they have to sell, you’ve lost them. They’re never going to be on your side. And this is what I translate all day.

M: So you think it’s sort of, it’s very important to just sort of know a little about, a little bit about every job.

OLIVETO: Yes.
M: Even photography, were you aware of the photography as well? [18:00]

OLIVETO: If you go out the side right now and you shoot it at F-stop 11, you’re going to need like 400 ASA film. Otherwise you’re going to blare out the photographs. And that’s film, it’s not digital, but I’m just giving you examples of you walk outside when the clouds start coming in, it drops down to 5-6, or you need to push it up to F-16. There’s all the little pieces to the camera you need to know. When I ask a photographer to blow the background out of focus I know the F-stop should be 2.8 and if he tells me he can’t do it, I basically know either he’s got the wrong lens on the camera or --

M: Or you have the wrong photographer.

OLIVETO: Yeah, I got the wrong photographer. Things like that.

M: Well, that’s impressive, so you know all about that.

OLIVETO: I’m working on it.

M: So you know at any time you can do anybody’s job if they’re not pulling their weight.

OLIVETO: Not that I’d want to, but yeah.

M: If you had to, if you had to. And that gives you a sense of sort of -- I don’t know, what sense does that give you?

SICULAR: Security, for sure.

M: Security?
OLIVETO: It actually makes other people feel secure. It’s kind of like, [19:00] “I feel your pain, I get it, you know, I’m not moving --”

M: You’re a leader. They know you’re a leader.

OLIVETO: Right. I’m not going to be the crazy art director that wants to put a really, really white girl in a really black outfit, and then the film or imagery can’t show up because there is no detail either way or I’m not going to be the person that says, “Sure, you can shoot this backlit,” when you know there’s no way it’s going to work. You know, I’ve been there. I’ve shot enough of my own things. I’ve had five photography shows, so I get it. I don’t do that to photographers. I don’t ask them to walk the length of a football field to shoot something and 10 minutes later expect them to be set up at the other end. It doesn’t work that way. You need at least a half hour in between things, depending on where you are. It’s just, if I know all these little pieces then I don’t see the, you know, people will get that look on their face like, “You want me to do what?”

M: Yeah, they don’t expect, you don’t expect them to do the nonsense. This is all realistic.

OLIVETO: It’s very realistic, what I ask them.

M: So essentially an art director is a leader. [20:00]
OLIVETO: Yeah. They’re the foreman on the jobs. They have to know everything.

SICULAR: Kind of acts as back and forth between photographer and art director, who are the leaders?

OLIVETO: Yes. Well, it also is like the photographer’s god.

SICULAR: (inaudible) photographer.

OLIVETO: Yeah. Photographer is god. They know, you know, you can’t get them to shoot something, they’re not going to shoot it, but you are the client, you know, you are the person that hired them, but they have a vision just as much as you do. So there is a lot more collaboration there, but when things hit the fan, if you’re the person that has to sign off on the budget, you’re the one in trouble. So it depends whether you’re in-house or you’ve hired everybody freelance.

M: Now is art director something that is, that people come out of school wanting to do? Like do people know about it?

OLIVETO: Yeah. I didn’t, but other people did. You know.

SICULAR: At advertising agencies it’s a very big position.

M: So I mean, I love the way the direction of the conversation went, it’s very interesting, for me, anyway. [21:00] And for everybody else, but what was the things that might be impeding you, then breaking into the business. Like what was that process?
OLIVETO: Well, it was interesting to go to college and I always felt like I was catching up to everybody.

M: And what were you studying?

OLIVETO: Fashion illustration and fine arts photography. And just the whole drawing aspect of knowing how to draw and getting that down. But then it crossed over into layouts. Because there weren’t computers when I went to school, so every single layout was hand-drawn. So if you had a 48-page catalogue, you were drawing all those layouts. A lot longer than computer nowadays.

M: And you moved on to advertising?

OLIVETO: And then I moved on into the department store advertising.

M: You just basically said, “I want to do everything” and that’s how it basically transpired or?

OLIVETO: Well, it sort of started out, I would volunteer to do just little bits of everything from helping the stylist, to helping hold a makeup brush or [22:00] just, you know, assistant photographer needs somebody to hold the light, and then you realize, you know, there’s the fill cards that fill light into your face and you start realizing what they do and how much it hurts the model’s eyes. And there’s just little things that you start realizing and you know, people shoot summer in the winter and winter in the summer
and if we’re shooting fur coats and it’s 90 degrees and you’re watching how I keep a model from passing out, because that things too heavy and hot on her, or how do you keep her warm because she’s in a bathing suit and it’s too cold to be in a bathing suit today. So there’s, you just start picking up, it’s just odd bits of information that unless you’re in this field I don’t know what other company or kind of job needs it, but it’s fun information to have.

M: Probably (inaudible) over the film, as well.

OLIVETO: Right, yeah, that would be fun.

M: -- actual director.

OLIVETO: Mm-hmm.

SICULAR: What are some of the shoots that you’re most proud of?

OLIVETO: We shot, we shot a model in front of a Strawbridge cover and they absolutely loved it. I ended up with half the business people behind in a studio. That I’d never came down, never knew what a studio was and all of the sudden I’ve got every VP in the company behind my (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

SICULAR: Who was the model?

OLIVETO: The model was Iman and she was on the front cover of a fall/winter catalogue for Strawbridge’s. Caused quite a ruckus in Philadelphia. It was fun. The one thing we did for a Mervyn’s shoot was you know, we had this suit,
Docker’s suit, $79. Cheesy little suit, selling Docker’s. But you know, they had said, you know, “The model’s going to stand on the seamless, doing the tie thing,” and we shot it, just like they asked. But then the next day I had hired a different photographer -- a different model, I’m sorry, who I knew would have the right chemistry with this photographer and at lunch I started playing with Polaroids, this camera saying, you know, “Look how cool this is. It’s a white background with a white sofa with a white [24:00] blaring through this. He’s got a black suit on. And we play. So instead of having lunch we started playing and the model started jumping across the sofa. So now I’ve got this shot of him straight out. And then he’s just sitting on the sofa, very lounged, and I took all this film back and it caused such a ruckus that the VP made an eight-foot poster out of it. Because they didn’t think their clothes could look that good. That model ended up on every woman’s screensaver, and they ended up rearranging the whole layout, because the shot looked good. It ended up posters everywhere. Because you take the vision. Like I did what you asked me to do. He’s on a seamless, he’s standing there. But here’s how further I can, much further I can push it and make it look really cool.
M: So you always have the game plan, almost like a storyboard for the film and then you say, “All right, we get our shots, let’s play.”

OLIVETO: Yeah.

M: And is that always the case on shoots? Or sometimes you’re just like, well -- [25:00]

OLIVETO: It depends on the photographer. Some photographers don’t like going off schedule. It depends on the chemistry between the people and how much time you have. I knew if I put those certain sets of people together I could try to find something to play with.

SICULAR: And how did you choose your team? Whether it was the photographer with the models, how did you choose them?

OLIVETO: Well, some photographers are better at locations, some photographers are better in studio. I know there are certain photographers I would use to shoot lingerie versus swimsuits. You just kind of, after a while, you’ve been doing this long enough, you know the players and you know what fits their personalities better.

SICULAR: Did you ever do any shoots where you thought in the middle of the mass hysteria, “What was I thinking when I thought of this?”
OLIVETO: Not me, particularly, because I think these things out pretty well, but I’ve had clients ask me to do things that I’m thinking, “Why am I doing this?”

SICULAR: Like what? Besides big animals. Whatever.

OLIVETO: (laughs) We shot the Monterey Bay Aquarium. So the stipulation to the Monterey Bay Aquarium was you can’t shoot when there’s people there, so we could only go at 3:00 in the morning till it opened at 9:00 or 8:00. You cannot flash the fish because they’ll bang into the glass. So we had to blacken all the glass, and that’s what the client. He wanted to see the fish coming through. So you have to actually shoot the fish first and then put the models in front and then sandwich everything together. It just became this huge nightmare.

SICULAR: But how did the pictures come out?

OLIVETO: Oh, they were fine. But it could have been done a whole lot easier and a whole lot simpler, but the PR people had promised something and I kept saying, “Wouldn’t it have been better if you had asked me first? Because I could have given you the logistics of this photo shoot and explained why you do or don’t you really want to do this this way.” So. But just walls of glass. And the minute the flash goes off, it’s like a mirror. All you get is that reflection back at you. No fish, just reflection.
M: [27:00] Do you find that art directors don’t know as much as you do? Like they’ll just come in and you know.

OLIVETO: I found that out when I did my co-op.

M: When you did what?

OLIVETO: When I did my co-op when I was 19. Yeah, it was, they would draw things and you know, the camera only has one perspective, one eye. But their layout would have had tops, like tilted this way and tops tilted down this way and this is the drawing and then you’d set it up and they’d look at their layout and they’d get confused. “Why does it look like this?” and then the photographer would have to explain, “Well, it’s one perspective. If you want these tops to actually turn like that, then we have to start building them up and propping them and this is going to take longer than, then your original expectation of how much it’s going to cost you for the shoot,” so I learned a lot from the co-op learning that if you’re going to do this you’d better know where your money is and why you’re doing it and why you’re drawing and what you’re asking for.

SICULAR: What’s the co-op?

OLIVETO: Co-op was my internship. Yeah. [28:00]

SICULAR: And what, I have a question about beauty. Who are some of your beauty icons? Growing up. (inaudible) models, actresses, politicians, anybody?
OLIVETO: (whispered) Politicians.

SICULAR: Men, woman?

OLIVETO: The most beautiful model I think we ever worked with was Garcelle. She looked the same with or without makeup on. Just --

SICULAR: Garcelle Beauvais?

OLIVETO: Yeah.

SICULAR: And she’s from the mid-’80s.


SICULAR: Then she became a television actress.

OLIVETO: Yeah. And a very sweet girl.

SICULAR: That’s nice. And who were some of your favorite creative icons, from the photographers or creative directors, art directors, editors?

OLIVETO: Photographers, it would be Richard Avedon or Irving Penn. Complete opposites on how they do everything, but brilliant people. I love them. I actually liked, I think Gap is brilliant, creatively. They know how to reinvent a white t-shirt and jeans every year. Because that’s what they sell. But think about all the campaigns they do and how different they make those two simple [29:00] things look. It’s brilliant.

M: It’s like Joan’s commercial as well.
OLIVETO: Yeah, it’s just absolutely brilliant. Two things and they can reinvent every season. That and Kenneth Cole does great catalogues.

M: And they also say you should have gone into psychology for it because it involves a lot. What do you look for when you’re putting a team together? When you’re meeting people, what psychological traits do you see? I mean, is it stereotypical? Can you figure somebody out in five seconds or five minutes? What’s?

OLIVETO: Some, well, the funny thing I used to ask the bookers was, “Is she a nice model?” Forget she’s pretty. We all know she’s pretty. I just --

SICULAR: And did you get a truthful answer?

OLIVETO: Most of the time I do, they’ll tell me like, “This one’s kind of cranky. If you’re going to use her for more than three days, (laughs) I don’t think it’s a good idea,” you know. Because I will ask you to go home if you don’t want to play nice. And I have asked people to go home, if you don’t want to play nice. I mean, [30:00] this is a, in some ways a luxury profession, it’s a privilege to do this. If you’re going to start acting like a diva, there’s other things I can do with my time besides try to cater to you and I don’t have the time for that.

M: Other than models, like you said, photographer or --
OLIVETO: Well, I’ve worked with some photographers that just really do think they’re God, and there’s ways to work around it. I’ve work with stylists who fight with makeup artists and the makeup artists fights with that person and... It’s like kindergarten. It’s one big sandbox, you’ve all got to play nice. I always end up being the most serious one on set because I’m the one that’s toeing the line here.

M: What is that one thing that you could say to people who are doing, you know, or aspiring to do what you do and they’re starting out with that team, what’s that one or two things or psychological sort of, I don’t know, tricks that you can do to have them get along?

OLIVETO: You have to let people know who’s boss real fast. [31:00] And you always have to be fair. Because people will watch. If you let one person get away with something but you don’t let somebody else get away with it, it creates just an anarchy.

M: So show that you’re boss but be fair about it.

OLIVETO: Right.

SICULAR: When you started in the business was the business dominated by men? As art directors and creative directors? Or was it (inaudible)?
OLIVETO: There’s always been more men, well, there was always more men in the art department at Strawbridge’s. As I’ve gotten older it’s more of a mix.

SICULAR: And when you started to gain more and more power, was it difficult for the men to take orders from you?

OLIVETO: Not in the office, but I’ve been on location where I’ve had to deal with people in other countries who just thought it was the funniest thing a woman was in charge. They, we had a guy in Puerto Rico, he used to call me “Boss Lady” and then laugh, laugh till he was crying. He just thought it was the funniest thing.

SICULAR: And what were some of the great locations you guys got to work?

OLIVETO: I’ve been to the top [32:00] of the Canadian Rockies up in Banff. I’ve been to Jamaica a few times. I’ve been all over the place in a bus. We used to take a, we used to it the “rock ’n roll bus” because it was like a living room inside and we’d send it places and follow it at airports and then go shoot. We’ve shot all over Colorado, I’ve shot all over Philadelphia. We’ve shot down in Florida in a lot of places. It’s just, you know, if you send me there I’m going. It’s just fun. I can’t imagine doing anything else beside maybe making movies for a living. It’s just too much fun.
SICULAR: That’s great that you’ve been so happy with your career.

OLIVETO: Yeah, I love this.

SICULAR: Any advice for aspiring art directors?

OLIVETO: Do it because it makes you happy. If not, don’t do it. You know.

M: What is your whole time at Ford? What’s the main time with Ford models? Like how long has your relationship been with them? And what --

SICULAR: Since the ’80s.

OLIVETO: Thirty years? [33:00] I think I’ve been talking to people at Ford for 30 years now.

M: What do you feel is the difference between Ford and say other agencies?

OLIVETO: Each agency has its own personality and its own set of models and there are people, some agencies actually, it can be a little snobby. Other agencies are a little, Ford’s a nice place. It’s just nice you can call, people remember you. You know, I always get a straight answer. I always, it’s nice, you just know that the people usually that they, they will hire as models are going to fit as nice people. And I know, I will repeat that a lot, nice people, you know, because it helps on a crew. If you’re out with somebody on location for a week, that’s 24/7 you’re
spending with people. The last thing I need is somebody that just wants to be a prima donna.

SICULAR: And did you find that the different agencies had different looks, or would have a certain look and other agencies, and what would you say [34:00] the Ford look would be, a Ford model would be like?

OLIVETO: Sort of, it’s more, I think, the girl next door, more home, more approachable. It goes off on a tangent a little bit, but that is it. You know, and they’re all, you know, they’re all 5’10” and beautiful girls to begin with, so.

SICULAR: And your favorite is Garcelle?

OLIVETO: She is definitely somebody who comes to mind. Now if we’re doing other sections, Christine Alt was fun to work with, too.

SICULAR: She was from the Plus Division.

OLIVETO: Yeah, and Emme. Emme was always nice to work with.

SICULAR: Emme was a superstar in that division?

OLIVETO: Yeah.

SICULAR: Have you found any girls? Discovered any girls? Started any girls off?

OLIVETO: No, but I did start a makeup artist off.

SICULAR: Really?

OLIVETO: Yep. She had got her license to do stuff and I went to my boss and I said, “This person really wants to do hair
and makeup and if you don’t like her you can fire me,”
(laughs) he looked at me and he said, “What?” [35:00]
because we’re back to, “You really believe in this,” and I
said, “Yeah, I do,” and she became Strawbridge’s makeup
artist for at least 15 years that I worked there.

SICULAR: And was she grateful to you?

OLIVETO: They knew, yes, and they now own their own makeup
company, it’s called Profaces. So.

M: Would you say the higher up the ladder you go the better
quality of people? Or is that just, you know, it’s hit or
miss?

OLIVETO: The higher up the ladder you go and sometimes I think
you get more people mad at you. (laughs)

M: More people mad at you?

OLIVETO: Well, because everybody’s creative and everybody
thinks they can do the same job and you know, you learn
fast who your real friends are or not real friends are.

M: Well, in terms of even just working with Ford, Ford is a
quality agency, like you know, and you said they’re very,
you know, stand up and nice.

OLIVETO: Yeah, they are.

M: Would you say that when you work with successful
photographers or models that you know, the more talented
they are the less, [36:00] I mean more humble they are? Or is that not the case.

OLIVETO: I think it is in a lot of cases, because you don’t have anything to be afraid of. You know that you know how to do this. You know, the biggest fear I’ve seen with photographers is if they don’t believe in the art director. They don’t believe the art director knows what they’re talking about or they don’t believe the art director can pull something off, that’s when I’ll see them get a little crazy. But I’ve never had one do that to me, so. I’ve heard stories, but you know, or I’ve watched other sets where I’ll say, “That wasn’t a good thing to say to that guy,” it was just not a good thing to say to that photographer. (laughs) You know.

M: Have you thought about writing a book?

OLIVETO: That would be fun.

SICULAR: And you could art direct it.

OLIVETO: Ooh, I can art direct it.

M: Have there, are there books about being an art director?

OLIVETO: I don’t know. I need a ghostwriter. Like I said, I draw. I need a ghostwriter.

SICULAR: Do you have any, any, [37:00] any suggestions for young, aspiring art directors, starting out from school?
OLIVETO: I would learn as much as you can and be around as many people that know what they know. You know, like hang around with a photographer, ask him questions. Ask him why he likes that camera. Ask him why he’s turned it into the light or not into the light. Ask the makeup artist why she uses that kind of makeup. Ask the stylist why they’re doing what they’re doing. Know that you steam wedding gowns from the inside out. You know, I know there’s a reason for that. I know there’s why you turn certain things inside out when you iron them. I know there’s certain makeup you would never use. There’s skin tones that do this or don’t do that. I know from the makeup artist that if a girl’s got really thin hair, don’t ask her to put it up or down or a certain way. I just ask. I’m constantly asking about what they do and why they do it. And the more you find out, the more you are better at directing. It’s fun.

M: And what’s next?

OLIVETO: I don’t know. [38:00] I still have to figure out what I’m going to be when I grow up. I’m working on it.

(laughs)

SICULAR: Any last thoughts?

OLIVETO: You’re only as good as the people you work with. And I really believe that.
SICULAR: And how would you like to be remembered?

Professionally.

OLIVETO: That I actually meant what I said and said what I said. So.

SICULAR: I have emails, because, are you going to finish?

M: Yeah, sure.

OLIVETO: You know if you keep this up I’ll just keep talking.

M: No, of course.

OLIVETO: OK, because it’s what I do. (laughs)

M: Can I grab that pen for moment? Is that your only pen?

SICULAR: Wait, I’ll take this one.

M: That’s OK. I’ll hold on.

SICULAR: I’ll be at my desk.

OLIVETO: I did an interview with a guy, I’ll give you the website, it’s called Rear Writer and he started asking me questions like this. And what I explained to him is this, the whole thing, I’m sure it’s the same way with movies, it’s addicting. You get that [39:00] chemistry on set, that moment and then you just keep going after it. And it is the coolest thing on earth to do. So I can’t imagine doing anything else.

M: Cool. What actually is next? I know you sort of like, you don’t know yet, but --

OLIVETO: I don’t, because I want to do everything.
M: You want to do everything.

OLIVETO: Right. I want to make movies. I want to do more print. I actually have a photography website of my own stuff. Just when I get bored I’ll drag anything out in the sun and shoot it, you know. I’m working with my nephews on some things. Whatever it is, if it’s something to play with, it’s what I want to do.

M: You know, now that the digital age is upon us, what do you feel about that, versus the film?

OLIVETO: I still think some of the images look better on film. Digital’s more fun to play with, though. There’s no --

M: It’s so easy.

OLIVETO: Well, yeah. There’s no chemicals involved, you don’t have to be in the darkroom, it’s much cleaner. But there is fill, I think they should make students, if they go to art school, actually do things the old way first. Because what happens is your eye gets really lazy. And I had that problem with a kid in Santa Barbara when I worked there. He would go out and shoot something and he’d bring it back and I’d say, “It doesn’t fit the layout,” “Oh, don’t worry, I’ll Photoshop it,” and, or I’d say, “Well, this isn’t right,” “Yeah, don’t worry, I’ll Photoshop it,” and they’d say, “OK, so how many hours are you going to spend Photoshopping it?” and he’s like, “Well, what does it
matters?” I’m like, “Well, it matters if I’m hiring you freelance because the shot that you should have did in let’s say four hours, you’re now costing me 12 hours. You’re not understanding why it’s important to actually, you’re looking at it, you need to see it. Two different things,” and he never got it. He would just roll his eyes at me and go, “Yay,” at his Photoshop. [41:00]

I get there’s Photoshop. We’re not debating there’s Photoshop. I’m debating you’re not seeing what you’re looking at.

M: So it’s not just you, you know, not being up with the times, it’s money, practicality, time.

OLIVETO: Right. I don’t get to play if you don’t give me money. You have to trust me with your money or I don’t get to play.

M: And do you feel that’s a common thing? With people coming in new to the business, they’re taking shortcuts?

OLIVETO: Oh, yeah. I worked for, I’ve been hired by the same company in California five different times, whether it’s been directly or indirectly. The last time I got hired, they hired me to mentor these younger art directors and the thing is, you know let’s say, I think one of their projects was they were going to have cosmetics in the store. So I ran out maybe 12 different layouts in very different ways.
Here’s the layout that’s going to cost you the least amount of money upfront, but in the long run it’s going to cost you more, and here’s why. And here’s the layout that’s going to cost you the most amount of money to shoot, but in the long run it will actually be cheaper.

And this is what you need to know if you want to be an art director is how to explain this. The one kid put his layouts up and everything’s a night shot with this, that and the other thing and 12 models in it and I looked at him and I said, “Do you know how much this is going to cost to shoot?” and his answer was, “I don’t care, I just have to do the layout,” well, not if you really want to be an art director, you need to care and you need to know why that one model cost one thing, 12 models cost another. Now you’re on a night shoot, now you’re out in the street, there’s permits. You’re adding up the cost that that layout might have taken you a half hour to do, but the actual cost of that layout is something you need to understand. And this is what they don’t teach you in school. So I used to make jokes, “What do they teach you in school? What exactly are they teaching you?” you know.

M: You said mostly, that most of the stuff that you, as an art director, you don’t learn in school. [43:00]
OLIVETO: No. Not that I ever learned. Which it might be different. I haven’t been in an art --

M: Do you work to go to the school? Or was that?

OLIVETO: I think yes and no. Most of these things I’ve learned are from my co-op, every job I’ve ever had in the last 30 years has because of the experience I’ve done at my internship, co-op, whatever you want to call it.

M: So basically, you know, (inaudible) just get in there.

OLIVETO: Yeah. Ask as many dumb questions as you can possibly answer, even if you already know the answer to them, somebody might have a different answer.

M: And what do you do when you’re on set? And done everything. Prepared it. You have the layout. You’ve got the photographer, everything, but you’re not getting the shots you want. It’s not right. What do you do?

OLIVETO: You stop everybody. You just say, “Stop,” and sometimes you re-talk it through or sometimes, there’s two thoughts to that. You stop it and you kind of re-group, or you let it work its way out of it. [44:00] There’s some things that just, you know, I’m talking, you’re not getting it, the model’s not getting it. They’re annoyed, I can tell they’re annoyed. They’re not getting what they want. Or they’re not feeling it. So you just let it go and all of the sudden it’ll click and take off.
M: They all just get like that second wind.

OLIVETO: Right. You know, they’ve gone through every horrible thing they could possibly go through. It’s not working. And then all of the sudden something works.

M: Like an actor who’s doing a scene but it’s not clicking and just all of the sudden they forget they’re acting and oh, we got it.

OLIVETO: Right. Something like that. But, it’s like everybody’s usually -- it usually does work. There’s always, there’s little horrible times when it doesn’t work, but they’re very few and far between. I’ve learned that I am very definite about what I’m telling you and I believe it, you believe it. If I start going, “Hm --” then you start doing it. It’s like having kids. [45:00] In a way. I believe this, you need to believe it.

M: Very specific.

OLIVETO: Mm-hmm. I’ve always been told that I’ve been very direct. So.

M: Now also, I know when people get better at things they, it takes less time to prepare. You know, would you say that preparation is key for success?

OLIVETO: For this, yes. The thing is, you plan it and you plan it and you plan it and you have to let it go and see what happens.
M: Now do you find sometimes that you’ve done this so much that sometimes you wing something?

OLIVETO: No.

M: Or prepare a little less?

OLIVETO: No.

M: So you always prepare the same way each time. You never take a shortcut or like, I’ve got this, this is cake, I’m just going to sort of, you know.

OLIVETO: Well, then you’re assuming if I don’t do it the way I do it, you’re assuming that every single person on that crew has all the information in my head that I have. And they don’t, because they haven’t been in the meetings. So if I come to you, you’re the photographer and I go, “You know, you don’t need a schedule, it’s just [46:00] those clothes,” you’re going to look at me and go, “What?” like you didn’t see the clothes, you didn’t hear the meetings, I’m not giving you that information. How do you know how to make the pictures in your head? I haven’t given you enough information that you can make a picture in your head. So how does that work if I don’t give you all that information?

M: So you always, each time you present, you know, all the flavors, (inaudible) all names (inaudible) mentioned that they need in a packet or fill in a conversation and --
OLIVETO: I will present all the layouts and then I will make a storyboard of the layouts. Because if you look at individual layouts, let’s say there’s this Red Bull, we’re going to prop some 48 pages. If you only focus on one layout you’ll forget that there’s eight million other layouts that it needs to go across. So now you’ve got the storyboard, along with the individual layouts. And then because most people in our field are visual, they won’t read notes. But if I color-code it, they’ll go after the [47:00] color that I told them their color was. And they will focus on that color and they will remember what that shot is. So when I work with seven photographers in a week and they all have the same 48 pages of layouts and let’s say four are shooting still life and three are shooting fashion, the fashion photographer A is yellow, photographer B is blue, photographer C is green. I highlight the boxes that are their images, I write it on the bottom and then I color-code the breakdown sheet of what shots everything is. And they will fixate on that color and they will remember it.

M: And how long does this whole thing take for a --

OLIVETO: It takes me longer to put my pre-production meeting together, but in the end everybody’s very clear about what
they need to do and very rarely do I get asked a second question.

M: So like a week or more? Two weeks?

OLIVETO: At least two weeks. But you know, it depends on the project, how big it is. For Mervyn’s, a 48-page tab [48:00] could have almost 700 shots in it that have to get done in a week. So I have to know where everything is. I have to know who’s shooting what, and again, I’ve color-coded. All the way down to the person that packs everything and ships it, and there’s who has what color and where it goes. The visual people respond to visual things. If you go to a pre-production meeting and you don’t have some kind of system in place, like mine’s color, what you’ll see is everybody around that table will start flipping through everything. Because they want to see it. And then they’ll start writing their own notes. And then they’ll start doing things and I know within five minutes nobody’s listening to me. But if I sit at that table and I hand out the packets and I go, “This is your color, this is your color, this is your color,” they focus right in on what they need to know.

M: And do you ever find that people come in and don’t look at the packet?
OLIVETO: Then they have to answer to me. Because then I’ll say, “Excuse me, where’s your packet?”

M: But that’s happened before. They’ll say no --

OLIVETO: It can, but if you’ve worked with me long enough you don’t usually do that.

M: Now do you prepare the models as well? Or are they last to know?

OLIVETO: They’re probably more last to know, but I will run through scenarios with them. And I’m --

M: On the day of? Or before?

OLIVETO: No, usually on the day of because I don’t get to see them. But the thing is, you never, I’m always amazed at art directors that stand there and say, “Do something, honey,” what does that mean? You know. Like. So, but after a while, I’ve worked with enough models, we used to start giving them little scenarios, like what’s my motivation. Or we’d start making up stories so that they actually get looser in front of the camera because now they think they’re actually doing film. So I’ll say, “Walk in from this side, you know, you’ve just run into a girlfriend you haven’t seen in 25 years,” and even though you’re doing stills, it keeps them away from doing the, I call it the “bunny shot.” (laughter) How many catalogues have you seen where a model does this? You know, the bunny
stands up on its back legs and his paws immediately, the bunny shot.

M: Is that for guys as well?

OLIVETO: Guys do the “watch shot.”

M: Oh, the watch.

OLIVETO: You know. Eddie Murphy has a really funny thing on that. But you can always tell when the art director isn’t talking a lot or the art director’s like just going, “Yeah, do something, honey,” because then you get the bunny shot with the toe out.

M: Because people, when they come in, they want to be told what to do, they want to know their feedback --

OLIVETO: Well, if you don’t help somebody, how are they going to know what to do? If you don’t, it’s like making movies. Somebody’s saying to that actor, “You’re really mad in this shot,” or “You’re not mad in this shot,” or “You’re happy,” or you’re something. Otherwise, you know, “How are you doing?” just that sentence, comes off like a zillion ways, depending on what the direction is.

M: Now you said that you know or you have experience in all facets of (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) --

OLIVETO: Not everything. I’m not an electrician. (laughs)
M: [51:00] Have you been in front of the camera? Have you worked that, where people are giving you direction and you have to --

OLIVETO: I’ve been a stunt model.

M: A stunt model.

OLIVETO: That’s what I call it, stunt modeling. You know, you stay, you’re in front of the camera until the model’s ready, which is hard, because I’m about a foot shorter than every model.

M: But even like, you know, doing photography, definitely have somebody shooting you and giving you direction.

OLIVETO: I’m bad in front of a camera. I get very self-conscious and I hate it.

M: Well, I think you’re beautiful here, but I mean you should --

OLIVETO: (whispers) Oh, I love him.

M: (laughs) Take a look, take a look. But do you think it would be a fun challenge? Do you think that would even take you further in what you’re doing, in a way? That you could feel that?

OLIVETO: It doesn’t hurt. But I’m not as extroverted. I’m happier being behind the camera and everybody knows who’s in charge and I just kind of make things happen.
M: No, but when, wouldn’t it add something to being behind the camera?

OLIVETO: You’re probably right.

M: Like a director taking acting class. It doesn’t mean you can be in the movie, but just to understand --

OLIVETO: Oh, I definitely agree. It’s just working myself up to that would take a while.

M: Oh, OK.

OLIVETO: I don’t, like I said, it’s not my thing. I get very nervous in front of cameras.

M: That would be a challenge.

OLIVETO: It would be a huge challenge. It would be harder than directing 30 people on set, in my opinion. So. That would be my humble opinion. So.

M: And so since we’re almost out of tape --

OLIVETO: There you go. (laughs)

M: I know you’re excited about that. The main thing that stuck with me on this one is, you know, the work ethic and also I think about being a leader. I think in society today, we hear leadership and blah-blah-blah, nobody really knows what that is. It’s like you know, or how to break it down. You know, you don’t have to tell, you know, what would that be? [53:00] You don’t always have to tell people what to do and throw your weight around. Like what
are three key things about being a leader, to close this off?

OLIVETO: Well, you don’t, you don’t order people around, because people work with you, they don’t work for you. And that’s a huge difference, number one. Number two, if you’re in charge, people need to know you’re not going to throw them under the bus. And I’ve said that to people. Like, “I’m in charge, I will take responsibility for something,” if something goes wrong, it is ultimately my fault. And enough people have seen me take that responsibility, that they’ll trust me more. And if somebody on your crew comes up with a brilliant idea, you give them credit for it. So it makes people feel safe, it makes them feel empowered to come to you and it makes, you know, we’re back to my thing of fairness. It’s fair. So in my lifetime I’ve had at least 20 people say, “If you move or you start a company, I’m there,” and I think that’s the biggest compliment you can get, [54:00] that somebody trusts you that much.

M: That they want to come along with you.

OLIVETO: Mm-hmm. It’s, it’s a nice way for people to show like that they care or they respect you, because I respect them back.

M: So (sirens) trust, fairness --
OLIVETO: Yeah, and giving people credit where credit’s due.

M: And what would that be? What would that additive be?

OLIVETO: I have no idea. It just makes you a decent person.

(laughs)

M: All right, great.

OLIVETO: OK.

M: We ended on -- [54:28]

END OF AUDIO FILE