Tiegs

SICULAR: Hi. Hi, my name is Patty Sicular, and I’m director of archives at the Ford Model Agency in New York City. Together with Professor Karen Cannell from Fashion Institute of Technology, we are collaborating in archiving the history of fashion, beauty, photography, and Ford models. We are in Los Angeles, California, so lucky to be interviewing Cheryl Tiegs, who’s an icon to us all, and today’s date is July 21, 2010. [01:00] We are so thrilled to be interviewing you, so thank you so much.

TIEGS: Well, Patty, it’s my pleasure, and it’s family to me -- you, and Eileen, and Jerry.

SICULAR: Thank you, but you’ve been an icon to a whole generation, mine included. We all grew up with you, and we’re thrilled. So I know you started out in Minnesota -- you were born there -- and how did you get to California?

TIEGS: Yeah, I was born in Minnesota on a farm, and for some reason, my father thought that nirvana was California, so...

SICULAR: It is.

TIEGS: Well, he just -- we came in a little airstream trailer and parked ourselves in California, and that’s where I grew up.
SICULAR: And how did you get to modeling? How did you start modeling?

TIEGS: I was in high school, and a small town agent was the speaker for our little girls’ group, and he was a model and agent, and he just said, “Come on up and see me sometime,” but he said it to 10 out of 12 girls, so I was not singled out. [02:00] I was not a shining star. But I went up and saw him, and I started really slowly, and I worked part-time in high school and then worked part-time in college, before I hit New York.

SICULAR: And then you went to Nina Blanchard first, right?

TIEGS: And then I went to Nina Blanchard. I was always afraid of calling Nina, because I thought I would have to pay her something like $3,000 a month just to join her agency, which obviously is not true. And, out there, I mean -- nobody should pay an agent anything until you get a -- they get a percentage of what you earn. So I was a little confused in the beginning, and Nina was my mentor.

SICULAR: Everybody loved Nina. So, what were some of your first bookings for, and were you doing teen type bookings or womanly bookings then?

TIEGS: Oh my God, no. I did teen -- I did Teen Magazine; I did Seventeen. I think my first cover was for Modern Romance, and I was so proud. I was so --
SICULAR: We always ask everybody what their first cover was for, and how they felt when they saw it. [03:00]

TIEGS: Well, I was so happy, and I was very shy as a teenager, but I do remember asking my girlfriends to come down to the local grocery store and see myself on this cover of *Modern Romance*. And it was just a pretty head shot, really nice, very sweet. And I definitely started as a young ingénue and eventually worked my way up to *Glamour Magazine*, which was slightly older than *Teen* and *Seventeen*, and then did a lot of work with *Glamour*.

SICULAR: *Glamour Magazine*?

TIEGS: Mm-hmm.

SICULAR: And then, how did you find your way to Jerry and Eileen Ford? Did Nina introduce you?

TIEGS: Nina introduced me to Jerry and Eileen, and they took me under their wing.

SICULAR: Did you live with them?

TIEGS: I never lived with Jerry and Eileen, no. I know that a lot of girls did, but Eileen and Jerry were always very protective and very loving [04:00], and I would go out to their country house, and we would have lunches at 21. They always -- Eileen was always very honest about what was going on in my personal life and professional life, so -- and Jerry was always, you know, softening the blows,
because she would always tell me exactly what she thought I should do, or which steps I should take or whatever, you know. It was very motherly, and he was always very gentle.

SICULAR: And did you feel very close to your booking team? Did you have bookers, or did Eileen take your bookings, then? Did you feel very protected?

TIEGS: Eileen didn’t personally take my bookings, but then, when I was with the Ford agency, I started getting big contracts, and then Jerry would, you know -- we’d sit down and have big pow-wows with me and the companies and all of that, so that was a bit of negotiating [05:00]-- a little more serious than the day-to-day bookings.

SICULAR: Did you -- did they send you to Europe to build up a portfolio and (inaudible)?

TIEGS: I went over to Europe, and I worked for Elle Magazine, say, for two weeks straight -- worked so hard -- but I got the covers, and I got the tear sheets, and that was important to me. Yes, I did go over to Europe. I guess that’s one of the steps that you do. And then, I went over there for Italian Vogue, and I went over later. When I was in my early twenties, I gained quite a bit of weight, and I was up to 170 pounds, and so everybody stopped booking me. So I learned about nutrition and diet and health and fitness and all that, and I took a couple of years off, and
in that time, I grew into a woman, a young woman, and then I started with Vogue and Bazaar and the more sophisticated magazines. [06:00]

SICULAR: Did you realize how special -- I mean, when did you feel like, “Wow, I really made it”? At what point -- or was it with the first little Romance cover?

TIEGS: Well, you know, you feel you make it in different stages. And yes, my first cover, Sports Illustrated covers, CoverGirl, and then eventually Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, and then Time Magazine. And then, Time Magazine -- I knew that I couldn’t go any further, so I -- that’s when I veered off and started licensing and all that. In modeling, I was always competitive only with myself, not with another girl, and if another girl got the job, I’d say, “Good for you -- it wasn’t right for me.” I had no competition with any of the other models at all, ever. And so I always thought, “I’m going to go as far as I can go,” because there’s no way you can say, “I’m going to become the top model -- the top model.” [07:00] You cannot say that, because there are all kinds of things, you know, that could be stopping you, from -- maybe you’re not the look that they want; maybe you’re not tall enough; maybe you’re not short enough; maybe you’re not, you know, it just...

SICULAR: So many variables.
TIEGS: You only do the best you can, and you can only do the best you can with yourself.

SICULAR: What were -- before you started modeling, when you were young, did you read Seventeen or other fashion magazines? Were you into fashion and beauty then -- like when you were 11 or 12 or 13, I suppose?

TIEGS: I couldn’t even afford to buy a magazine, so I would always run next door, and my girlfriend would have Seventeen or whatever, and she’d open it up, and she’d say, “Cheryl, you can be a model,” and I’d look at her like she was crazy. These girls are from another planet. You know, they’re not really, you know, healthy human beings like you and me, you know. And I just thought they were from another world [08:00], and I just thought I could never do that -- “You’re out of your mind.” And then, I started slowly, and I just found that these other girls were really nice.

SICULAR: Was your perception different when you started modeling than when you were really at the top of your game with Sports Illustrated and so on? Do you -- was it what you thought it would be?

TIEGS: It was always what I thought it would be. It was very glamorous, and it was wonderful. When I did Sports Illustrated, there would be me and the editor and a
photographer -- period -- and a suitcase full of bathing suits. That’s it. Today, it is videos and teams and assistants and cars, and it’s just like -- 50 people go on the photo shoot. So it’s a little different. It’s a very glamorous business, in that -- you’re made up into something a little different than who you are, and that’s fun. Of course, at the end of the day, you take it off [09:00] -- you know, like Cinderella -- and get back to yourself. I never had a complaint about it. The thing is that every single day, you go into a situation where there’s a whole new group of people, so you learn a lot about people. You learn a lot about yourself. Do you like everyone that you meet every day? No, but you learn how to focus on the ones that you like, kind of stay away from the ones that you don’t, and it’s a -- psychologically, I mean, it’s fascinating.

I earned a lot of money. You could book out when I didn’t want to work. I traveled the world. I worked hard; I worked really hard, though. You know, you get up sometimes at 3:00 in the morning to get to a location, and you finish at 11:00 at night, and then you start all over the next day. But when I was young and I first moved to New York, that’s all I wanted to wanted to do. I didn’t really have a social life. [10:00] All I just wanted to do
was work. I was so happy.

SICULAR: It’s so funny because I worked at Ford when you were a model there, and I know you weren’t there a whole lot, because you were booking most of the time, working out of the office. But once in awhile, when you came into the office -- the townhouse -- there would be hushed tones -- “Cheryl Tiegs is in the office,” and all the bookers from the different divisions would, like, sneak a peek, because a place like Ford has the most beautiful models in the world, but there was always a higher echelon, and you were the higher echelon. So when people like you came in, you know, it would be -- on our phones, but then, “Cheryl Tiegs is in the office,” and we’d take turns, you know, having a reason to go to accounting, [which was next to us?], to sneak a peek.

TIEGS: I was never really aware of that, or -- sometimes, people will say, as I walk through a restaurant -- “Oh my God, did you hear them say there is Cheryl Tiegs?” I’m not really aware of it, because I was just so rooted in my Minnesota background that I don’t really -- I’m not really aware of that. [11:00] And you know, people think that celebrities or top models or whatever live in pink clouds, you know, and that everything is good, and everything is great, and nothing bad happens. And if it does happen, you
know, we kind of poo-poo it, because we all have feelings, and hard days, and bumps in the road, and mountains to climb, and you know, we’re just -- we’re all in this together, and we’re all just human beings. I mean, I’m exactly the same as you are -- we’re just in different skin, and you’ve got brown hair, and I’ve got blonde hair.

SICULAR: Uh, no, I don’t think we’re exactly the same.

(laughter) I’m five foot one. We’re not quite exactly the same. But I’m about to go home and look in the mirror and say, “I’m just like Cheryl Tiegs.” When you worked, did you prefer working with the same team -- like the same photographers, the same hair and makeup people -- or did you like changing it up with different teams?

TIEGS: I did like working with the same people, because then we could get into a pattern. And it didn’t happen that often [12:00], but when we could get the group together, it was fantastic, because that was then my little community. You know, sometimes, I would sit in a beauty salon or whatever, and I would see the people say, “Good-bye, good night, say hi to Grandma. How’s your sister? Happy birthday,” whatever. And I would look at them jealously, really, and with envy, and say, you know, “They have a community that they know each other so well.” And I never had that. It was always a very independent career, which
is good, but kind of lonely, sometimes.

SICULAR: I think people were probably afraid to approach you --
to respect your privacy -- is really it.

TIEGS: Yes, people are afraid to approach me, but then, some
people aren’t. (laughter) But I would say, for the most
part, people are very gracious.

SICULAR: And you spoke about your favorite people. Who were
some of the favorite -- who were some of the greats you met
along the way that you got to work with? [13:00]

TIEGS: Scavullo and I worked quite a bit. Avedon was my
neighbor in Montauk, and a friend, and I worked with him.
Bill Connors, who’s up in heaven now -- I traveled with
him. You know, when you travel together, and you work
together, and really, you learn a lot about people when you
travel, and oh, we had laughs and oh, we had such good
times. And there were times I would be so tired, and I’d
be taking a photograph of a cover for Glamour Magazine, and
I remember just tears rolling down my cheeks, because I was
a young girl, and I was so tired. I was just worn out, and
I was just overwhelmed, and Bill was the photographer, but
he was there to say, “Let’s do the cover later -- let’s go
get a hot fudge sundae,” which was just the right words
that I wanted to hear at that time.

SICULAR: But people don’t understand models that are in demand
like you. They’re always getting on a plane and running, running, running, running, and never a day off, [14:00] because people are always for fighting for your time.

TIEGS: Yes, but people are fighting for your time, and you can be overworked and overbooked, and --

SICULAR: It’s true.

TIEGS: -- exhausted, but you have control of that. If you reach that point, just book out and don’t work for two weeks -- hello.

SICULAR: A lot of people are afraid. Before we end, I just want to know, what are some of the bookings that you’re most proud of, whether it’s editorial or campaigns?

TIEGS: Certainly, *Sports Illustrated* and *Time Magazine*. I loved going to Brazil. [Manale’s?] is one of my nearest and dearest in my heart. Then, there was Helmut Newton -- I’ve been there for *Vogue* and *Sports Illustrated* -- so I loved being on the Amazon, and the butterflies are this big, and the snakes -- and it’s just amazing. So I like that. [15:00] I liked meeting all the interesting people, and, as a model, and the more well-known you get, the more you can just kind of pick up the phone and say, “Hi, I want to meet you,” you know, and they know who you are already, so you’ve already gone past all the small talk and whatever. So that’s nice.
SICULAR: Do you have any last thoughts before we end?

TIEGS: My son just graduated, and for his graduation, I said, "Keep your feet on the ground and keep reaching for the stars," and that’s what I done all my life, is really -- literally, keep your feet on the ground. I go hiking all the time. And also, metaphorically, just keep yourself grounded and just keep reaching out.

SICULAR: Thank you, Cheryl. We just have to do the --

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