



Storytellers @RPL
Interviewee: Virginia Hyman
Interviewer: Sarah Kiefer
Recorded on September 7, 2017

SARAH: My name is Sarah Kiefer. Today is September 7, 2017. I'm speaking with Virginia Hyman. We are recording this interview over the phone. Thank you again, Virginia, for agreeing to do this oral history for our "Storytellers at RPL." I'm excited to learn a little bit about your story. So to start, can you tell us a little bit about how you came to live in Ridgewood and when?

VIRGINIA: I came when I was 8 years old. My family knew another family who lived in Ridgewood, and they liked Ridgewood. So they decided to move here.

SARAH: And you've been here ever since?

VIRGINIA: Yes. More or less. For ten years my husband and I lived in Manhattan and Brooklyn, and then moved out when our daughter was eight years old. And lived here ever since.

SARAH: Since you had different time periods that you lived here, can you talk a little bit about your fond memories of maybe growing up in Ridgewood and then raising your children here in Ridgewood?

VIRGINIA: Sure. Sure. Well, it was wonderful moving out here. We lived in a nice residential area near Westchester, in the Bronx, and it was very nice and residential, but it wasn't "countrified." And one of my fondest memories—you know, we went back and forth to school for lunch, too, so I had four trips back and forth to elementary school. And I rode my bicycle through the fields—it was between Steilen and Van Dien. There was no Valley Hospital or parking lot. There was no junior high school, B.F. Junior High School—it was just all fields. And the school was called Harrison Avenue, now it's called Travell.

So that's one of my fondest memories-- the openness, you know, that I could ride through fields and see how it changed over the seasons. And there were other places that I walked through swamps, near the Duck Pond, where I now live. So it was that memory, of the openness of the fields, that I remember best.

But also, because it was wartime, there was gas rationing, so we used our bikes and walked a lot. And I remember the freedom of my bike. I could take my bike anywhere I wanted. The fondest memory was of going to Pease Library—that was the only library—and I would have a basket, and I would fill my basket each week with new books. And we had no television, so that was a major pleasure for me.

And then summers at Graydon, and riding through what was then a country road, part of a country road, on the way to a place there that I went to, to Williger and Wakefield, which had been an ice factory, cause the Duck Pond was next door. But then it became an ice cream place--dairy and so forth. And then, I'd do some shopping for my mother at Williger and Wakefield. But uptown—most of the landmarks were there when I was a child. But what I remember best were a hardware store, where they still had straw on the floor, and an A&P market where they still had straw where the meat was sold. So it was a much more provincial and quaint town than it is now.

But it still was a wonderful town to grow up in. And because of the war, there was a great sense of community. There were air raid wardens, we collected money, we collected silver foil for the war effort. I worked at the Red Cross, rolling bandages, knitting. I remember in school, the teachers allowed us to knit. They thought we were knitting socks for the soldiers—sometimes we were, sometimes we were knitting our own. So those are the fondest memories then.

And later on, one of my fondest memories was walking away from Valley Hospital at dawn--my daughter had just given birth to her first child, our first grandson, and we were walking home from the successful birth. That was a memorable experience. Leave it at there, and let you go on with your questions.

SARAH: Well, those are some really good memories, and, along those lines, can you share a little bit about your family history, because when we talked earlier, you talked about having multiple generations of your family....

VIRGINIA: Yeah, yeah, the most important person in my life was, of course, my husband. He was 10 years older, and had been a Flying Tiger and had been in the Air Force and in India and China for four years. So when I met him, he was a veteran at Columbia, and I was an undergraduate, and we hit it off right away. He had a larger perspective. He was more interested, even though he was an English major, he was more interested in political science and philosophy. I learned almost everything I know from him. And when we were married, we had a phrase that we used—It was from Milton—it was Eve's speech to Adam in which she says, "With thee conversing, I forget all time, all seasons and their change, all please alike." And he goes on. But that was, for 50 years, we had a conversation, and it was wonderful.

Then we had a daughter, Laura, and I must preface this--every one of the graduates of Ridgewood High School has turned out a professional. She became a clinical psychologist. She's practicing in Ridgewood, and she's been practicing, I don't know,

for 20 years or so, and doing very well. And she had two children who are my grandchildren, and one has become a lawyer, and one is in medical school, and they're doing very well.

I attribute it to the education at Ridgewood High because, even though we had some complaints at the time, they went swimmingly through college and through graduate school. And they attribute it to the support they got went in the Ridgewood schools. They went all through the Ridgewood Schools.

My son-in-law is a biophysicist. And my father was a banker, and he commuted back and forth to Wall Street every day. And my aunt was one of the first stenographers, secretaries, in Wall Street because it was World War I, and there weren't any men and so she was one of the first women secretaries on Wall Street. And she worked there for 50 years or more, and was very proud of her job. So that's my family background.

SARAH: You mentioned also as well that you taught at Ridgewood High School for about 5 years.

VIRGINIA: Oh, yes, yeah. When I graduated from Ridgewood High, I thought that was going to be the end of it. And so we lived in Manhattan, cause I went to Barnard, Columbia, and my husband taught at Brooklyn College, and continued for, I don't know, 25 years or however, long. So we were living in Brooklyn, but we visited my mother often in Ridgewood. And we had come back from vacation one year when my daughter was eight, and she'd been going to private school in Brooklyn Heights, and she said, "I wanna move here." She said, "I really want to live in Ridgewood." It was September, the beginning of September, and I said, "Well, I'll see." I'll contact the Ed. Center and see if...and sure enough, there was a teaching job. I already had one but they said, yes, you can start right away, and that's how I got started teaching at Ridgewood High and I taught for five years.

And they were the best students in the world—I had a marvelous time. But then one day one of my students said, "Mrs. Hyman, why aren't you teaching in college?" And I thought, "You know, that's a pretty good idea." So I went back and finished my graduate work and taught at Rutgers Newark for the next 20 years.

But my children went all through the Ridgewood school system then, and did very well. And one of my happiest memories was picking up my grandchildren at Willard with a dog, our dog, and the dog remembered it fondly for years later. So that's the story.

SARAH: So, you went back to graduate school—what was your degree in?

VIRGINIA: Um, English and comparative literature. Doctorate.

SARAH: And then you said you taught at Rutgers for a while? How different was that?

VIRGINIA: Yeah, 20 years.

SARAH: 20 years!

VIRGINIA: Most of my teaching career after Ridgewood High School, I taught at Rutgers Newark, yeah. And that was a very, very good experience. And when you asked, what the highlights of my career were, there were some in the classroom. And one particularly, in high school, that was a real highlight. I taught “Hamlet” every year, as we were required to do, in senior year, and I used recordings and so forth. And then one year, I had a film, a very good film—and we went down to the auditorium to look at it, and when Hamlet came on the stage, on the screen, all the boys whistled and cheered, and I knew that “Hamlet” had gotten through to them. He had become their hero. It was a highlight. It was one of those times that you never forget, you know, that you had been somewhat successful in conveying your enthusiasm for literature to your students.

SARAH: And you continued staying involved in the educational system, right? You worked on the Board of Education in Ridgewood?

VIRGINIA: Yes, after I was teaching at college, one of the requirements for tenure was voluntary work, and so I ran for the Board of Education. I was on the Board for three years, but it did take too much time away from my teaching, so I can only say....But I saw changes that--one of the major changes that we made, and I have regrets now, is that we decided we continued to emphasize the sports. And I realized when my grandchildren went through high school that that was *the* major emphasis. And we emphasized it because we wanted to keep the kids away from drugs and all the other things, and it certainly did. My grandson became a runner and owes much of his perseverance and whatever to “Coach.” He called him “Coach”--I don't know who the coach was, but he was kind of a father figure, so... And he did establish great self-discipline, but I think at the expense of paying the attention he should have to academics, although he got by.

And my granddaughter, too, was in band-- it was a big, it became a big thing, and it occupied her a great deal. So, I saw changes in the school system as I was both a teacher, having been a student, and then having been a teacher, and then seeing my daughter go through the school system, and my grandchildren go through the school system—and the outcomes were fantastic. Everyone became a professional, they got along beautifully, and I attribute it to the high school.

I think I had the more academic education and I owe it to certain teachers and I really want--may I mention their names?

SARAH: Of course, yes.

VIRGINIA: Okay, the major teacher that I owe so much to was Helen McClure. She was a French teacher, and she lived nearby, and she went out of her way to teach us.

She made classes like a private school. And I learned how to learn with her, and she she expected so much. In the second year she had us come in before school and make book reports on books we had read in French, and we had to report in French. And I read “Les Miserables”-- the audacity of a second-year French student reading “Les Miserables” and reporting in French—it was remarkable.

But she did other things. I don't know what the teachers have done—I didn't do it—she served us in the cafeteria, the whole class, a whole French dinner, including the best bouillabaisse I've ever had in my life. It was wonderful! And also she had a French Christmas program where we had to learn Christmas carols in French, and we had to—the person who was performing, read the Bible in French. Everything was done in French, and it required many performances, and she was kind enough to pick me up—this was the time of gas rationing—pick me up and take me to rehearsals, take me back, and it was, it was memorable! I still remember those Christmas carols. And I don't think we had an audience except ourselves. We may have had a small audience, but it was just for ourselves, the performance. And she knew so well how to teach, it was remarkable.

And the second person who was most influential was not in the school system, but might have been—she was one of the old families. Her name was Dora Goodbody, and she ran the program for the Girl Scout Camp, and for four years I went to the Girl Scout camp that she was running in Central Valley, and that's where I made many friends. But I learned the basic values that I carried with me all my life. And at one point, I had some kind of crisis, and she happened to notice it. She took me very subtly aside and spoke to me a little bit about, you know, carrying on and all that stuff, and at the end of the summer—she always gave out awards-- I got the “Great Camper” award, because she had watched me. That is a remarkable thing, running a big camp and running it so beautifully, and, at the same time, being aware of specific problems.

So those two people...And then a third person was the dean of students at the high school, and apparently she knew us all so well, that she gave us the interview when we were planning for college. And she recommended to my sister that she become a cadet nurse. And sure enough, my sister joined the cadet nurse and became a nurse with a BS and RN in nursing. And she recommended that I go to Barnard. And, I'd heard of it, but she said, “No, no, you should go to Barnard.” And it was the greatest recommendation anyone ever gave, opened up a whole new aspect of my life.

So many of the teachers were all so kind, and so generous with their time and their energies that one couldn't help but learn and enjoy.

How's that? That enough?

SARAH: That is perfect, yes. Thank you. And you've continued with your degree and your literary love by doing a book club here at the Ridgewood Public Library.

VIRGINIA: Yes.

SARAH: Can you talk a little about that?

VIRGINIA: Yes, yes, the librarian—and she was the one who started your center, I think, and I can't remember her name cause she's retired now...

SARAH: Peggy Norris.

VIRGINIA: Yes. She asked for volunteers, and she wanted me to help with the archives. I took one look at the archives, and I said, "This is not what I do. I cannot do that, I didn't do it for my doctorate, I cannot do this." And she said, "What would you like to do?" And I said, "You know, I miss teaching, I've been retired for a while, I miss teaching. Maybe a book group." She said, "Why not?" And that's how it started. And it's been going on for 15 or so years.

The other part of it was, I was at the library one time, with a new committee, and they were thinking of what the library should do, and a fellow and I were shocked that all they wanted to do was to buy computers, and they were getting rid of the books. And they said, the reason they did was—if they weren't used in three years, they just got rid of them.

Well, I'd had an experience where I was looking for something on James Monroe. There was nothing in the library on James Monroe, except in the children's section. But there were three biographies of Marilyn Monroe, and I said, "No, this should not be."

So, he and I thought, "Well, why don't we start a book group which uses the most important books, so they will stay in circulation." So, that was really the main idea behind it. And then the people came and have been coming, had always wanted—they choose their own books. We sent out a list and they add to the list, but they only wanted to choose books that needed study and discussion. Anything that they could read on their own was fine, and they said there were many book clubs, modern fiction, so we wanted to read the classics that we never got to read and always felt we should. So that was the criterion for choosing the book, and we have gone through, in the last 15 whatever years, many of them, and now they're going to be part of the permanent collection that the library has, and that answers your last question, "What did I want to leave as a heritage," and it's those books. And, hopefully, the book group will continue, because, for me, it has been the most pleasurable of my after-retirement occupation.

SARAH: Is there a particular book or discussion that sticks out in your memory, that you maybe want to talk little bit about? Or are there too many?

VIRGINIA: I think there are too many. I think what happens—it's marvelous. Someone introduces the author, just briefly, and then we go into the major discussion. The excitement, the involvement of the people is so great, that each time I start by thinking nobody's coming--I know nobody's coming, because I get there early and it's empty, you know. And then, sure enough, about 20 people show up, and the

excitement is so—and I walk away like I've had a glass of champagne. And everybody else does, too. Almost every discussion ends on this feeling that, my goodness, we've covered a lot in this short time.

So there's not one particular book that...almost all of them from Milton to Dante--of course, we don't do the whole Milton, we didn't do the whole of Dante—we did Joyce, the last chapter of "Ulysses," and that's one of my goals. I might like to do "Ulysses" with the group, but that would take the whole--six weeks or more, you know, time.

But, no, there is not one that stands out. They're all marvelous. All the discussions have been--I think that's why it continues because, they choose, so they're interested to begin with. And it's a self-selected group, needless to say.

SARAH: So you talked about leaving the books and the book group as sort of a legacy here. But, looking ahead, is there anything else you plan to work towards?

VIRGINIA: No, really, I'd like to leave Ridgewood a little better than when I came, and the only thing I can think, because Pease Library was so important to me, I'd like to leave the Ridgewood Library a little bit—perhaps, with this heritage of the selected books, they promised me that they're not going to, you know, be discarded--because they are the great classics of literature, and not just English literature, of literature in general. So that's really the thing.

And also I'm hoping that my grandchildren come back and live in Ridgewood. You know that book, *You Can't Go Home Again*. Well, you can tell the parents, "Yes, they can." I came home, my daughter and her husband came home to Ridgewood, and I'm hoping that my grandchildren will, too, when they look back and realize the advantages of being in Ridgewood for their children and themselves.

SARAH: It's amazing that you have the different generations that grew up here, to see all those changes over the years, and, like you said, leave it a little bit better. It's great. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about, whether it's family, work, volunteering?

VIRGINIA: No, I don't think so, unless you have a specific one. I think the change in Ridgewood—of course, change is inevitable. And some of it's wonderful. Ridgewood was a little quaint town, it really was. It was very nice, but it was a little quaint, with the straw on the floor and so forth. And people are nostalgic for it. But it's far more cosmopolitan now, and that's a wonderful thing. I mean, that we have the restaurants and so forth, and the school system has kept pace pretty much.

The only thing that I regret is the leisure, that we had more leisure than the students today. And I saw it with my daughter and then with my grandchildren--the competition for grades, we didn't have that at all, and I got very good grades. And I know that competition is greater nowadays, but it's very sad, because the pleasures that we got-- I felt that my grandchildren didn't have quite the pleasures from the freedom and autonomy that we were given. And also there was another thing--the teachers were

always kind, and they still are kind. But I think, during the war, they were a little kinder to us, because they realized that these were the boys that were going out to fight, and, sure enough, they did fight, and they did die, you know. So I think they were kinder, but it was, it was a more relaxed and comfortable atmosphere—the fact that one didn't need a car, that one could walk anywhere or ride a bike anywhere. That, I feel, is a real-- and that children are scheduled so much—you know, driven here and there, and people say that all the time, but we keep doing it. So, that's really the only difference. It's a wonderful town, and it keeps on growing in all sorts of wonderful ways. And Nancy Greene is one of the greatest--she's the one, I must give her credit for supporting and encouraging all the groups she has at the library, including the Readers' Choice group. She is a marvelous asset.

SARAH: Yes, she's done a lot for the library and the community.

VIRGINIA: Oh, a tremendous amount.

SARAH: Well, thank you for all the stories you shared today. It's been a pleasure speaking with you...

VIRGINIA: It's been so much fun, I can't tell you, Sarah, how much fun... and I've been trying to cut it down, so I hope I didn't speak too long.

SARAH: You didn't, this was perfect, thank you again.