



**Storytellers @RPL**

**Interviewee: Claudia Botz**

**Interviewer: Sarah Kiefer**

**Recorded on July 26, 2016**

**SARAH:** My name is Sarah Kiefer. Today is July 26, 2016, and I'm speaking with Claudia Botz, who is a volunteer here at the Ridgewood Public Library. We are recording this interview in the Bolger Heritage Center of the Ridgewood Public Library. Thank you so much for coming today, Claudia.

**CLAUDIA:** Thank you for inviting me.

**SARAH:** To get started, if you could tell us a little bit about how you came to live in Ridgewood, and when, and how long you've been a resident.

**CLAUDIA:** Well, I've lived in Ridgewood three different occasions of my life. The first time was in 1964, '65, excuse me, when I moved here with my parents. We lived in a house that was half in Glen Rock and half in Ridgewood and paid taxes to both towns.

**SARAH:** Really?

**CLAUDIA:** Okay, and I guess we're not the only house in New Jersey that has dual residency. But, we actually had an advantage because you had your choice of going to Glen Rock public schools or Ridgewood public schools and enjoying the amenities of both towns, because the tax rate was actually 50-50 on the property. I lived there a very short period of time and then went away to college. And then I did come back for a few years.

Then I married, moved away, moved into New York City. I lived in New York City from 1975 until 1996. Then in 1996, I moved back to Ridgewood with my husband, my second husband, and I lived in Ridgewood until 2001. And then I left Ridgewood, in our retirement years, moved to Maryland, and then in 2006 my husband passed away. And I moved to a different part of Maryland to be by family. In 2013 I moved back to

this area, and I had no intention in the world of ever moving into the “SHARE House”—in fact, I was adverse to it. I could not believe that I reached the stage of my life where I was gonna be one of these supposed “seniors” that was going to be put in a home.

I couldn't understand this, and I didn't like the fact that my family was saying to me, “No, you have to be someplace that—you're not going to drive anymore.” They took my car away for me—I got sick, so they said, “That's it, no more driving, and you're going to be by us, and you're going to live in this house with other seniors.” And I said, “Oh, no, I'm not.”

So I started looking for something on my own in the area, and every time that I would go, I had a particular brother that would come and say to me, “All right, I'll take you.” And we'd get to wherever I was looking at, and he'd say, “No, you can't walk to the train, you can't walk to the bus, what you going to do with your life? Okay? You're going to SHARE.”

So, I finally, after a couple of months, gave in and moved into SHARE. Not willingly. And it turned out to be one of the best experiences of my life. The SHARE House has 14 residents on Cottage Place, and 14 on Prospect. I chose Cottage Place, because I love the flowers in the yard that it had, and the location to the library, believe it or not, because I had already predetermined that if they were going to put me out to pasture, I was going to have to do something to keep myself alive. And to keep myself alive, I was going to volunteer to be with children that were going to make me feel young again and happy and not miserable and old in an old folks' home.

So here I am in this independent-living home, okay—there's no assisted-living, it's all independent, with characters the likes of which that-- I used to say, we should have a reality TV show, because if we had a reality TV show, we'd make millions of dollars to be able to build so many more additional SHARE Homes for Ridgewood senior residents to live in. Because it becomes very comical what happens. You have 14 people living in a house, and everybody has a different personality, a different agenda, and if you could hear what happens at dinnertime and the conversations that take place and the arguments, and everybody has their own opinion-- and at the same time, when push comes to shove, when somebody's in need, everybody's there for one another. So I love it. And that's where I am now, at the Cottage Place Senior Home. .

**SARAH:** That's great. Do you have a particular story you might like to share about living in SHARE—that came out wrong—any story you'd like to tell about living in SHARE?

**CLAUDIA:** You know, there are so many, there are so many characters, okay, that do live there, okay. But now for the first time in the house, there is a man living in the house, which is not-- I shouldn't say “for the first time”—cause this is not the first man since I've lived there. But there's a man, a gentleman that moved in less than a year ago, that is a phenomenal asset to all the women, because he plays off of all the women. He pretends that he's engaged to one of them, okay, he'll make

announcements, he'll give her rings and the rings are from the top of an orange juice jar—you know, the plastic rings. And she'll go around and wear it for days, saying that they're engaged. And then at the same time, there's another woman in the house that kinda has always kept to herself and has felt kinda neglected and felt that the house was biased and prejudiced against her. And this woman lights up which when she comes down now in the morning because he makes such a fuss at her when she comes down to dinner-- she lights up because she sees him. I mean, it's such a pleasure to see this man interacting, and each one of these women think that they're so special for him, okay?

And then there's another woman in the house that he takes out for coffee every day to Dunkin' Donuts. So you've got all these different women that are sitting there, and Nathan-- he's in love with them. And you can't help but sit back and smile. And he and I happen to be friends-- we sit next to one another in the dining room, and he'll kick me under the table before he does some of these things. He's on vacation, he's been on vacation the past week and a half, and everybody misses him. I mean, the house isn't the same because he is the life-- he puts these woman, he puts a little sparkle into them and a little life into them. So you can't help but get a kick out of him.

So that would be the one main attraction at SHARE today that has really been the cohesive factor in putting a different attitude within the house. The age range at SHARE -- and this is a big age range-- our oldest resident is a 97-year-old woman by the name of Nancy Petry, and she's an artist, and a fantastic artist, by the way, and she has her artwork hanging all over the house. She still goes dancing on Sunday nights at the Unitarian Church, okay? She can't dance like she used to, but this is still a big part of her life.

So that is our oldest resident, and then our youngest resident is, I believe, she's probably 62 or 63. So it's a diverse age group of seniors that are living in the house, and each one of them brings something a little different to the table. And it's like a family. It is really like a family. Everybody does not get along, everybody does not like one another, and at the same time, when something's going on, everybody sticks together and acts like a family.

And it's also like living in a college dorm. So it's a real throwback in our lives that all of a sudden we are living altogether in this atmosphere of "everybody knows everybody else's business," whether they want to or not. And we get a kick out of it.

**SARAH:** Great. I guess, as a relatively new resident of SHARE, is there anything you would say the community services could improve?

**CLAUDIA:** Oh, there are many things the community services could improve, okay? And I'm probably the wrong person to be asking this, because right now I'm very active on different committees within Ridgewood, and very involved. One of the things with SHARE is that it's not known. We have a high vacancy rate-- I will be a resident there

for two years come this October, and I will be there for two years, and one of the biggest problems that we have is, we have a 20 to 25% vacancy rate which is absolutely absurd when you consider the fact that 70% of the seniors living within Ridgewood --the biggest concern is housing, affordable housing, and this is affordable housing, that's what SHARE is. So we have put together a committee-- we have a meeting that's taking place here at the library that I started, because I feel... Personally, I feel that I want to see the vacancy rate go up, because I don't want our rents to increase.

We're a nonprofit-- when you have a nonprofit, you have very simple addition when it comes to economics. You have income, and you have expenses. Income is the rent, okay? Your other source of income are fundraisers, but unfortunately, they're not as big, they're not gonna compensate for your monthly expenses. So you've got to be able to cover your monthly expenses by your rent, and you cannot do that with the 20 to 25% vacancy rate. So, very selfishly, I started committees, I'm very vociferous about everything, I'm very active, I'm sure they're gonna get tired of me at Village Hall, okay? So that is one of the biggest things that I'm working on right now, this outreach program, and I have to say that Robin Ritter, who is one of my dearest friends—you know, I work with her very closely, volunteering for her at the children's library -- she has overextended herself, as far as I'm concerned, with giving me the opportunity to be able to hold these meetings and availing different personnel here at the library to help put this program together for us, with resources and posters, their time, their effort, and meeting. So that's one of the big things.

We have another issue that's just taken place in the village, that, to me, is horrendous, but it's got to be addressed, and the village knows it, but I don't know what's going to happen. Up until now we've had a senior taxi coupon program. It's defunct. It's over as of last week. That's not acceptable, okay? We don't drive, we need transportation. We have a senior bus that on Tuesdays will take us within town. On Thursdays, will take us to Paramus Park or the Fashion Center or to the Luckow Cancer Center, okay? But that's it. Otherwise, we rely upon on our taxis, and, as seniors, our incomes are fixed for SHARE House, okay? Our incomes are fixed but not just SHARE. You've got Ridgcrest also—we're all living on a Social Security income, and those senior coupons were so important to us—to be able to pay, it was Monopoly money. You paid \$.50 for every dollar, and you got to travel and you got to go to your doctors' appointments and you got to go to see friends. In my case, I used to like to be able to go to the train station, get on a train and go to Hoboken on a Sunday and read the newspaper and sit by the water. I like to be able to take the train into Manhattan. Not all seniors enjoy doing that, but it's something that I enjoy. All that extra money going back to the train station, it may sound small to somebody else, but when you add up, you know, 15 or \$20 for that one outing and double it, it makes it unreachable.

So I want that to be addressed, too, and they tell me that they are addressing it—we'll see. I don't know, I'm not so sure—not happening that fast, but, meanwhile, we still do have-- anybody that has a taxi coupon, we have until October, the contract doesn't run out until October. I'm anxious to find out what will happen with that.

**SARAH:** I hope it works out.

**CLAUDIA:** Me too.

**SARAH:** Along the lines of your volunteer work, you also—

**CLAUDIA:** It's the joy of my life—that's the highlight-- at the library.

**SARAH:** Can you describe what you do?

**CLAUDIA:** I read to children, but I not only read to children, I'm teaching them, you're teaching them. These are young children and you can incorporate teaching them the alphabet house, spell their names, numbers, adding—but you're also teaching them manners. It's the most amazing thing in the world when you see little children that are anywhere from six months old to four years old, and you're sitting grouped together, maybe 10 or 12 or 14 of them at a time, and they'll sit with me for two hours, and they behave. You walk away and they might not, some days they might not behave, but as a whole, it's amazing. And they are so inquisitive. They *want* to have that knowledge, they want to learn. But they're also learning the love of books, and that's so very important. So there are so many things, and I try to make it as interactive as I can. If I'm going to read "Princess and the Pea," I build a cardboard house with a bed, you know, with the 20 sheets on it: "This is Princess and the Pea, guys, you know...."

If you're reading about an African safari, I have all the African safari animals there, so they can actually interplay with the animals, which, to me, is just so important, because, as a young child, if they don't have that interactive play-- when you're reading about dinosaurs, I have all the dinosaurs-- now they look at the dinosaurs and they can tell which dinosaurs-- they know, they can pronounce the names better than I can. They know which dinosaur is what dinosaur. It just amazes me. At very, very young ages, they can spell their names, they can sing the alphabet at such a young age. And it's beautiful to see it. And even-- I've seen some of them that were just a couple of months old, and in the past couple of months, you see them taking their-- when they crawl for the first time, when they take their first steps, and they're paying attention. And it's the most amazing thing in the world.

I get more out of it than the children do-- it's what makes my life happy. I look forward to Tuesdays at the library. You know, there's a book about "Tuesdays with Morrie"—well, mine is "Tuesdays at the Library with the Children," okay? And that's my book, that's my happiness.

And it extends beyond that, because actually I come from a very large family. I'm the oldest, I have nine siblings. I'm the oldest and, you know, never a Tuesday night or a Wednesday doesn't go by where one of them or the other is not calling or texting me to find out how things went at the library. They don't even live around here some of them-- they might live in Maryland, they might live in Pennsylvania, they might be in Ohio: "So what happened at the library today?" Okay? Because they see the joy that

this brings to me, and they want to share in it. And they really, they take pleasure in hearing my stories about being with the children at the library. I get so much more than these children do. But I've also, in addition to that, it's not just the children-- it's the different librarians and the staff people that I have met here that have actually become my friends, that have done things for me and overextended themselves for me, that I'm going to be eternally and forever grateful for.

I went through a cancer situation the past couple of months-- they insisted, refused to allow me to take a cab back and forth to the hospital, the doctors, or to radiology. Whatever I needed, they were there for me. So I've made the most valuable friends of my life from the library, in addition to all the pleasure and joy and happiness that I get from the children. So I owe more to Ridgewood Library than anybody does, because it's been an invaluable asset in my life.

**SARAH:** Well, that's very great to hear.

**CLAUDIA:** It really is, it's an invaluable asset now, and I'll take it beyond me at the SHARE House. You can't imagine, the people there belong to the book club that Lorri heads up, and I'm not part of the book club, but they talk about it, and they look forward to it. Just today before I came here, one of the women that lives there, "I put a book on reserve-- maybe when you go there, you could check to see if it's there yet, okay?" This is their life, they love the library.

So I don't think the library realizes how invaluable they are to the senior citizens that are living within this town. I don't think that the library realizes how invaluable that they are to the working mothers and fathers who send their children here with their caretakers during the day. It astounds me to see the number of children that are walking in here that are not with parents—they're with caretakers and this is their home, and those caretakers all know one another—it's the most amazing thing. People might not realize it – they're not neighbors. They've met here at the library, and they form these groups and there's like, the groups that I see, it's always this, and they know and they talk to one another, these caretakers. But they form these friendships here, so the library's been a valuable resource for the people of Ridgewood-- so far beyond volumes of books or the historical efforts that you are doing-- there's a companionship, there's a friendship that has evolved here because of your library. So to me it's the most valuable thing in Ridgewood.

**SARAH:** Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. We love to hear those things, and I mean, your volunteer work here has been invaluable.

**CLAUDIA:** Actually, yeah, it's invaluable to me, okay? Not to anybody else, to me. There's a little boy that used to come every Tuesday, and his family is now moving to Iran of all places, which kinda broke my heart. He's five years old and he walked in last week with his mother, with the most beautiful note to me, because it was going to be the last time he would see me before they were leaving. His mother wanted to make sure I had their email address, but she wanted to make sure that I knew what an impression I

had made upon his life. I don't know whether you've ever heard of "Priorities," okay? And it was written by a man who's a scholar-- he was also a Boy Scout and actually the quote of "Priorities" comes out of what he wrote for the Boy Scouts and what you do in life. If you haven't made an impression on the child, you haven't lived, okay? Because that's all that matters in life, and that's where your priorities should be. That's where mine are.

**SARAH:** A beautiful story, thank you for sharing that. So I spoke to Robin a little bit and she told me to make sure to ask about your lines of work that you are involved in, and what it was like to work in that type of job.

**CLAUDIA:** I was very fortunate, I worked in the textile business and I worked during a period of time when equal rights was just coming into play, and I ended up marrying the man that I worked for. I must have been good at my job (laughter). But very seriously, it was a great opportunity for me. I started working in the textile business in 1968, and I had a very fast rise to success, not because of my relationship-- I was not, I had no relationship with my husband at that time so I don't want to mislead you. I was married to somebody else. I was fortunate enough that the man that I worked for, Jim Botz-- who I ended up years later marrying, okay-- he sold one of the companies that he worked for to Burlington Industries, and he gave his employees all the option to either stay with one of his other companies or go to Burlington Industries. At that time in history, Burlington Industries was the largest textile company in the world, not just the United States, and they had over 60,000 employees right here. But they had places, plants all over the world and offices all over the world. Equal rights was just coming into play at the time-- I chose to go to Burlington Industries, and it was, turned out to be the best thing that could've ever happened to me.

Cause what happened is, Burlington Industries chose 25 women-- they had to, by federal mandate-- to put on a fast track for management. And I was lucky enough to be one of those 25 women that went on this fast track for management, and they gave us an education the likes of which you would never see a company giving anybody today-- sending us back to school, in my case for textile technology, and then also spending, I spent one week in New York and one week down South at a plant, for two years. So it afforded me the opportunity of really getting to know the inside out of the textile industry, that very few women ever knew. So I had a huge advantage and my career exploded from there. I was very lucky, very fortunate—worked hard, though. I always had a motto-- you think like a man and work like a dog, okay, and it succeeded for me.

So I ended up being in directing, in marketing and sales, until I retired in 2001. My expertise was in the dyeing and finishing end, only because for some reason, I could walk into a plant and somebody could explain what they wanted to do with a piece of fabric, and I just knew how to do this—scientifically and chemically-- not because, not because I worked in a lab-- I just knew what had to be done. It was just an instinctive quality, I must have been born with that, okay?

On the other hand, at that point, and I would have to say 10 years later, I started dating the man I ended up marrying. And his forte, he was in the textile business, but his forte was in the gray goods, in developing the gray cloth that would be developed into fabric. So between the two of us, his forte was the weaving of the goods; my forte was the finishing of the goods--worked out beautifully, okay? We were able to play off one another like crazy, and it was a wonderful, wonderful relationship that allowed us to travel throughout the world, be involved with all these different companies, and to be successful at what we did.

And then, unfortunately, the textile business all went bankrupt, all down the tubes, and it doesn't exist anymore. So I worked for 32 years in that business, and it's non-existent today. I don't care what Trump says, it's not coming back to this country. I don't have any grand illusions about that. It would just be, it's not just the economics of it, it's also the EPA regulations, okay? There's just so much involved in all of that.

**SARAH:** Is it weird to know that the business you worked in for so long is just non-existent?

**CLAUDIA:** No, I knew it was happening. I was fortunate enough, also-- my husband had a joint venture agreement with the Japanese that started in the '60s, so I was fortunate enough to have firsthand knowledge of the necessity to join forces internationally. What Lee Iacocca did with the auto industry, my husband did with the textile industry. Was also with Mexico, with NAFTA, that same involvement, okay? One of my very last jobs was for a Canadian textile company, when all the plants started closing down in this country, okay? They were still looking for somebody that had the knowledge of the American market, and they came to me and I worked with them the last two years that I was working, out of Montréal and Toronto. But I worked in the Empire State building, heading up the New York--not the New York-- but the U.S. operations. So it just totally-- you saw the writing on the wall. You knew it was gonna happen.

The original textile business in this country was in Paterson. In the '70s, that changed. They all started moving down to South Carolina and North Carolina, for economic reasons, okay? It wasn't just for labor unions-- that was one big part of it-- but it was also because property values were much lower down there, the cost of living was lower so they could buy a piece of property, build a plant-- electricity was lower, okay? And there weren't the stringent EPA regulations that there should have been, to protect the planet, okay? The affluencies from a dye plant or a mill, the pollution was horrible, what happened in this country, okay? In Paterson that whole river was totally contaminated and the ground underneath it. Well, unfortunately that's happened down South, too, and then the EPA came and made these regulations. The companies could not afford to even begin to be able to handle cleaning up what they had already dumped. So you knew it would have to go offshore and go to other world countries. So it was a very quick transaction, because it happened within my lifetime, it was quick. But I saw it happening, from the inception of my employment.

**SARAH:** That's a piece of history there for you.

**CLAUDIA:** Not such a great piece of history.

**SARAH:** Well, things change, so...

**CLAUDIA:** Actually, my husband still has a son that's very involved, but he travels to China and India now.

**SARAH:** So, the last thing I have to ask is, I guess, looking forward, or looking ahead, are you working towards, any specific projects besides the projects you have at SHARE...is there anything else you're looking to do?

**CLAUDIA:** Actually the only-- it's not a project-- the only thing that I look forward to every day is ensuring that the younger children within my own personal family are happy. And again, it comes down to priorities and children. At the end of the day, no one's gonna care unless a child is happy. So I do take a lot of personal interest in my family's children and grandchildren and their happiness, and whatever I can do to contribute to that. And that, to me, brings me happiness, and it brings them happiness, and it's "oh, how nice." But I have, I have no grand illusions about anything except the family being happy. That's all that counts-- at the end of the day, nothing else counts. Nobody likes to think that they reach a stage in life where they have to rely upon living in a place like SHARE, where they have to rely upon, that this is what happened to my life? I went from being up here to being down there? Well, guess what? It's kinda nice, because all of a sudden, it puts into perspective what is really important about life. But I would never, ever recommend somebody younger to have that perspective cause they gotta be-- they gotta go up there to drop down there first. You have to go up to go down.

**SARAH:** Thank you again for taking the time to share your story with us.

**CLAUDIA:** You're welcome.