



Storytellers @RPL

Interviewees: Jim O'Rourke and Bea O'Rourke

Facilitator: Sarah Kiefer

Recorded on July 11, 2017

SARAH: My name is Sarah Kiefer. Today is July 11, 2017, and I'm speaking with Jim and Bea O'Rourke. We're recording this interview in the Bolger Heritage Center of the Ridgewood Public Library. Thank you both for coming today, and I'm going to let you tell your story.

JIM: Thanks, Sarah, good morning. We came to Ridgewood in 1965. That means we're here 52 years. And it was May. My mother-in-law's roommate at the Maxwell Training School in New York City—that was her junior college, I guess, at the time, yeah—and, well, her name was Catherine Murray, and she had a real estate business on South Broad Street. So, when we started looking for a house, and we struck out in Rockland County, we came down to Ridgewood. And she was part of the reason we came here, although I had lived in Bergen County all my life. And we found, we looked at many, many houses, and then one night I came out on my own, and looked at a house on Spring Avenue, and I called Bea from the house, and I said, "I think I've found the right house." You remember that?

BEA: I sure do.

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: And I said, "What does it look like?"

JIM: Yeah, I described it over the phone, and she said, "That sounds good, tell 'em ok." So she really trusted me enough to make a decision like that on my own.

BEA: Really, what you're not saying was-- I really didn't want to move to Jersey.

JIM: Well, that's true.

BEA: I'm a New York girl...

JIM: I know.

BEA:and the last place I wanted to be was New Jersey.

JIM: Right, right. The Hudson River is about 3,000 miles wide, she didn't want to move across...

BEA: I like Jones Beach.

JIM: But I had to show her that we had beaches here in New Jersey....

BEA: Right (laughs)... So when I came to see the house, I loved it, too, and I don't know, maybe just...you know when you're supposed to be someplace.

JIM: Yeah. Well, there were a lot of things...

BEA: Until we walked in, Jimmy, do you remember, when we walked in the house, the people who were selling the house had painted the whole house green inside--everything in the house!

JIM: Everything was the same green.

BEA: Walls, wood...

JIM: Everything but the floors.

BEA: I looked at Jim, I said, "The whole house is green—what are we gonna do??" And he looked at me, and he said, "Maybe we'll paint."

JIM: So we painted.

BEA: So we painted.

JIM: But what attracted us to the house was, it was the right size, cause we had three—at that time we had three kids, all girls, two years apart, and the oldest—

BEA: Our youngest was just born.

JIM: The oldest was 5, I guess.

BEA: Christine, Claudia, and Clare.

JIM: Yeah, we were still carrying Clare around.

BEA: You bet.

JIM: Right, and we were only one block from the school, Union Street School. I wonder how many people remember Union Street School because—although the realtor didn't tell us—it was closed the year after we moved in, so we never...

BEA: Right! (laughs)

JIM: ...got to go there.

BEA: We were very sad about that, though...

JIM: Yeah, we were.

BEA: ...cause we had been told it was the only integrated school in town...

JIM: Right, right.

BEA: ...that that's where our kids could've gone to school with children of other colors, and that was very important, especially to me. As a New Yorker, I grew up with all kinds of different people, and I wanted my kids to. And we had raised our children to believe that people are like flowers—they're born differently, they look differently, they have a different color, they're beautiful! And I kept thinking, "Oh, boy, here's my journey to New Jersey, you know."

But as it turned out, it was probably the best thing that ever happened, cause our children went to Somerville School...

JIM: Right, Somerville's a terrific school.

BEA: ...which was such a gift.

JIM: Yeah, probably had the best school principal in Ridgewood, ever, ever.

BEA: Oh, John Archibald.

JIM: Past and present.

BEA: John Archibald was one of the finest men I ever met.

JIM: Right. Plus at Somerville School, I got to be in "Dad's Night"...

BEA: Dad's Night.

JIM: And Dad's Night was a lot of fun and helped us make a lot of friends, too.

BEA: Yeah.

JIM: And I was in that for quite a few years, quite a few years. And then I was in it the second time, because our grandson went also—who lived with us, and has lived with us since he was born. He went to Somerville, too, so I got a second chance, a second round.

BEA: There's nothing like watching your husband in your bathing suit, with all these dumb men, running around being silly. But they made so much money, every year, and gave it to the schools. But I remember when I saw Jim come out in this bathing suit for the first time, I thought, "Oh, I wish I had those legs." And when I came home and told him that, the guys told me he wasn't too happy about that statement. But he looked great (laughing). And, of course, he has a marvelous voice, so they were lucky to have him, because he can sing like an angel, and that was just one of many shows Jim has been in in Ridgewood.

JIM: Yeah, we had an active...

BEA: Oh, my goodness, we had so many active theaters in Ridgewood (laughs). Mt. Carmel had, which is our parish, had a number of shows over the years. Jim was starring in almost every one of them because he was handsome, and he had a voice that was like no tomorrow. He can't dance very well, but he tried, and so they would just like dance around him, which is pretty much what he's been used to all his life anyway, so that was not a bad thing.

And then he joined Gilbert and Sullivan, and you were in that because we knew people there—

JIM: Couple of years.

BEA: They needed a gorgeous lead, so, you know-- right in. And then, I forget, well, oh my God, Jamboree. How many years in Jamboree?

JIM: Well, it was another two shifts in Jamboree, too, because...

BEA: Yeah, yeah.

JIM: ...we were in when Christine got to high school, and I was in it for some years there...

BEA: Well, Christine, Claudia, and Clare...

JIM:and then, the three of them...

BEA: And then James...

JIM:and then James.

BEA: Our son, our fourth child, was born at Valley Hospital.

JIM: Right. Right. In November of 1967.

BEA: He's gonna be 50.

JIM: Yeah, I know.

BEA: Woooo!

JIM: All of our children will be over 50. Woo-hoo!

BEA: That's pretty cool! Who woulda believed that?

JIM: Yeah, yeah.

BEA: We met at Fordham University. When I met Jim, I was 17, dear God. And I'll tell the story—is it ok if I tell that story?

JIM: Well, I guess.

BEA: It doesn't matter, I'm telling it. So, I was sitting with a friend, Mary Burke, who was in my freshman class at Fordham. And I watched these two very good-looking young men walk into, what they used to call, the student lounge. And the student lounge was just a place where you talked and had fun with other people and that stuff. So I said to Mary, "Do you see the shorter blonde?" And she said, "Yes." I said, "I'm going to marry him." And she said, "What?" I said, "I'm gonna marry him. So I'm gonna go up and find out if he's married, because that will be a real problem."

So she laughed, and I went up and I said, "Hello." And I said, my maiden name, "My name is Bea Eckart, and I'm the freshman class president," which I was, and then I said, "I'm the editor...."

JIM: Then she lied.

BEA: "I'm the editor of the Fordham newspaper" (laughing). I wasn't the editor. "And we're doing an article on veterans returning back to school." And I knew they were veterans-- all the veterans dressed alike. They all wore jackets, they had long pants, briefcases, and they all looked older. And I said, "Would you be interested in being interviewed?" And he said, "Well, sure." And I said, "Well, let's go for a cup of coffee," and I'm looking at Mary, and she says, "Let's go." So we went (laughing).

And I found that he wasn't married, so that removed one barrier. And I asked him if he wanted to be president of his class, and he said, yes, he thought he might like to do

that. I said, "Well, that's good, cause I can get you elected." I mean, what....

JIM: And, she did.

BEA: Yes, I did (laughing). So we went through those two years, working together, not always liking one another, and then that started everything, I guess. We got married in 1959-- Jim went quickly through college, cause he's smart, so that we could get married on time. He worked, I worked, and we prepared to teach and that has been Jim's life—teaching. And he's subbing now in Ridgewood, in the high school and in Somerville School. And when I heard Jim was going to Somerville School, I mean, it was just like, life repeats itself so often, and that's cool.

JIM: Yeah. And we early got involved, we early got involved in the church, the Lady of Mt. Carmel Church—part of it was the shows that were there, then we got involved with teaching...

BEA: Sunday school.

JIM:Sunday school, and then we became principals of the high school part of the CCD.

BEA: Didn't make everybody happy because I'm a particularly strong liberal.

JIM: No, but we had—but it was one of the best things we ever did....

BEA: Yeah, it was.

JIM: ... was to get that program really in good shape.

BEA: And we moved it from the church into the homes.

JIM: Right, we did a great innovation, instead of having it in Our Lady of Mt. Carmel School on Hudson Street, what we did was, we said, why don't we get couples to do this, if we can find enough couples, or people who have their own homes and bring the kids into their own homes, because the class sizes would be, okay, be 12 to 15 kids. And so we thought that could change the whole tone of it, and we were right.

BEA: Absolutely.

JIM: It really made a big difference. So we trained the teachers, and we...

BEA: Wrote the lesson plans.

JIM:recruited them, and wrote some model lesson plans for them, to start with, and then it took off. And it was really, really successful.

BEA: And they're still doing it.

JIM: And they're still doing it.

BEA: Not the way we did it because life has changed.

JIM: It's different. It's different.

BEA: But it was good.

JIM: We just went a few weeks ago to one of the sessions that they had—we went back and revisited it...

BEA: The homeless session.

JIM: We revisited the CCD program after all these years. It was cool....That was cool.

BEA: The kids were sleeping outside at the church, they were trying to think about what would be like to sleep in a box or something. I don't know if this ever makes any difference. But, I mean, I know with my own friends who go off and sleep with Covenant House, and they're really there, with people who are homeless, and they find out what it's really like--but the idea that kids even wanted to think about that, Jimmy, was really cool.

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: And we went because we've dealt with homeless people before, and we do very well with folks who are sort of disenfranchised and have miserable lives. We've done very well with people like that over our lives. Probably, I'm proud to say that. We've met enormous amounts of people in Ridgewood with good hearts, from so many of the churches. When we first moved in...

JIM: Yeah, well, we got into a lot of stuff...

BEA: Yeah, yeah.

JIM:in the community. I think, uh...

BEA: We worked with the Unitarian Church and several friends—in fact, Ernie and Jane Scerbo, who used to read here in the library's mom-and-pop...

JIM: Yeah, mom-and-pop readers.

BEAand they would read stories to the kids—he's just passed on—but Jane's still here, she was here the other day for one of the library programs. And, uh...

JIM: So we had a joint project between Mt. Carmel Church and the Unitarian Society...

BEA: ...for the Paterson Ecumenical Pre-school.

JIM: Yeah, that was cool. A lot of stuff came out of that....

BEA: And then Citizens for Swimming. Boy, did we take heat for Citizens for Swimming. This was not the Ridgewood people are used to, in those days—Citizens for Swimming made a lot of people very upset, because black folks in Ridgewood weren't even allowed to swim in the pool when we moved here.

JIM: Well, I don't think it wasn't, they were not *allowed*. They were not *encouraged*.

BEA: What?! No, they were told "No!" Well, we could look that up, I suppose.

JIM: I suppose. But there were very few people...

BEA: We worked to get a black person—wonderful black man, Mr. Thomas—elected to the Council in Ridgewood—do you remember that?

JIM: Oh, Wes. Oh, yeah.

BEA: That hankled a lot of people, but, when they—you know, we had this crazy experience once. We went with folks to the black ch-- there were two African-American churches in Ridgewood, and we went to one where we had brought people together to just talk, cause we actually met people in Ridgewood who would never talk to anyone who was different, which was astonishing. Now remember, I'm a New Yorker so, you know, but, uh....

JIM: But, when we came here in 1965, through the '60s...

BEA: I know, I know.

JIM: ... diversity was, like, not a word that anybody even used.

BEA: The plague! (laughs)

JIM: If there was anybody who was African-American, he lived up South Broad Street, Edwards, Highwood, and nowhere else. And there were very few Jews—Jews?

BEA: In those days...

JIM: You didn't find Jews in Ridgewood.

BEA: My uncle had a house in Ridgewood, right after World War II, and he was

Roman Catholic...

JIM: Right, Ethelbert Place.

BEA: ...and he was selling raffle tickets on Union Street-- how your history goes, and he was arrested, because he was a Catholic, #1, which was what the cop told him.

JIM: Well, he was soliciting.

BEA: But he was soliciting--soliciting raffle tickets (laughs). I mean, when you hear these stories—I mean, our kids know these stories cause they've grown up living them and hearing them and—they used to tell friends they came from Ridgewood and everybody goes, "Oh, what kind of town is that—snooty and..." And my kids would say, "Oh, no, we didn't live that kind of life. We were always in the middle of something." But, I mean, it's just so amazing.

Connie shook hands-- my friend-- shook hands with one of the black folks from Ridgewood in the African-American church-- friend of ours. And she actually said when we left, "He felt just like me." And that was, again—all those kinds of experiences change you forever.

When you look at someone with a college degree who's white, who's lovely and wonderful and says something like that, and you just say, "Oh, my God." And you think about today, Jimmy, think about today, my God. And we're still fighting the same battles...still fighting the same battles.

JIM: Yeah. I know there's still an underground feeling of worries about who's going to move in...

BEA: In some places.

JIM: ...in some places. And there's a lot of suspicion about affordable housing and who's going to come and maybe exploit that and "spoil the town and change its character"—put that all in quotes.

BEA: Yeah.

JIM: But that's not something peculiar to this town...

BEA: No. No, not at all. And it's always something.

JIM: But this town has always been rather exclusive to start with because it's economically isolated, you know—in order to live here, you have to be able to afford a whole lot of money.

BEA: Well, how do you see Ridgewood changing?

JIM: Oh, yeah.

BEA: Well, there we are at the 4th of July parade—Jimmy is judge-- so he's there trying to judge. We look like two little old people sitting in our chairs and he's judging, and the Chinese American Society walks in front of us-- these gorgeous wonderful girls, *girls*, pardon me, girls, but you're *girls* to me, these gorgeous women— and they're holding umbrellas, they're doing some kind of a dance—I practically cried, they were *gorgeous!*

JIM: They did a dance with the umbrellas, and they were wearing traditional Chinese dresses.

BEA: And a woman behind me says, “Did you ever think you’d see so many of them in Ridgewood?” (laughing)

JIM: Oh, yeah. She’s lived here longer than we have.

BEA: And I said to her, “No, but am I happy I just saw them.” And she said, “Oh, Bea, I would have expected that from you.” (laughs) But they were beautiful and...

JIM: Actually, I was thinking about that recently...

BEA: Yeah...

JIM: ...that when we moved here, there were Chinese living here...

BEA: That’s right.

JIM:and they had the laundry.

BEA: That’s right.

JIM: There was a Chinese hand laundry...

BEA: That’s what they did.

JIM: ...and they were the only Asians in town. Maybe the only Asians. Now, as a substitute teacher, I go to classes in elementary school ...

BEA: Yeah...

JIM: ...and the Asian presence is very strong in this town.

BEA: Right. Right.

JIM: Still, the African-American presence is minimal.

BEA: Yeah.

JIM: Still. But I think it's an economical thing. But we've met a lot of great people in the town—you said that a while ago, and I had made a list of the organizations....

BEA: Talk about RAGS

JIM: Oh RAGS. Why don't we talk about RAGS? Well, we had an opportunity to meet a lot of people in Ridgewood because we belonged to, we worked with the Ridgewood Association for Good Schools, which was RAGS....

BEA: RAGS. (laughs)

JIM:which was a very, very active organization at one time.

BEA: What a bunch. Full of Quakers. Unitarians.

JIM: Yeah. Yeah.

BEA: And you and me. (laughs)

JIM: And FISH.

BEA: Well, we started FISH. FISH was an organization in town where-- we met with several people from different churches and decided that there needed to be something that people could count on to get some help in last-minute ...

JIM: In emergencies.

BEA: in last minute situations. If you had to get a kid to a doctor, if you needed to take a ride somewhere quick for some reason, if you were not feeling well and you were elderly...

JIM: If you had to go to the hospital, if you had to leave your kids...

BEA: So, we all got together, this whole gang of us from a variety of different churches, and we established that. And we did that with the Kaspers, and the McWilliams, the Burgins—boy, look at that—the Hunters...

JIM: Yeah.

BEA:some of whom still have children living here, which is very interesting.

JIM: And we also met people through the Ridgewood Democratic Committee and

Jamboree and Dance Night and the RBA—the Ridgewood Baseball Association.

BEA: Well, that was you.

JIM: And coaching and softball...

BEA: Right.

JIM: ...and soccer, and then the Rotary Club....

BEA: Well, that was in my life.

JIM: ...15 years ago.

BEA: Yeah, when I retired, I joined the Rotary.

JIM: So we had some opportunities to do that. Oh, yes, and when we first moved here, we got involved with--- Ridgewood had a “fair housing” committee, because there was obviously resistance to selling to...

BEA: Well, in those days.

JIM: strong resistance to selling to someone who was not like everybody else. We talked about Asians and African Americans—hard to sell to someone of color. It was hard because people always suspected that their neighbors would object, although every study showed that their neighbors wouldn’t object. But that was...

BEA: If the person was—well, now remember what we had learned—if the person was a football player or a basketball player...

JIM: Yeah, yeah. That made a difference.

BEA: and they were famous...

JIM: One of the best things I ever did was, with the fair housing committee, we got a first prize in the Ridgewood Fourth of July parade for our float. And the theme of the parade that year was something like “Three Cheers for the Red, White, and Blue.” So, the float we had was a mockup of a house, with a front door and a roof over the front door, like a front porch. And the family that we had standing on the float were painted and dressed in...

BEA: Red, white, and blue.

JIM:red, white, and blue, but their skin was painted red, white, and blue.

BEA: Red, white, and blue. It was the Ilowites’, do you remember? They were the

most controversial people in Ridgewood (laughs).

JIM: And the banner on the float said, "Would you sell your house to a red, white, and blue family?" (laughs)

BEA: But all along the parade route, people screamed and cheered!

JIM: And we got a first prize. For theme. And that was terrific.

BEA: It was a wonderful feeling! Now remember in the '60s and the '70's, we're here in this community...

JIM: That was in the '60s. '67, '68.

BEA: Vatican II in our church was changing. The Women's Movement was really starting and, um, I love that movement, and so those, too... The anti-war movement was really growing, you know.

JIM: It was a hot time.

BEA: It was a fabulous time, to live-- very hard for us because we had a lot of beliefs in social justice, which they call now "civic engagement"-- God forbid, we should say "social justice," and so it was a hard time if you really had those feelings, and they were beliefs, maybe that you had been raised in, or weren't raised in and grew to understand that it would be good to work for the country and to take a chance. Change is always something that Jim and I have done, and we're never afraid of change.

You remember, when my mother was here years ago...

JIM: I know what you're going to say (laughs).

BEA: My mother comes into Ridgewood, with me in the car, and she says, (gasps) "Oh, Bea! Has Ridgewood changed? It's becoming Hackensack." This is 20 years ago. We still have people who...

JIM: 20? More.

BEA: 30?

JIM: Oh, 40.

BEA: 40?

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: OK. I'm not good on that stuff. But, I mean, it was just...I looked at her

(laughs)—what did she know about Hackensack? (laughs) I came home, I told all of our friends, “We’re living in Hackensack!” What did she mean? Too many people, too many cars, too many everything. “You know, you moved here to get away from all that stuff!” Get away from what? Yeah, we moved from the Bronx. We were very involved and had to leave for a variety of reasons (laughs). But, Holy Toledo...

So, anyway, one of the questions that you ask people when they’re going to do this wonderful program that you’re doing is, who was somebody you really admired in Ridgewood? And Jim and I came up with the same person, so....

JIM: We came up with the same... And then our daughter Christine, when she...

BEA: Oh, right.

JIM: ...when she heard, when she heard we were going to do this, and I said to her, “One of the questions is who is the person who you most admire?”...she said the same name. She just came right up with it, without any prompting...

BEA: Right.

JIM: ...she said, “Ruland Anderson.” If you go to the Unitarian Society on Cottage Place, you will see that...

BEA: Well, when you walk in...

JIM: When you walk in, there’s a plaque, and it says, “This is the Anderson Auditorium.” And the Anderson Auditorium is named after him. And he was the person who Christine came up with, and I and Bea all agreed was...

BEA: We adored him.

JIM: ...the finest man that we...

BEA: The finest person.

JIM: ...the finest person that we ever knew in Ridgewood. And the auditorium is a terrific place cause it’s very open and very airy and it’s dedicated to art...

BEA: Artistic.

JIM: ...art and music and...

BEA: Which is central, I think, to what Unitarians like.

JIM: good ideas, yeah, good ideas and community life. And that’s just he was, he was that kind of person.

BEA: Mr. Anderson would come to our house on Sunday afternoon-- I cannot recall how we really met him, but it didn't matter because the children--the minute they met him, fell in love with him.

JIM: Yup.

BEA: What was not to fall in love with? He was just this very old, very sweet knowledgeable man about Ridgewood. And he would come on Sunday afternoon...

JIM: His father had been the mayor...

BEA: Yeah.

JIM: ...way back in the '20s, yeah.

BEA: And, um, Ruland married his high school teacher, so there was some heat about the Anderson family for a while that we really didn't know much about. But he shared the truth, and we were remembering, laughing...

JIM: His high school math teacher, and then he went on to be a math teacher, but he taught his whole career in Paterson.

BEA: (laughing) Paterson. I don't know if they would have let him back in Ridgewood.

JIM: No, I don't think he could have been hired here.

BEA: He had a marvelous way about him. And, through him, we met—who was the older woman, the longest living...

JIM: Oh, the teacher?

BEA: What was her name, do you remember? Oh, darn..

JIM: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. But now, you're going to ask me to remember her name....

BEA: No, it's ok. We'll remember it later.

JIM: Yeah, I will.

BEA: All right, so, there were other things on this wonderful sheet. Um, I want to talk about my work history in Ridgewood, which was exciting...

JIM: Yeah, go ahead.

BEA: Um, after being a Mom, and having all these kids, and being very happy-- by the time I was 30, I had four children, and was kinda overwhelmed with all the kids, because I was involved in a lot of stuff. And I kept thinking, how am going to keep doing this and raise these children? And it became very clear to me that I wanted to spend more time, in a different way, with the kids.

So, I had met some people like Ivan and Joni Park, and Dick and Harriet Sullivan, who were old, wonderful standard bearers of Ridgewood for years, and friends of a lot of other people...I wanted to get involved in child care. And so I became a founding mother of the Child Care Center at the Y, with Buffy Sachtler and Joni and several other people. We raised money, we worked hard, we opened up our homes, brought people in, cooked dinners for free, had people pay to come in, raised money any way we could. And we're so happy that it's still going—that makes me very proud of one of the things that I did in Ridgewood, pretty much on my own, with a bunch of other women, and we worked hard to get it done.

So that was great. At the same time, when we moved to Ridgewood, we found there were probably only four democrats in the whole town, who would actually say they were. So, now happy to report today that's certainly different in Ridgewood—the town carried Hillary—probably people putting ice packs on their heads now. Uh, but a neighbor of ours, Andy Maguire...

JIM: Oh, yeah—decided he wanted to...

BEA: He ran for Freeholder and he lost.

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: He was young, he was handsome...

JIM: He had worked with the Lindsay administration in New York City, and he decided he wanted to run for Congress.

BEA: He was brilliant. Yeah.

JIM: And he had a lot of stuff going for him. He had gone to Ridgewood High School, and he lived on South Irving...

BEA: Was on the tennis team. Yeah.

JIM:and he had a nice Harvard degree in government, and he decided he wanted to do this.

BEA: And Oberlin.

JIM: And...

BEA: Everywhere, he was everywhere. So we went—we heard about it, and we went and we met him, because we had known him, walking his kid. And he said, “Do you want to help me?” Well, I jumped in feet first—we opened up an office on Franklin Avenue with Gina Glantz...

JIM: You had already run the field operation in the county for Brendan Byrne.

BEA: Oh, for Brendan Byrne. Yeah, yeah. I had no experience whatsoever.

JIM: But you did a great job there.

BEA: But I know how to reach out to people, I like people, so...

JIM: And Brendan never forgot it.

BEA: (laughing) No, the Governor never forgot it. The Governor still sees us, and every time he sees us, he still says, “Hey, O’Rourke!”

JIM: “O’Rourke!”

BEA: He’s 90something...

JIM: The Maguire campaign was innovative because it was just when computers were coming in to strong use, managing data, and Andy found people...

BEA: Oh, Lynn and Don Henry...

JIM: ...who could manage that.

BEA: Yeah.

JIM: And he did an innovative, door-by-door, knocking-on-doors...

BEA: Right.

JIM campaign.

BEA: Well, that was Gina Glantz. Gina went on later on to run presidential campaigns.

JIM: Right.

BEA: She lived on West End Avenue, I think.

JIM: So it was a great team. And he, unexpectedly, I think unexpectedly to many, many people, he won.

BEA: He won.

JIM: He won.

BEA: All of a sudden, he says, "You wanna run my district office, with some other people?" And I looked, I said to Jim, "Well, what are we doing with the kids here?" And so we talked to the children, everybody was in school now, I was very worried about it, very worried about it.

JIM: It was 1976?

BEA: '74.

JIM: Oh, '74. '74.

BEA: Yeah, it was the most brilliant—everybody in every story book we've ever read about the Congress says it was the smartest congressional election in history, the way it was run, around the country. But, also, it elected the bold and the brightest of them all. More women than ever before—I remember meeting...

JIM: Pat Schroeder.

BEA: ...Pat Schroeder. I was walking through the halls of Congress, I had James in my arm, I was lugging the other three kids, she had two kids on her back, she had just been elected to Congress. Bella Abzug...

JIM: Bella Abzug took one of them.

BEA: ... took one of my kids, and said to me—that was '76—Claudia—she took Claudia and Christine to a meeting. Claudia fell asleep, and Christine wanted to know why she couldn't talk (laughs). Our children had so many wonderful experiences and met some of the most exciting people in the '70s. Of course, I couldn't...

JIM: I know, Bill Bradley left his pants at our house. He changed...

BEA: Well, don't you think you should explain it?

JIM: Well, he changed into his tennis outfit at our house, and he forgot...

BEA: Oh, he was doing a fundraiser for Maguire!

JIM:Yeah, right, and he forgot his, he forgot his trousers. So you had to return...

BEA: I had to call his wife--can you imagine—

JIM: ...Call his wife to return his trousers.

BEA: (laughing) She was wonderful—she laughed...

JIM: Yes.

BEA: ...she laughed—she was so terrific. Then I found out she was this wonderful professor.

JIM: Rutgers.

BEA: Yeah.

JIM: Anyway...

BEA: So we had some wonderful stories, and the children have shared a lot of them.

JIM: And that job for you, that political job, was really...

BEA: Aw, it was—the beginning of another life for me.

JIM: Yeah, it was like a new life for you.

BEA: Yeah, yeah. I got hired by Lautenberg when he was running for Senate...

JIM: Yeah, yeah.

BEA: ... to do women's issues which is really interesting as a Roman Catholic woman in those days-- Holy Toledo. Um, so we were battered around a while for all that stuff, but that's okay—it was worth it. You have to stand where you have to stand. I worked a lot in anti-war stuff, was very happy to have met John Kerry, very happy to have worked with him for a very short period of time, but I loved the veterans who came home. I felt so sorry for them—it was such an unfair place to have to send anybody. And I could see all the poor children coming home who were sent to die, and it was awful. But, anyway...

And we're still in war, right?

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: We're still in war. Jim and I have lived through World War II...

JIM: The Korean.

BEA: You were in the Korean War, and then, we had Vietnam-- I mean it just never ends. All of our lives we've worked for peace and justice and the poor.. and it just makes you so sad when you think of what's going on around the world. All these people who are alone with kids and no place to live and it's just...amazing. But we've raised children to be like us, and we're happy about that. Some of them have gone off into a little bit more, I think, less liberal things because marriage changes people, and, and, we always just, well, me, mostly, dove head forth into everything.

Remember with the Women's March when we went into New York-- that's a wonderful story. We were going to be on PBS, you remember that?

JIM: When you went for that taping...

BEA: Yeah.

JIM: ...at Channel 13?

BEA: Yeah.

JIM: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEA: That was a riot.

JIM: Oh, yeah, okay. Bea went with a friend from Ridgewood...

BEA: Mary Lou McNamee.

JIM: Mary Lou McNamee. And they taped a panel that included...

BEA: With Steinem, Pollitt...

JIM: Katha Pollitt...

BEA: Gloria Steinem...

JIM: Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem...

BEA: Right. Who was the other one?

JIM: I don't know. I don't remember. But it was in WNET studios, which was in the east side, like in the east 60s, and the studio was right up against the river, right over the FDR Drive, a dead-end street. And when we came out, we were all standing in front of the building, and brought it around, and I saw Gloria Steinem came out, and she...

BEA: Hopped into a convertible!

JIM: ...hopped into a little sports car with a nice-looking guy driving it, and they sped away. And Betty Friedan was standing on the sidewalk, and I said to Bea, "She's looking for a cab..."

BEA: She's looking for a cab.

JIM: "She's never gonna find a cab on a dead-end street in the East 60s..."

BEA: No...it was crazy, right? (laughing)

JIM:"Should I ask her if she wants a ride?" And we had a big old '66 Impala at the time...

BEA: We had that awful car.

JIM: with big seats, you know—three in the front, three in the back. So, she said, "Well, ask her." So I went over and I said, "Oh, Miss Friedan, I see that you don't have a ride. We're going uptown, could we drive you home?" And she said, "Sure!" So, I opened up the—I thought that she might get in the front seat with me, or maybe my wife would get in the front seat with me, but no...

BEA: All three of us sat in the back seat (laughing).

JIM: All three women sat in the back seat.

BEA: ...and all we did was talk—about her book and...

JIM: So, I thought I should have had a chauffeur's uniform on, cause they weren't talking to me.

BEA: (laughs)

JIM: So we drove her home. And she lived at a very impressive address, West 80s, West 83rd or something, up by the museum.

BEA: Anyhow, he walks her up...

JIM: Anyway, I opened up the door, she got out, took a few steps across the sidewalk, she rang the bell, and she said, "I forgot my key again." And her daughter was in the apartment, and she said, "Mom?" And she said, "Yeah, I forgot my key."

BEA: (laughing)

JIM: And her daughter says, "Again?" And she buzzed her in, and I thought, wow, just like everybody else.

BEA: It doesn't matter who you are—you got a teenager, they all treat you the same.

JIM: It doesn't matter who you are. Your children still object to you, no matter who you are.

BEA: It was a good story. Our girls loved that story cause I'm always losing something.

JIM: Yeah, pretty cool (both laughing).

BEA: Just hilarious. Our son James--we had a wonderful experience the other day. Our church called and said somebody called to find out-- Jim and I were honored recently by the Rotary Club which we were thrilled about--we raise money for them and are very happy--I find the Rotary to be just a wonderful organization—and anyway, one of the teachers from Somerville School, Veronica Lyons, called our church. She's now 90, she's living in Florida, and she wanted to know if they would give her our phone number. And they said, “No. But if you give us yours, we'll see if we can do something.” So the phone rings, I get the phone, they give me the number, I call Roni, and the first thing she says to me is-- she adored our son—“Is James still walking around, pulling his shirt over his knees, playing midgets?” Now, you would never get away with that today, and you probably should never get away with that. But Roni Lyons—you have to understand, our son was small, he had a mop of red hair, he was so adorable, he looked like somebody made him every morning—he was precious. And he was probably one of the funniest children I've ever met in my life. Everyone who met James loved him. And it's still like that, even though he's almost 50--a father with three teenagers, God help him.

And, we just laughed on the phone, about so many stories. Claudia once walked out of Roni's class when she was in kindergarten, because she just didn't feel she was being appreciated for her artwork. So...

JIM: So she walked out the door and walked home.

BEA: And walked all the way home.

JIM: Nine-tenths of a mile, she walked home...

BEA: I'm driving, I'm driving...

JIM: Roni missed her...

BEA: Course, they're calling the police—I stopped the car, “Claudia, you're supposed to be in school! What are you doing?” “I'm not being appreciated.” “Get in the car.” “OK.” And Claudia adored Roni Lyons—I mean, there wasn't a kid who didn't.

JIM: It was terrific.

BEA: How could you not?

JIM: She just didn't feel appreciated, so she left.

BEA: She walked out. What? But that was funny.

JIM: So you took her back, and Roni was panicked, but...

BEA: Everybody was.

JIM: Everybody.

BEA: And the principal was furious with Mrs. Lyons, furious with the cops that they hadn't come soon enough, furious with everybody...

JIM: When you have an elementary school class, like I do now sometimes, what you're doing all day long is, you're counting. In the morning, you say, "What's my number?"

BEA: I know.

JIM: Your number's "18." All day long you're going, "How many are here?"

BEA: It happens. It just happens.

JIM: If you get 18, you're all right. Otherwise, you know, you freak out.

BEA: What's the thing in Ridgewood you've enjoyed the most, living here? Aside from how beautiful the town is, and the town is beautiful. It's a wonderful town.

JIM: I guess, uh—you know, Dance Night was terrific and Jamboree was terrific, and I did Jamboree...

BEA: And that's meeting everybody.

JIM: not just because I could be on stage, because I did more time behind the scenes...

BEA: Oh, off-stage, yeah—building.

JIM: stage crew—it was a wonderful experience with the stage crew. And doing stage manager with my daughter Claudia...

BEA: Oh, that was wonderful...

JIM: ...my daughter Claudia was stage manager and director and...

BEA: Producer.

JIM: ...producer and she was a writer...

BEA: She was marvelous.

JIM: She did everything with Jamboree. Jamboree was terrific. It was a great opportunity to get to know people and to do something really, really worthwhile.

BEA: The thing that's been nice for us...

JIM: That was good.

BEA: ...in our later years...

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: ...is that, having a grandson in the house, extends your relationships with those who are younger-- having daughters who come home to visit, having a daughter who is with us, who is involved in the whole town, extends your relationship with people.

JIM: Yeah, right.

BEA: We have been fortunate enough to stay pretty healthy. I have a dystrophy, a muscle disease, and it hasn't stopped us, because we've had wonderful doctoring. I have. Jim just had his knees replaced—he's 83 years old, he still looks like he's 12. We have been so lucky to have been blessed with fairly decent health and great kids and neighbors who have been—oh, our neighbors just sold their house next door and we are heartbroken. We have seen them have children, raise their children...

JIM: How long have they been there? 27 years?

BEA: Yeah, I think so. And we're just heartsick, but-- and so are they. I mean, it's really funny, but-- they're very different politically than we are, and we have never agreed on anything and never had one fight. 27 years of really great neighbors.

JIM: But when you ran for Senate, for New Jersey Senate...

BEA: 1993.

JIM: ...in 1993, they put your...

BEA: They put my thing on their lawn.

JIM: your poster, your campaign sign on their lawn. They said, the only Democrat they ever voted for (laughter). See what happens when you get to know people, you know?

BEA: It changes things, it changes you, too.

JIM: If people would just talk more.

BEA: We weren't allowed to be in the Ridgewood parade, cause they don't allow political people, which is ridiculous. But anyway, so we got in a car and we called ourselves "The Ridgewood Democrats."

JIM: Well, if you're running, if you're running, they don't allow you in. But...

BEA: Kim was in the parade—what are you talking about? Anyway--she's a Lt. Governor, I get it. So, anyway, we're riding in a car, and it's me and the two guys I'm running with for the assembly. Gov. Florio had called, I knew him from Congress—he was in Congress when Congressman McGuire was there—and Jimmy used to live in his office-- long story-- and so we became friendly—Andy would say, "Go get 'im something to eat, for God's sakes."

So, we're driving down the street in Ridgewood—we're in front of Van Neste Square (laughs)-- there's this guy on the top of the square and he yells, "Hey, Bea!" We got all the Ridgewood Democrats in one car, and the whole street went crazy. Everybody then was cheering, applauding—I never laughed so hard. We knew we couldn't win—nobody could've won. When Florio called and said, "Will you please do this, I can't get anybody to run, and I said, "Oh, my God..."

JIM: You knew you couldn't, couldn't possibly...

BEA: Why would anybody do this and lose?

JIM: Well, you did well in Ridgewood.

BEA: Yeah, I did.

JIM: You did very well in Ridgewood.

BEA: I almost screwed up his election. That's another thing.

JIM: You couldn't do anything with Sussex County. Or Warren County.

I was thinking, how was Ridgewood changed?

BEA: Oh, wow.

JIM: I miss Drapkins...

BEA: Oh, me too. Woolworth's!

JIM: I miss Woolworth's, where I could go and buy thread if I needed thread or a goldfish, if I wanted to buy a goldfish—you could go to Woolworth's.

BEA: (laughs) Sealfon's.

JIM: Sealfon's was on the south side of Ridgewood Avenue before they moved across to that big building, which everybody calls the Sealfon's Building now, but they were on the other side of the street, and McHugh's was on the other side of the street, too. It was on the south side of the street, just north of Maple Avenue, before they built that big, big building...

BEA: Across from the pond.

JIM:across from the duck pond. Oh, yeah, across from the duck pond. And something else was there, too—that ice cream store, which I also don't remember. But I remember now the name of the teacher who came all the way from South Dakota to Ridgewood in 19, like, 03. That was Miss Abbott, Jane Abbott.

BEA: Jane Abbott!

JIM: Jane Abbott, who we talked to when she was in her 90s.

BEA: And I said, "Why didn't you ever get married?" She was gorgeous. And she said, "Well, you couldn't be married..."

JIM: "Well, you couldn't be married when I came to Ridgewood and got hired." They said, "Now, if you marry, Miss Abbott, we'll have to let you go."

BEA: "We'll have to let you go."

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: Oh, yeah.

JIM: Because—I don't know why—I don't know what the rationale was there, but...

BEA: And she was a great friend of Ruland's.

JIM: Yeah, she was a good friend of Ruland's. And the other thing was, the thing about Ridgewood and those stores was the service was fantastic, how they would take care of you in those stores. Outstanding.

BEA: Retail was different.

JIM: Retail was different.

BEA: Retail was different. There were no computers.

JIM: No computers, that's right. And there were maybe only two restaurants that I can remember. One was the Brass Lamp and the other was The Cellar, and those two...

BEA: Espo's is was what my kids remember.

JIM: And there weren't any other restaurants. And now there are something like 48, or 50, or something, I don't know how many. And then on Van Dien, there was Schweinfurth's Florist, which was...

BEA: Oh, that was wonderful.

JIM:which was a huge, big piece of property with greenhouses going all the way back, three blocks.

BEA: They were terrific.

JIM: Now there's a cul-de-sac there with about, about 5 or 6 huge homes. And that's changed a lot. So...but... Ridgewood has always been a community where, people say to me, "Oh, Ridgewood, you have to pay so many taxes." And I say, "What? You get what you pay for." And then I start to tell them what it's like here, and I think I can convince people that for a couple of thousand dollars more, you get more than your money's worth, you know?

Just met the man this morning when I took out, I took out the garbage—I rushed out, I said, "Hey, I saw you coming," while he was coming down to my backyard enclosure to take my garbage. They don't do that anywhere...

BEA: And also they're lovely men.

JIM: You have to take it out, take it out to the street. The services are great.

BEA: We've had an opportunity to get to know some of the kids who work--they're marvelous.

JIM: I've never objected to the taxes we pay here, it's worth it.

BEA: I'm thrilled that we have—I'm thinking about the cops in town who have always been wonderful....

JIM: And the cops. And the fire, yeah...

BEA: The police officers in Ridgewood have always been terrific, but having a woman chief—my, my!

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: And a woman mayor? Holy Cow!

JIM: And what we said before—the quality of government in town has been fantastic over the years.

BEA: I know that people this year, and the last couple of years...

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: ...we have seen people be angry, and really unkind...

JIM: More than historically.

BEA: and just miserable to each other, and that's gone on for a long time, and it's something you and I just don't understand. And it's like we said to one of the council people, who we did not vote for this year, who consistently says to us, "You people get along with everybody--you even like me, you know." And we said, "Yeah, what's not to like? We don't like what you're thinking about doing sometimes, but why would we not like you? I mean, you want to give your service, you've raised children here..."

You and I are from—and somebody said, "It's because you're old"—well, I mean, is civility old? Maybe it is. You know, I'm not tweeting every morning—are you, Jim?

JIM: I don't, I don't tweet.

BEA: I know, dear. Do you know what a tweet is? (laughs)

JIM: Everybody knows, everybody knows what a tweet is.

BEA: Everybody knows (Bea and Jim laugh). All right, so 58 years almost, soon, right?

JIM: Married? Oh, yeah, married. No, I thought you were talking about living in Ridgewood.

BEA: 52 years in Ridgewood, 52.

JIM: 52. It was 52 in May.

BEA: And never sad about ever buying that house.

JIM: No, no.

BEA: Because that house has been....oh, what a gift.

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: It is very hard to take care of now for us, but a couple years ago we put a veranda on the back--I love calling it a veranda. It's a little porch with a little roof. And then our front porch is gorgeous. And what's so marvelous is, because it's Spring Avenue, so many people ride up and down, and people know us, and so they'll beep or they'll stop. And, unfortunately for us, we have put out that we will occasionally...

JIM: Oh, oh, oh.

BEA: serve between 4:30 and 5:30, a cocktail on the porch. And that has caused quite a bit of traffic on occasion (laughs). But most of our friends know to park on Union Street or Hope Street, walk up to where we live, and just leave their cars there. But that's been fun.

Ridgewood has been fun, and a blessing. Do you not think?

JIM: Yeah, it's been good for a lot of things. It was good for our kids because...

BEA: Yes. Good education.

JIM: ...the schools did a good job for them.

BEA: We found the love in Ridgewood when we were honored in April of 2017 by the Rotary Club. We found love, and we told our children-- when we die, we don't need a repast because we had it already (Jim laughs). I mean, this was the nicest...

But, our daughter died in 2015, our little girl Clare, our third child. And, it was so painful, it was terrible. She left two children. So, we went to Feeney's, and we said we really want to have—um, she was buried on Long Beach Island which was where she lived, and....

JIM: We wanted to have a memorial or a celebration of life for her...

BEA: Something up here for our families. So, I mean, Dave Feeney is the dearest soul in the universe--our grandson worked for him for years, and they're just wonderful people. And so David said, "We do a celebration of life." And we said, that's what we're going to do.

So they decorated the place with Clare's beautiful pictures and funny mementos that we gave them. And they put a notice in the *Ridgewood News* and in the *Bergen Record*--this was in 2015 before everything hit the *News* and the *Record*.

JIM: And we had a wonderful outpouring of affection...

BEA: Oh, my God... Hundreds and hundreds of people came...

JIM: And people came from so far away.

BEA: People from Clare's Ridgewood class of '83 came--people, her friends on Long Beach Island came up-- it was such a celebration. And I thought, this is what funerals should be about--this is just beautiful. There were tears, but there was laughter and even song. It was marvelous, and that was really good. That's the only thing, the only sadness we've had in 58 years that really--I mean, you lost your parents, I lost my parents, you're supposed to lose your parents. But you're not supposed to lose your child, no.

JIM: Right, but you're not supposed to lose your child.

BEA: Other than that, I mean, Ridgewood has just been splendid. Splendid.

JIM: Yep. A lot of our friends moved away, went to various places, you know—it's a joke—everybody goes to North Carolina. If you don't die, you go to North Carolina.

BEA: Or Arizona.

JIM: But we really don't want to move out of here.

BEA: We don't want to leave.

JIM: We would really like to stay.

BEA: We don't think we can stay in the house much longer.

JIM: No.

BEA: I'm having trouble with stairs and a whole lot of stuff. But, I can't imagine leaving the house. But you got to. I mean, there comes a time when you just have to say, that's it, baby, you know.

JIM: Yeah, yeah.

BEA: But, we have a granddaughter getting married in September-- that's the second grandchild that's been married. Nothing more exciting than that. And our daughter who's never been married, Claudia, just got engaged and is getting married in 2018.

Marrying a man who's never been married, in his 50s. Who believes this? It's just absolutely wonderful (laughs).

JIM: Yeah.

BEA: So, we have so many things planned that we can do and have fun with and...

JIM: That's right.

BEA: We're just so lucky.

JIM: We have a lot to look forward to.

BEA: We sure do.

JIM: Yeah.

SARAH: Thank you both--those were amazing stories. I really appreciate you doing this interview and the oral history. So we'll make sure to preserve this, for all time.

BEA: Thank you.

JIM: Thank you.