



Storytellers @RPL

Interviewee: June Regal

Interviewer: Sarah Kiefer

Recorded on March 23, 2016

SARAH KIEFER: So today is March 21, 2016. My name is Sarah Kiefer, and I'm speaking with June Regal, who is a longtime Ridgewood resident, and we are recording this interview at 104 Cottage Place in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

JUNE REGAL: I came from a family of artists, designers, and, way back, my grandmother embroidered in Latvia for the nobility. She married my grandfather, who was a tailor, but he was an educated man. And when they came to America, he wanted his family to live in a town, a college town, so he would make the uniforms for the college and have someone important, people to speak to. As a result, as you look around the room, you're going to see paintings that came from my family—my aunt, my sister-- the china and porcelains came from my aunt's home, some from my mother. What my grandmother did was supply all her five daughters with porcelains of varying degrees.

My mother was a designer at high school, and she married my father, who was a doctor, and my sister became interested in art, and my mother encouraged her. Right behind you is a painting by my sister. The other paintings you see around are paintings that my aunt did. And over the bed is a sketch in an art class that my granddaughter did. And this is a photograph of my mother's sister and her husband. My mother's sister made most of her own clothes, and she was a hat designer. She was very beautiful. When they walked down the street in Manhattan, men smiled at her even though she was holding her husband's hand. There was something very lovely about her. And my mother died when I was quite young, and I lived with them, and the family was very close. Unfortunately, they lived in a small apartment, and at the age of 17, I was wooed by a very wealthy man, and I stupidly married him. I didn't know what I was doing-- I had been raised in a Victorian atmosphere, and the whole thing of marriage was overwhelming for me. It did not last.

When we separated, they didn't know what to do with me. And I went out West to Fort

Lewis where my sister and her husband were with their daughter, and they were shipping 5,000 men a day overseas, and there was a real war on. That was in 1943, I believe. We came back to New York, and I went to a nightclub with a date. And the women were in sequins and jewels, Gary Cooper was sitting at a table, and I was horrified. This is not a way to conduct a war.

The next morning I enlisted in the Navy. However, it was the wrong thing to do. I remember, I was ill most of the time with aches and pains. My father said, "Tell them I think you need a two weeks vacation." Well, he was a scientist and a doctor, and he was in another world. I had an uncle who was a general appointed by Truman and he said-- he called them up and wanted to know what was wrong with me. And they said, "We don't know," and then he said, "Well, find out," at which point they sent me home. I was misplaced, because I had lived in an atmosphere as a young debutante type, and the Navy was no place for me.

What happened-- my sister by now had established herself as a leading children's clothing shop in Miami Beach, and I went to live with her. And one thing I noticed was that I absolutely hated folding baby clothes. She had a woman on the second floor who ironed all day long. Well, this whole atmosphere was not for me. But down the street, there was a beautiful antique shop filled with porcelains, and I said, "That's what I want to do."

Okay, back to New York, and at the age of 22, I went to see Victor Hammer, who was selling the William Randolph Hearst collection, and that was in 1946-- on the fifth floor of Gimbels, and asked him to hire me with no salary, and he did. He gave me, I think, was \$25 a week.

The fact that I had the ability to walk in and ask for a job and sell myself, was something I continued to do for the rest of my life. I call it "educated, enthusiastic conviction," and basically that was what it was all about—"enthusiastic conviction." I wish today young children would learn it. It's a wonderful thing. And I had an experience, with a Mr. Seligman from the painting family, who was selling the paintings of Mrs. Goodman-- was selling furniture and architecture. Mr. Zadok in oriental rugs and Mr. Lyons in silver, and I had the huge china square-- was about 10 feet square cabinets, filled with beautiful china.

At that time antiques, after World War II, were selling for nothing, absolutely nothing. I remember selling a 4 foot dore bronze clock of French revolutionary soldiers, to an Episcopal Bishop for \$1,500. This was outrageous, is what some of the prices were. I worked there for about six or eight months, and then the whole thing petered out, because I had come in towards the end. It was called the "sale of the century," and several years ago, PBS did a movie of that experience, and they had me in it. But the man who did it was not-- it wasn't very good, but they never showed it really. They did have it, but they didn't show it.

From there, I went to Plummer's. Plummer's at that time was on 57th St. and Fifth

Avenue, and they imported all the beautiful porcelains from England-- the cups and saucers, the birds, the flowers, and I was selling the birds and flowers right by the front door. And the men wore jackets-- they were Englishmen wearing jackets, and I, as a young woman, was getting phone calls for a date or so, and therefore got fired because you weren't allowed to have a phone call in an English establishment.

Next I went to the St. Regis hotel where there was a beautiful antique shop, and I said I'd like to work for you, and they hired me. I kept the records; I washed all the porcelains; they taught me how to make lampshades by lining the wires, binding the wires, lining...and my lampshades sold for a lot of money, and, of course, selling the porcelains.

From there, I remember working for another antique shop further up on Madison Avenue, and they were receiving things from England. I remember 20 pairs of lusters came, and I had to pin the lusters on the lamps--it was all finished, and the mother of the couple who owned the shop said, "Is there anything else you could think of to do for me?" It was charming.

But I then went to Bibi and Company, and they were importers of crystal, crystal chandeliers from Czechoslovakia and all kinds of crystals and porcelains and furniture. And they were wholesalers and they were at 225 Fifth Avenue. Actually, no, they were one block up. They were very pleased with me, I enjoyed it so much. I liked working with the decorators cause it was wholesale, and they eventually put me in charge of the shop on 54th St. and Third Avenue called "CrystalLight," which they had so that they would have a retail outlet for the crystals and chandeliers. And at that time we were not air-conditioned, and there I was, on the east-north corner, with the sun beating in on me among all these crystals. It was very warm and I was sitting in a cotton dress—mind you, I was quite young, and I looked young-- and I remember Eva Gabor coming in and saying, "Uh, my dear, where is your mother?" And then she did purchase a chandelier from me.

Shortly thereafter a very distinguished gentleman came to me in the showroom, and he said he'd heard about me, and he wanted me to manage a wholesale showroom for H. Sachs and Sons, from Brookline, Massachusetts. H. Sachs and Sons made reproductions of original hepplewhite Chippendale and Sheridan furniture. It was absolutely perfect reproductions. Today, if anyone happened to have one of those pieces of furniture, they would have something exceedingly fine. They also sent a woodcarver to sit in Gimbels window, carving a Chippendale chair. It was an experience.

Among other things at that company that I ran, there was leather furniture and there was brass accessories and lamps, and also that was the Plymouth Lamp Company and the group leather-upholstered furniture. It was a very prestigious group and, again, selling wholesale.

At that time I had married Mark Druck, and he was a budding playwright and he was a

protégé of Harold and May Friedman. Harold Friedman was the leading agent in the world. He had covered everyone from Clifford Odets up to and including S.J. Perelman-- every major writer except Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Other than that, every playwright was under his control, and he thought that my husband was a budding genius. Unfortunately, he wasn't, but it was my determination to see him succeed.

After I left, I went to Barclay Square Hofstadter. Barclay Square Hofstadter manufactured upholstered furniture, and sewed beautiful custom-made furniture. He had married the daughter of Beacon Hill, and he had a company called Shaffro which did reupholster the White House for Truman. It was a wonderful thing for me to run this place and sell these things. A friend of his from Europe from the war sent him two lift vans full of Biedermeier furniture. At that time no one knew what Biedermeier was. I didn't know and they didn't know. So I went to the Metropolitan Museum and everything on Biedermeier was written in German. That was no help. So I wrote to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, and I got a three page single-line typewritten description of Biedermeier. That was a cartoon character like the Katzenjammer Kids, and it was what happened to the heavy, clumsy furniture in the middle of Europe after Napoleon had come through with his classic designs, and it was marvelous. What we received was wonderful. However, we did have to let it sit for a while because it was coming from a country, from countries where there was no steam heat, and it used to talk to us. But all the major manufacturers and the decorators were very thrilled with this.

I had contacted the manager of the home furnishing section of the *New York Times*-- she sent a photographer, and she photographed all this furniture, and it took off. It became very important. To this day, Biedermeier is a major firm, a major source in our decorating. It was very thrilling. Among other things on that lift van, there was a picture called the Second Gioconda. It was a painting of the Mona Lisa. No one knew when it was painted-- we had the experience of taking it to a master art gallery to have them blacklight it and see if they could find out. Turned out that it was probably from the 18th century instead of the 16th century. Anyway, my experience there was very unusual.

After working there, well, of course, with Mark, we went to Europe— I'll never forget, we saw 14 plays in nine days. That was something. He said if we do that, then maybe I could have a child. Well, the experience of those 14 plays-- everybody that was important in the theater, in England and in America, were on the boards at that time and we saw Lunt and Fontanne and we saw a Claire Bloom and a Donald Wofford—I mean, it was phenomenal. And theater in London always had a perfect production, and the tickets were a couple of pounds, and they served tea in the interval between the acts. I'll never forget, you know, after an experience like that, you really don't even need to go to the theater anymore. You've done it, you've seen it, you've had it, it's yours. Just as the art and the furniture and the porcelains-- all mine. I'm a very lucky person.

When we came back, I took over the front of the store for a company called Dino Levi. Dino Levi imported Murano glass and Bombay furniture from Italy, and they put me in

the front of a store on 59th St. between Madison and Fifth Avenue. In the back Leon Medina had all the paintings from Italy, and he also had a three-foot tall bust of Isabella and Ferdinand that King Emmanuel had offered him \$100,000 for, and he didn't sell it. And he was stuck with these great big gorgeous majolica busts in his store, but artists, the dealers, would keep running in and out of his store past me: "This is a possible Guardi; this is a possible Remington; this is Sasha." The whole art world was opened up to me in that experience.

I also had the good fortune to sell one of the Bombay chests to Greta Garbo. As I went through all my life, I've been exposed to people and I comfortably was able to talk to them because of what I was doing. When I went home at night, I wasn't very good. I was never a good housekeeper, and I remember my daughter-- after I remarried and had a baby boy after three months-- she said to me, "Mom, I want to compliment you on the way you're taking care of this child." In other words, she didn't trust me and rightfully so.

Anyway, after working at the shop in front of the art gallery, what happened—oh, I know what happened—I ended up working for a man who designed the most exotic office furniture, introducing the use of Lucite, rosewood, and other exotic woods to the decorators. But unfortunately, he was not well financed, and I remember he got sick, and the sheriff came to the door and closed the place down, and I went straight to the hospital. It was a very vast experience— however, the merchandise manager, I mean the general sales manager for that company, took me to the office furniture company that he was working for. It was called J. G. Furniture, and I ran the show room, and I transposed the specifications that architects offer to their clients, using Noel and Dunbar, and I would transcribe what the needs were from our company. And I enjoyed doing that. It actually used a lot of math and experience and knowledge and ability to talk.

It was at this time I had to divorce Mark. I had moved with my daughter to 63rd Street between Fifth and Madison in a townhouse on the second floor, which was the parlor floor. I was able to get that apartment because of a friend of mine that I had met in Rome—it was Barbara Barondess McClain, and she got the apartment for me. Mind you, this apartment—and Alissa was four—it was 1958, cost a hundred and fifty dollars a month. Isn't that extraordinary? Today that building isn't there anymore, but an apartment of that size today would cost a person at least 4 or \$5,000 easily or more.

Now what happened at that point, we would be going to-- every weekend, or every once a month, we would drive out to Scranton, Pennsylvania, to visit Mark's family who I loved very dearly— they were marvelous people-- but there was an ad in the newspaper. It was about 3 inches long, and I read it and I called them up and I said, "Look, you have an ad, you have an ad that is perfect for me. I'm going away for the week and just hold it, I'll be there Monday." Mind you, can you imagine this kind of confidence that I had in myself-- that I could call a major company and tell them to hold a job for me, which they did.

When they interviewed me, they was introducing modern home furniture to the world. Today it's called midcentury—today, everything in that company is in the Museum of Modern Art. And I said that, “This is a perfect job for me,” so they asked me questions. “Do you know who Russell Wright is?” “Oh,” I said, “he's a famous architect.” They said, “No, no, no, that's Frank Lloyd Wright-- I'm talking about Russell Wright, the man who designed china.” I said, “Look, I don't know anything about modern home furnishing. Give me a couple of months and it'll be fine.” Well, they sent me for a Personal Institute test that cost several hundred dollars. It lasted for two days, and I passed with flying colors, except-- not in management, but they didn't want me for management. I'm not a manager, I'm a sales woman, and I have a way about me. They hired me. I loved it, I just loved it. However, that manager that they had sort of grated on my nerves after a while, and I lasted for two years in the showroom. Then I told the owner, “Look, look,” I said, “I can't stand her. Either put me on the outside or I quit.” And he wrote in big letters: SHE DEMANDS. But they did-- they made me the only girl on the sales force of 23 men that covered the country-- and me.

Now what happened was all these designers twice a year would come into Raymore, which was the name of the company-- Richards Morganthau—Raymore. Today there's Raymour and Flanagan which people confuse with this famous name of Raymore. They would, the designers would come-- we would sit and listen to what they had to offer, and then the whole showroom would be emptied out and all the new things would come in. And within a couple of months, we would have memorized everything that came in. It was exciting, it was thrilling, and the sales manager was a very brilliant man. He taught us to have a complete ability to express ourselves in the language of what we were selling. And he believed in selling in depth. In other words, you don't just take an order for a few pieces. Either the people were interested in everything, in a large content of what was being offered-- then you believed, they believed it, and they could convey that to the people who were looking— the customers.

I remember going down to the Village and visiting a company that I had sold six tables to. And the tables were still on the floor, and I was so enthusiastic, they bought six more (laughter). I mean, this is what you could do. I remember walking into a shop on Fifth Avenue, and there were four people lined up on the side. And I said as I walked in, “You know, you look like bookies.” I think, “Where's the excitement, and what were they selling?” They were selling Lucite chairs-- great big gorgeous chairs in the shape of an egg. And they were sitting there.

Another place I went into was-- by the way, when I went on the outside, I covered the five boroughs. And I had a driver, this wonderful driver because I couldn't drive-- I had a car, but I didn't know how to drive. His name was Jean Telemaque, and Jean was dressed in a gray uniform, and when he wasn't driving me, he was driving Mrs. Da Vega and Mrs. Straus, the owner of Macy's. My goodness, can you believe little me, with this chauffeur. And when we would go out, by the time we got out to Brooklyn somewhere in the wilds, we'd get there, and I'd say, “Well, Jean,” and he'd say, “Look, you have to go in there, and you have to impress them.” He encouraged me-- it was delightful. The

way you work, with joy all the time, has enabled me all my life to have joy, even if something is selling for five cents-- just as much pleasure as something that selling for 10 or \$15,000.

And the 22 salesmen and myself, we did a very effective mission, and the country bought the whole concept. And 55 years later June and her daughter Lisa are having a fine time selling the contents of homes, where the treasures and trash of the whole world are being offered by someone who has seen a good part of it. So my daughter actually is keeping me vibrant and alive and interesting, because I go with her, after she's visited someone and they say they'd like to use our services. I go and I am able to write down everything that sold, and do some selling, and I love to add the pages with my head, and that, of course, is keeping me active in my brain. I will be 92 this June, and I'm very fortunate because I don't have any wrinkles and happen to have the blessing of a family of attractive people, so I'm looking pretty good, and I'm feeling good, and I have doctors who help me learn how to grow old.

SARAH: That's wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing your story. Before we end the interview, is there anything about one of your fondest memories of living in Ridgewood?

JUNE: Ah! Well, what happened when I remarried, we had two little boys, and we were living in Manhattan. And I said to my husband, "I can't go to the park at my age." I was in my 40s. So we moved out to New Jersey, to White House Station, on a big farm and a furnished home-- we sublet our apartment, and we did that for four years. And finally I was becoming-- I needed to be closer to civilization, so we came up Route 17, and we got to the Ridgewood exit, and I said, "Let's go to the right." He said, "No, I think you're going to enjoy the left better." That was Ridgewood, and I fell madly in love with it. And that was, let's see, 19--let's see, my son was 7, and he was born in '64, so that was in 1971. And we've been here ever since.

The first house we looked at to rent-- because my husband refused to buy anything-- was a house, a beautiful home right across the street. By the way, I just had this conversation interrupted by the lady who lived across the street, and we became friends ever since. And she and I started selling, doing garage sales. That was Dee Steen and she and I did garage sales. Well, from the garage sales, I grew, and I ended up doing estate sales. And Dee didn't want to be in a partner with me, because she and her husband traveled a lot and he did various things, but she helped me.

Eventually my daughter joined me, after she got over the shock. One day I had an oil painting of a Russian sleigh in the snow and the sunset, and Lisa was 18 at the time and she fell in love with it. But I had to sell it, and when I sold it, she ran in the other room crying, and she was, "I want no part of this business." Well, at this time, she has taken over the running of the entire-- she is so organized, she is so capable, she knows all about the antiques. She spots things and she also knows what is new today because I look at something, "And I'll say, ooh, isn't that pretty?" And she'll say, "Mom, look at the bottom-- it's bought in a home store. It costs four dollars." It's just a whole

new world. She says, "You don't know what's going on." But I do enjoy-- enjoy her and her ability to work with the people the way I did. So that is what we're doing now, and I'm so proud of her.

By the way, I haven't been able to tell you about my sons. I have two sons-- one is a designer of jewelry and he does fabrics and patterns and that's Russell. He called me one day last year, and he says, "Mom, I got a real job, I'm working with a man, and I'm the partner in a construction company." Well, I never heard of such a thing—that's wonderful, and it's called Brooklyn Concrete, and he's pouring concrete floors in buildings.

But my younger son is Guy Regal, and he is the managing director of the Newel Galleries. He had his own magnificent shop next to Serendipity in New York, with the finest, magnificent furniture and just as exquisite as it could be. It was so beautiful-- each piece was perfect, and then when the recession came, and he lost most of his billionnaires, he joined with Newel Galleries, and he is the managing director. They just opened up on 61st St. and Second Avenue and he has-- I can't imagine, but he has a lalique coffee table in that gallery. Can you imagine a lalique coffee table? I am so impressed with him and the things that he has, and he goes from antiquities to the present. So, I have been looking at a catalog of some of his items-- everything is the finest and everything is exquisite, and he happens to have a way about him very much that is warm and knowledgeable, and people like him completely. Dealers say he can have whatever we have-- his taste is so good. We'll give him what it costs and he could sell it if he wants to.

So, I do have that nice feeling about having produced three lovely children and their children and their spouses and my grandchildren. I'm a fortunate lady.

SARAH: Do they all live nearby in Ridgewood?

JUNE: No, no, Lisa lives in Westwood, and her husband is a minister of all faiths. And he has a ministry, it's a small ministry in Englewood, and he writes the sermons. He's also an accomplished auctioneer, and they do an outreach auction once a year and all the money goes to the different charities. They raise quite a bit of money. Lisa and Paul—his name is Paul Dodenhoff--are very giving wonderful people-- they help where they can.

Guy lives in New York, and he has this magnificent showroom, and he's living with a very lovely lady and his daughter is in boarding school, and she has two lovely daughters. She is a designer.

My son Russell lives in Bloomfield. His wife Ava works for a marvelous company called Accenture, in client relations. She is a very, very accomplished young woman, and they have two adorable little children—Gigi and Vivian. And they live in a house, by the way, that was built in 1943 by the man who invented Saran wrap. And it's the original house, and they maintain it, and it is filled with eclectic, mostly midcentury

furniture, with a few antiques that they have. And Russell collects fine art. So that's the story of my three children.

SARAH: It's a wonderful story, and thank you so much for sharing, and I appreciate your taking the time to do this. So I guess this part of it will conclude the interview, so thank you for sharing your story with Ridgewood Public Library