



**Storytellers @RPL**

**Interviewee: Jim Griffith**

**Interviewer: Nancy Greene**

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**NANCY:** I'd like to say welcome and I'd like to thank Sarah Kiefer our local history librarian for coordinating all of this and our technical director Charles Gallo over there that the leaping young man and I'd like to say a special welcome to our Peggy Norris and Joe Suplicki, it's wonderful to see you at the Library events. Alright, Mr. Griffith when we picked Jim because we know is a good sport and if we don't do something right we can do it again. Alright Jim can you tell us anything about how you came to live in Ridgewood and when?

**JIM:** I'd be delighted to because it was a very specific command, it was not a gentle question, it was a command. It was a winter morning with dusting of snow outside, it was Sunday morning, we had come back from mass, we had stopped at the bakery and we had gotten the dozen glazed donuts and the newspaper and I was home, fresh pot of coffee, my share of donuts, the kids were happy and I was set and I knew that I would be comfortable for the rest of the day. I did not get through the first donut when my wife said, we've got to go to Ridgewood. At the time we were living in east Paterson/Elmwood Park in a garden apartment. Not with that contentment surrounding me, and I knew that I was going to put my superior talent to work and finish the donut and finish the coffee and finish the paper so I said to my wife, and why do you think we have to go to Ridgewood? And she gave me two words: she said schools and the hospital and I'm the mother of your three kids (laughter) and needless to say, we went to Ridgewood. Now, being a negotiator, I had to explain to my wife, that when you looked at the house, and I should tell you we had been looking for houses, for about six months, looking for the right one, so checking out a house was pretty easy, we knew what we wanted and what we didn't want. So in the car on the way over I said you have to do me a favor, I said if you like it, keep it to yourself and we'll talk about in the car on the way home. But don't give up the hand in front of them, and she performed

beautifully and as we went through and we had three children it was four bedrooms, you know, and there was a finished basement and she did beautifully. We're on the front steps and we're leaving, and my wife turns to the woman selling the house and she says, oh by the way, where does the school bus stop? And the woman said, at the end of the driveway. You're right, she blew it, she screamed. But anyway, we moved in, we were there for 50 years, and as you know 2 1/2 half years ago there's a woman in the audience that took control of my life and I now live in her house, but I stayed in that house for 50 years. Why? Because of schools and a hospital! And I couldn't run away from those two words.

**NANCY:** Well I'm sure the library brought you here too.

**JIM:** It took you awhile but I want you to know that the library, and what a library can do for you was pressed into my soul as a very young man.

**NANCY:** Can you tell some of your fondest memories of living of life in Ridgewood?

**JIM:** I can't help but think, I got to use one word, and I'm going to use one word, family and I'm not talking about necessarily my family, I'm talking about the community. Needless to say RBE came and was a big part of my life, I ended up spending about 20 years there and Mt. Carmel getting involved with Mt. Carmel in many different ways, and then there was the Girl Scouts, the CYO, but I never got involved with dance night or the group over at the high school. I don't know I just lucked out, but everyone else got their hooks in me. So I found that living in Ridgewood there was always a bunch of people that I knew and I got along and they had similar thoughts as me, as I did. Now whether it was the church group, the spiritual group there, whether it was the guys that played softball, whether it was the kids playing baseball, the girls playing basketball every time I turned around and I find that to this day to this day. Now yes there were several camps and there's, I have developed a way of living that comes from this family association all my life through Ridgewood and I follow that in my political thinking right now as I go forward and I want that family feeling to be nurtured and continued. It gave me such happiness and success I'm going to say success, I'm 81 years old I'm still alive, that's success so I'm thrilled I hope that answers your question.

**NANCY:** That's wonderful. Can you tell us how have you seen life in Ridgewood changing over the last 50 years?

**JIM:** Wow, that's a tough one and that's a problem. I wish you would stop asking me that question and I would like you to ask every other resident in this town that question because I see one of our biggest problems is that us, an awful large amount of our

people are afraid of that question, they won't go near that question and I give you an example. New York City, when I was a young man, real young man, when I was 12 or 13 years old I lived in Queens, took a bus to Jamaica, got on the subway, the F train, went in to Manhattan, sometimes I had to switch to other ones. At the age of 12 and 13 I traveled all over New York City with a gun on my shoulder and an equipment bag in my hand. I was on the rifle team. All over New York City at that young age would you like to try that trick today? It would be hard to do it. My oldest sister fell in love with Joe Page. Joe Page was the first dedicated relief pitcher. There wasn't relief pitchers in the past, it's your turn to go in and help the guy finish the game. But Joe Page became a relief pitcher, and she fell in love with him. Now what that meant was I learned how to get to Yankee stadium that was one bus and two trains to get to Yankee stadium. I was I don't know, 11/12 years old. That was no challenge and away I went. You had 9/11 and they brought Pearl Harbor to our shore. They had the audacity to bring Pearl Harbor to across the river, to New York City and we responded correctly. New York City has changed though and the world has changed. After World War II the idea of democracy and the responsibilities of democracy burst forth so it stared you right in the face and when these third world countries came by and said I want some of what you have we gave it to them. And the competition worldwide has changed, and it's changed dramatically. At New York City where I used to walk around with the rifle over my shoulder now is the center of the world. And if you don't believe me take a walk over to the UN building. So New York City has changed dramatically but New York City is still only 60 minutes away from Ridgewood and that's the key and that's the key. When you get a town of this quality, of this quality within 60 minute ride of New York City, this town is precious and the people of the world know it. A lot of people in our town don't know it, but people around the world know it because I keep track of who's moving in and I keep track of the houses that building on the empty lots they tear down a house and they put one up three times the size. Why? Because they're facing the same thing that I did 50 years ago when my wife said schools and a hospital and they look at our track record and they come here. Now if we're going to maintain that we have to become competitive, and we have to get in the competitive thought, and we got to keep up with the time. And keeping up with the times is something that this lady sitting next to me trained me to do while working for her 12 years ago and we had to we had to look at California and we had to look at Connecticut to see what the good guys were doing and we found out what the good guys are doing, and if you go upstairs you'll see we're getting ready to imitate them.

**NANCY:** It's true, thank you. What about, could you tell us the name of a Ridgewood resident that you've greatly admired and why?

**JIM:** I have to say John Rosengren and I'll tell you why. John is a, was a leading

member of the First Presbyterian Church and also he was one of the founding members of Paterson Habit for Humanity but beyond that John and I worked shoulder to shoulder for 12 years on the Ridgewood Parks, Recreation and Conservation Commission. He ran it for 9 years and then I ran it for three years. He took care of the trees and parks, I took care of the fields. He left my fields alone, I left his trees alone. It was a working relationship. He said I want you to work for Habitat, and I said John I have a few problems I'm working on now, but here's the deal, when I retire, I'll help you. I retired on a Friday, the following Wednesday I was in his living and within a half-hour I raised my hand and I was the charge of the walk-a-thons. Just like that, I became in charge of the walk-a-thons. They told me it would only be for a year or two. Five years later I was introduced to my replacement and that's the way they do business and I'm still involved with them but John made a big impression on my life in the way he loved this town. And the way he loved he was in charge of the wildscape and if there is any unused part of this town, John knew about it and he knew what was planted on it and what was growing on it. And he loved it and I think I got some of my dedication from him. What I must admit that Wayne Morrison and the RBA really started me on my this volunteer thing. First of all, coming from New York City and then playing baseball behind the Hawes or Somerville field, what a delight, what an oasis of fun. Enjoy with the kids, I mean how could you not like it, how could you not get involved? And then lo and behold 20 years later the president of the semipro baseball league has a sudden heart attack and who gets stuck with the job, me. Taking care of Tiny Tim 20 years later running the semipro baseball league. Did I have fun? I had fun, I had fun.

**NANCY:** I'm learning more about you every minute, this is great. I'd like to ask you a little bit on, before we get back to your service as a volunteer, is there anything you'd like to share about your family history or your family life today?

**JIM:** Oh my goodness, you better order in lunch. I was unfortunate and I had a little tragedy in my life. My wife passed away when she was 60 years old after 12 years of illness. But I look back now here in just this Christmas was the first year where I was able to sit back relax and call forth memories to the point where they were joyous and complete, so it wasn't that I got a quick shot here and a quick shot there, for some reason this year I was able to sit back and do the panoramic review and that's what you're talking about and I was delighted. Three children, the oldest one works so hard and is so successful that she forgot to tell me this past Sunday that I was due at her house for dinner. But she didn't give up when I told her that I have a previous engagement, she just called up my son and got a substitute and the dinner went on. The second child, Peggy, a lot of you know Peggy she works over at Valley Hospital and it's wonderful and she has a job she loves. My son lives on South Pleasant. So I have two children that live in town and I have one child that lives in Wannaque, half an

hour away, isn't that gorgeous. Now on top of that, it's now at the point where the grandchildren are graduating from college. And they're going out in their world and they're making their first step into the world of responsibility and it's so interesting to see how they're doing over and how they're handling that. We've all gone through that awkward thing. I think you ought to check that woman's ID who just came in, I don't think she's allowed here. It's Jane Riley our ex-Mayor, she's trying to hide with those glasses on. I've seen my kids grow up and my family and now two and a half years ago this library, with her involved, had the nerve to throw a big dance and a tent out back. Big tent out there and I met a young lady out there, and about six months later married her and I have to be careful because she's sitting here, I can't say anything too bad or too good. So my life here in Ridgewood has been wonderful. I've been treated well. I was fortunate also being here, I worked for the same company for 35 years and it took me 20 minutes to get to work. And because it only took me 20 minutes to get to work I was able to go out and get myself a couple more college degrees so I feel a little confident when you people start throwing difficult questions at me.

**NANCY:** What did you do in your career Jim?

**JIM:** I told the other guy what he couldn't do. I was very fortunate that we were talking before with the gal who is running the event, and she was telling me of her background and I had a background where I started out a storm with some technical, electronics and industrial instrumentation. And I was great with the book. You know you couldn't give me any problem where I could sit down with the book and figure out the answer. You make me leave the book here and go out there into a big plant and somethings not working and they tell you to fix it. I had a lot of trouble doing that. I just, the hands on technical ability wasn't there. I couldn't take what was in the book, put it here and apply it real quick and solve problems. The good thing was that one morning getting ready for work, because when I changed jobs and moved here, I went from a technical job to a technical job. And I recognize in this thing you know you're going to have the same problem so you might as well cut the cord real quick. And I can remember to this day I was shaving, I was shaving actually looking, they say you got to look in the mirror, well I was looking in the mirror and I was shaving and I said make the decision. And I did. And I signed up for Rutgers in the business administration. I switched from the service department of benedicts to the contracts department. The contracts department was fun because as I found out if you're honest, outspoken, friendly person, they liked you. And once they liked you they trusted and it was obvious from their experience that they couldn't trust everybody. So once they got to know me, they insisted that they do business with me. Oh what a shame that was. So I was a negotiator and my job was to solve the problem before it happened, because they wanted the contract and every contract we got meant jobs for about 100 people for 20 years. You think about going

out and winning something that's fine, but you suddenly realize that if you win this you're gonna give a whole bunch of people work for 20 years. It suddenly has a different light on the need for doing what you're doing correctly, and I was very fortunate and I dealt with all of the big guys and I swear I got my master's degree in the downstairs restaurant in the St. Louis Marriott next to the airport because I was out there so much with McDonald Douglas and I had to do so much homework and I did it there. It was beautiful so I was fortunate. I was a negotiator. I worked with great people and there was some very trying times. My experience led me to the world of deep throat, what is the name of the guy that they're still looking for in the parking lot of Washington, secret stuff?

**NANCY:** Snowden?

**JIM:** No not Snowdon, way before him. So I would be home and get a telephone call on Sunday afternoon telling me where to be and I wouldn't know who the person was on the other end of the phone except that when he told me the location where I had to be he knew, that I knew, that location. And so I went and things were glorious. We kept doing good business and I enjoyed it and I, I always say to you young people today. When I get a chance to sit down with a young person today, that includes you. That if you can find something you're good at and something you enjoy, and then if you get a job doing that, you'll never work a day in your life. You'll have so much fun and in my work I had fun.

**NANCY:** Thank you. If you were going to try to narrow it down, what would you say is your greatest accomplishment in your life so far in your work your volunteer career?

**JIM:** Marrying the two women that I did.

**NANCY:** That's a wonderful accomplishment, convincing them to marry you.

**JIM:** Don't let it go to your head now.

**NANCY:** That's lovely. Alright just one more question. Looking ahead what kind of lifetime goals do you plan to work toward, or what special trips or anything that you're looking forward to?

**JIM:** Oh yes yes good. See that girl in the black jacket over there? Well I just gave her, four months ago, my resignation from the community center group that she's heading up to enhance the life of retirees in this town. And I did it because I got a message about my health. It wasn't a critical message, it isn't something that you have

to start sweating and go say extra prayers at or anything like that. But it was a message that says pay attention. So I have established the firm goal of stopping all volunteer work. Now needless to say, I'm a pushover, alright? And this goes so far, I will not take any new long-term assignments. But there's a couple people out there in which my relationships have developed where I just can't say no. And one is Habitat. Every time they call, no matter what and you want to hear about surprise phone calls, when was the last time you were asked to borrow a cathedral? Yeah. Shake your head. Well Habitat and I have a relationship where they know that I can't do too much, but they don't hesitate to ask, and some of the things they asked me to do I don't know where they get the ideas but they do. This girl here, at the library, how can I say no to helping the library? To give you an example, they're having an author luncheon that's sold out, sold out! Author luncheon is sold out, and yes I'll be the greeter and I have already ordered my boutonniere so that I can be a good greeter. And yes I will speak there at that thing and when she comes around and she asks me to do something else yeah I'm going to say yes. And that girl in the black jacket that she you know she come around and she gonna say later on you gotta do this you gotta do that, except run the organization, and I'll help. But no, I just started a good book that I bought six months ago and I'm enjoying it, I'm enjoying it tremendously but it's an in-depth book that if you can read five or ten pages at a time, because you gotta, every sentence you gotta understand, and put it in perspective and realize what is being said and I'm on page 62. And he's, he's used two words in 62 pages that the dictionary doesn't cover. So this guy is a thinker, and if you can't find a word in the dictionary where do you go?

**NANCY:** I think we need to find you a different book.

**JIM:** [laughter]

**NANCY:** Well Jim I wanted to thank you very much for being our celebrity key note interviewee.

**JIM:** That's the first time you've called me that by the way.

**NANCY:** Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you'd really like to share about Ridgewood life here?

**JIM:** No, it's not about Ridgewood it's about libraries. It's about libraries. You wonder why you've got a captured audience with me? Let me tell you. I went to parochial school. And we had a library in the parochial school. It was one small room and it probably had 500 books in it and that was our library. But they had a lot of kid's books in it, and I enjoyed that library. In the sixth grade Sister Mary Rose grabbed me

by the scuff of the neck, dragged me out of the classroom, dragged me behind the stairwell, and shook me and she said “stop daydreaming, I want to pay attention and get involved all you do is read books!” It’s not bad, to this day I’m still doing the same thing. In the town I lived in, I think the first project after World War II was building a library in my town. My mother took me over to the dedication of the new library, she got me a library card, and she took me in and she explained to me that the books here were all mine. You can only take them out two or three at a time. But all those books as yours as long as you have that library card. She told me that and here I am, where am I today? Sitting in your library, with my library card.

**NANCY:** And today you’re buying Kindles and learning how to download books.

**JIM:** She's got a Kindle now, she doesn't need me.

**NANCY:** OK I'd like to interview you a year from now. Everybody thank you so much for joining us today.