



Storytellers @RPL

Interviewee: Tony Damiano

Interviewer: Nancy Greene

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NANCY: Good morning, my name is Nancy Greene I'm the Library Director at the Ridgewood Public Library and this morning we're speaking with Tony Damiano, one of the best-known shopkeepers in Ridgewood. Today's date is Wednesday, October 2, 2019. Tony is known for his artistic taste and his sense of fun that have made his Broad Street store Mango Jam a destination for generations of community members and has also contributed to his starting and leading the organization the Ridgewood Guild. And Tony has also served the Library as a designer and a member of the Ridgewood Public Library Foundation Board. So Tony thank you for joining us this morning.

TONY: That's correct. Thank you Nancy, thanks for having me.

NANCY: Yeah. Tony I think people would be interested to know where you grew up, you know, like what kind of education and experiences led you to the point that you've reached today.

TONY: Absolutely yeah, I actually grew up in Paterson in the Hillcrest section and went to a great public school. I graduated from Don Bosco with an architectural drafting background basically. And had a BA in Art and I actually wanted to teach art at the high school level, I was certified K-12. And what happened was I kept subbing for English and the head of the English Department said look I have 36 English teachers in my department, there are only two art teachers, see how many credits you need to teach English. So lo and behold I only needed three credits, got the BA in English, taught for three years, and got antsy, I was young, 22, I had kids in my class that were 19. Classes of 45 students and I decided it was time to go back into the art field. And I wanted to work in New York, and I actually fell into visual merchandising and store design and worked for five very well-known companies including the Pottery Barn, Conran's Habitat, Dansk the tableware company. And designed and opened stores throughout the country, coast-to-coast, in over 30 states.

NANCY: Well how did you make that leap, I mean that must have been quite a leap to go to the security of teaching, you know, and working full time, and benefits and all of that to being an entrepreneur.

TONY: I'll give you the abbreviated story. My parent's wanted to kill me because they put me through college and here I was taking a chance. I was teaching ceramics in the evening. So, I, it wasn't like I left teaching and didn't have an income. And I walked into the Pottery Barn, one day and lo and behold, I didn't know this, but I was talking to the owner at the time. And at that time it was a smaller company, similar to Williams-Sonoma. And the New Jersey owner had five stores and she just, we just, hit it off, and so go down to my Short Hills store tomorrow and talk to my Director of Visual Merchandising. And the woman was fantastic and she hired me on the spot. I worked for them for two years and then I was actually recruited to Conran's Habitat, which was my dream job because it was a larger store, it had a furniture floor, and I served them for eight years, reporting to a wonderful woman. And it was great to work with Sir Terence Conran, who would flyover on the Learjet from London because he was the owner.

NANCY: Can you tell us about Conran's Habitat, do the stores still exist?

TONY: They don't exist in the States. He lost his stores in the late 80s. They do exist in Europe primarily France and England under the name Habitat. So it was kind of like a Crate and Barrel if you will. Housewares, homewares, full furniture floor. It was very very well-known. Sir Terence was knighted for his brilliance as a designer. The flagship store was a Citicorp Center in New York. We had three locations in Manhattan. And it was a whirlwind, it was wonderful.

NANCY: What fun, Tony, so you got to travel a lot I guess, doing this.

TONY: Yes, yes. With Conran's, with Home Limited and with Dansk. And what I loved about it was I visited many states that I would never thought to work, you know, to visit. One job was in Little Rock, Arkansas with President Clinton's cousin who owned a tabletop store. I got to go to New Orleans, and 12 wonderful cities in California, Maine, yeah just again coast to coast.

NANCY: So you would go to the store and you would guide them in design?

TONY: Yes.

NANCY: And marketing?

TONY: I would lay out the stores. And then meet with the buyers, merchandise them.

NANCY: Before the store is open?

TONY: Before the stores opened. Or the other part of this was redesigning existing stores. And then periodic visits. For instance, Boston, I was in Boston once a month for two years. I was in California once a month for three years. So I was constantly on the plane at that time in my life.

NANCY: Oh my goodness. Did you have to staff or you did this all yourself?

TONY: Yes, no at Conran's I had a staff of 35. At Dansk it was me and my assistant.

NANCY: Wow.

TONY: But they were much smaller stores.

NANCY: Yeah. You didn't do those at the same time, I guess, right you, I mean this is a chronological journey from one?

TONY: Yes. So what happened was, it was time to sit down. And I was getting older, tired of the flying. So I met my wife when I was at Home Limited actually, which that was a short tenure. It was going to be the American Ikea. So the store was 120,000 square feet, just outside of Chicago. And unfortunately it only lasted three years. In the interim my wife and I got married and again time to settle down, and we always had in the back of our minds that we'd like to have her own store. Gina was in the accounting field and getting kind of board so. Actually when we opened Mango Jam in 2000, I was still gainfully employed with Dansk. And the only dinnerware we carried was Dansk and Lenox brands, because Lenox was the parent company.

NANCY: I remember buying Dansk wine glasses at your store a long time ago.

TONY: Sure, yes. And I remember you coming in with Annabel as you mentioned, the community grew up with Mango Jam and now your daughter is heading to college I believe.

NANCY: Well she's actually flown the coop, she's in college.

TONY: So yeah so what happened was Dansk had a lay off and I was saved but the second wave hit me. So it left me at Mango Jam full-time which I was ready to assume that responsibility.

NANCY: So almost 20 years.

TONY: 20 years.

NANCY: Oh we'll have to have a party.

TONY: 20 years, this year, 2020 will be 20 years.

NANCY: Wow. And then on you, I guess are completely the buyer for the store. What, what do you look for in particular? I know it's a wonderful place for teacher gifts and hostess gifts and new babies and anniversaries and weddings.

TONY: Yes.

NANCY: And it seems like a lot of the things you have are beautiful, and have a sense of, a little bit of a sense of humor.

TONY: Yes.

NANCY: To them.

TONY: We kind of morphed into a gift shop. The first ten years I would say we were actually a tabletop store. So we only carried dinnerware patters, ceramic accessories, anything for your table, glassware, wine glasses, linens. And when the recession hit and the Eurodollar had increased, I had to make a decision whether to go high-end or to become more of a gift store. And I'm glad I made that decision because it gave me the opportunity to have more of a variety in the store.

NANCY: Yeah.

TONY: And, you know, there's always a trend watch, which I'm always, I keep abreast of. I go to the New York markets, sometimes the Atlanta gift show. And I still enjoy it, very much.

NANCY: Yeah, well so then how did you happen to start the Ridgewood Guild, when you were already working full time, managing Mango Jam?

TONY: Yeah, what happened was the recession hit, and hit Ridgewood hard as you know. And it just amazed me. The phone stopped ringing. People stopped coming in the door. There were over 40 vacancies in town. And my customers actually put it in my head because they kept coming in saying "what can we do?" "Nothing is happening." "The town is falling apart." Actually almost three years went by and I thought well maybe it's time for a new organization. And at the time I met with my friend Anne Zusy, who was Councilwoman at the time, and spoke to her about it, and she said "yeah you can form an organization." So the intent was to get a sound board of directors. And I have a board established in two weeks. And we were incorporated in March of 2010. And the intent was to get 50 people to give me \$100. And the spin that I took on this organization was residents can join the Guild. It was not only for merchants. So the Guild consists of merchants and residents. Lo and behold, by the end of the year, which was really only nine months, we had 150 members.

NANCY: And the mission of the Guild, how would you describe that?

TONY: The mission is to support our business owners and to make sure that our downtown flourishes. So today we have over 300 members. And the breakdown is probably about 200 merchants and about 100 residents.

NANCY: Wow. And I know that you also, the Guild also brings a lot of fine arts to

Ridgewood, with your, you want to tell us a little bit about your film program, and your jazz program?

TONY: You know it's so funny, you're not the first one to mention that. And I never even realized it but I guess because again I have a creative background etc. it did, it kind of went that direction. So yes film festivals going on ten years. It's gone on to be an international film festival. So, and it's also gone on to encompass seven nights. So from a two-night festival, it's gone on to be seven-night festival. We've premiered some films which were great. This past year we had Eric Roberts premiering a film. We had a spectacular after party at the new Felina restaurant, over 300 people. Our second largest event is the music fest which would just had last month. And on a beautiful day in the park there's nothing better.

NANCY: It has been beautiful.

TONY: Yes. September is usually a beautiful month. So probably I would say about 1500 people drifting in and out of the park. An all day event from noon until seven in the evening. Restaurants, desserts, a beer and wine garden, and all local musicians. That also, you have to learn from, I don't want to say your mistakes, but what wasn't working is that started as a jazz festival. And it was too narrow. So we broadened it, and now we have every genre of music and also all local musicians. The first program we put together was "Music in the Night". So on Friday evenings throughout the downtown from seven to nine, between Memorial Day and Labor Day, we position musicians throughout the town. And that's also grown. It started as acoustic musicians only, now we have four and five piece bands. And people just love it. They call and say "where musicians playing tonight?" So yeah that's another great program.

NANCY: Well you are, I would say, the unofficial fine arts coordinator for the Village of Ridgewood. No you are.

TONY: It's, it's enjoyable I have to say.

NANCY: You are, you made such a difference.

TONY: And being a movie fan, one of my favorite programs is Movies in the Park. We have six free movies every other Wednesday throughout the summer months.

NANCY: And do you have a great big-screen that you put up?

TONY: We have a 25 foot screen. And a year or two after we started the program, we started with two movies. And I decided to buy the equipment, and it grew into four movies and now it's six movies.

NANCY: That's just great, that's wonderful. Well Tony, could you tell a little about some of your work to, to encourage the growth of businesses in the community? I know you've been very involved with, you know, trying to add parking for example for

the community.

TONY: Yes. That I learned through my background because when we, and all the companies that I worked for, when we went in to a town there were two things that we looked for - one was parking and second the tenant mix. And if the town did not have ample parking, we passed on the town. And right now also our tenant mix is off balance. We're heavy on the restaurant side. I think I'm the only gift shop left in Ridgewood. So I know, it's funny I ran into our Mayor this morning also and he was just interviewing some people – he's very active in trying to fill some of these empty store fronts as well. But I think what the parking garage will do, and unfortunately as you know it has been delayed, but we will be opening next July, it will organize the parking. Right now there's not enough employee parking. In my street, North Broad, I always joke, it's like the employee parking lot on my side of town. So what the parking lot will do is, it'll have ample space for the employees to park. And they will be ten hour meters. Because right now you have to move your car every three hours or you get ticketed. Also the parking garage will offer a lesser rate. So it'll encourage –

NANCY: This is for employees?

TONY: Yes, well it will be employees, commuters and shoppers. But most importantly, employees, so that'll free up street space for our customers.

NANCY: Yeah because I would be concerned that commuters might take up a great deal of the space that you would want for downtown.

TONY: It'll be designated. From what I understand the top level will be the commuters, because they're the ones who will be there all day.

NANCY: Okay.

TONY: And then it'll be divvied up between shoppers and employees.

NANCY: Yeah.

TONY: Yeah, so that's a good thing.

NANCY: Well I look forward to that, that'll be a wonderful enhancement I think for everybody.

TONY: We need to win back our customers. A lot of out-of-towners have boycotted Ridgewood because the parking problem is really twofold – you can't find a space and then you run the risk of getting ticketed. And if you get with a hit, if you get hit with a ticket once or twice you're not coming back. There are too many other options out there for free parking, such as malls, or the Woodcliff Lake parking shopping center.

NANCY: Yeah.

TONY: You know they make a little bit easier.

NANCY: And I know also now you have to feed the meters I think til eight o'clock at night.

TONY: Yes, yes.

NANCY: So, so that's tough. I guess Sundays are still free right?

TONY: Sundays are free.

NANCY: Because I know you've done a lot of work with various community organizations to help support them, including the Friends of the Ridgewood Library. With giving us special opening, especially for us on a Sunday and giving us a percentage of your, your take for the day.

TONY: Yes, we're known, we've been doing this for a number of years. We do our fundraisers any time of year, but the holiday season is most important because that's the shopping time of year. This year we have College Club and Jamboree again is returning. So we'll open up on a Sunday and give 20% to the organization.

NANCY: Well Tony I can't imagine anybody, you know, more community minded of all the Downtown people I've had the pleasure of meeting.

TONY: Thank you.

NANCY: Than, than you. Are there any new initiatives that you'd like to tell us about?

TONY: Let's see. I mean we're always growing, we are creating a Shakespeare Festival.

NANCY: You are?

TONY: Which started as a one-day event on a Sunday in July. So that's grown into a two-day event. And we hope to grow that even further. We're just redesigning our website, so we're very pleased about that. Our magazine, our Downtown with the Ridgewood Guild magazine.

NANCY: Yeah tell us about that.

TONY: Has been a huge hit. You know, several years ago there were a couple of Ridgewood magazines, and they've all gone by the wayside. And unfortunately a lot of these county-wide magazines, us little guys, cannot afford. So I thought well you know what, maybe we can do this, and it'll be 30 or 40 page magazine. Well last holiday season, which was the premier of the magazine, it ended up in 56 pages. Our summer

edition: 96 pages. And we're probably going to hit 90 pages with this upcoming holiday issue, I'm on deadline right now.

NANCY: Oh my goodness, and you're the editor of course.

TONY: I'm the editor, yes, because I did, I art directed several catalogs for companies that I worked for.

NANCY: I'm so impressed. And I love that you bring back writers like Betsy Murphy who are like you, beloved by generations of people in the Ridgewood community.

TONY: Betsy is a rare jewel, yes.

NANCY: She is. Definitely, definitely. Well Tony thank you for so much for your time this morning, and we look forward to working in partnership with you for years to come.

TONY: Nancy thank you very much for having me.