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Oral history interview with Randy James Stromsöe, 2012 June 4-7

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Randy James Stromsöe on June 4, 6, and 7, 2012. The interview took place in Templeton, California, and was conducted by Jo Lauria for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Randy James Stromsöe have reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JO LAURIA: Today is Monday, June 4 [2012]. Jo Lauria interviewing Randy Stromsöe for the Archives of American Art at Randy's home studio in Templeton, California.

So, Randy, let's start with you pronouncing your name the way it should be pronounced.

RANDY STROMSÖE: Stromsöe is "strom" with an S-O at the end, Stromsöe. It has an "E" but we don't pronounce the "E" so it's just Stromsöe.

MS. LAURIA: Great. When and where were you born?

MR. STROMSÖE: In Los Angeles, California, January 18, 1951.

MS. LAURIA: And can you describe your childhood and your family background for us?

MR. STROMSÖE: I was one of four boys. And small house in Panorama City. I had a typical childhood with the Little League and all the activities that a child would have.

MS. LAURIA: The name sounds Scandinavian.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, it is Scandinavian and there is — I guess there is a river — island in the fjords. I guess there's a lot of islands with rivers around them. And by Tromsø there is, I guess, a collection of Stromsöe. And actually "Stromsöe" in Tromsø means "pickled herring." So we are Scandinavian and I do enjoy the Scandinavian design sense.

MS. LAURIA: So your parents, were they immigrants or come from second or third generation?

MR. STROMSÖE: My great-grandfather came from Norway, and he was a bicycle rider, a racer, and he worked as a professional boxer, sparring partner for the heavyweights. And he was a tailor in Belmont Shore in —

MS. LAURIA: Belmont Shore in Long Beach?

MR. STROMSÖE: In the Long Beach area, where he did quite well. And they also had a bait and tackle shop on the pier in Long Beach.

MS. LAURIA: So this might explain your love for the ocean and possibly the fact that you are now not only a silversmith but a surfer.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. My father was a body surfer and we went to the beach quite often as youth. And then we would be dropped off at the beach with our surfboards and spend the whole day there while my dad was at work. We would be at Malibu and Rincon and all the great surfing spots in California. And we were accomplished body surfers and surfers. And we've done it a whole lot. My younger brother, who is also a silversmith with me, has been a lifeguard at Malibu Point for the last 25 years.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, I didn't know that. I didn't know your younger brother was also a silversmith.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: Anybody else in your family involved in the arts or crafts?

MR. STROMSÖE: I did have my Uncle Doane, who passed away 10 years ago. He was Doane Spencer. And Doane was a metalsmith extraordinaire. He far surpassed what most people's capabilities are, because he could

engineer and build racecars and then build a car by scratch. And he could modify cars. He could do things that are unbelievable with metal and with his mind.

And living close by to him — and then my family with four boys were each given to us a family member for a second home. And so when my parents got busier and they needed somebody to take over, I'd go to Doane Spencer's house. And he had a garage out there and he would be making Ferraris and Sunbeam Tigers. And his '32 Deuce Coupe is famous all over the world.

MS. LAURIA: So will you say his first name?

MR. STROMSÖE: Doane, D-O-A-N [sic].

MS. LAURIA: Oh, OK, so '32 Deuce Coupe. Isn't there a Beach Boys song that goes like that?

MR. STROMSÖE: There probably — yeah, there is. And it's in the Peterson hall of fame right now.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, the automobile museum.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. It was, like, the quintessential '32 roadster.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that's very interesting.

So how did you come to the world of metalsmithing? What was your path? What led you down this path of being a craftsman?

MR. STROMSÖE: One of the things I attribute it to, when I was 4 years old my oldest brother was at school and my dad was adding on to our modest 800-square-foot house that we all lived in. He was building a 20-by-20-foot addition. And to keep me busy he gave me these double-headed nails used for tacking. And they're quite large. They can be up to eight inches long. And he gave me an anvil and a hammer. So he had this 4-year-old boy out there and I was forging swords. So I learned to forge swords at an early age for — miniature swords, but it got me hooked.

And those same swords I forged out with my father at that time, I've taught most of the local kids. I've gone to the different grammar schools and junior high schools and I've taught a lot of kids how to make these swords, and they've become fanatics. They just love them. And you can go to the hardware store. You can buy the double-headed nails. And because they have a head, about three-quarters of an inch spacing between it, it's like a handle built in.

So I got an early start in making things at that age. We had a jigsaw and we were always manufacturing our own toys and weapons. We rebuilt bicycles. We did a lot of construction as youth and was kind of encouraged by the family.

MS. LAURIA: And what about your mother? Was she also a hands-on homemaker? You said she also went to work.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, she was a riveter during World War II and she was a supervisor at the telephone company, but when she started having children she became a housewife. I mean, she was very hands-on. She was always involved in one craft or another, and she was always building — she came from a musical family where everybody sang and everybody played instruments.

And my family encouraged me a lot with the art world. When I was in grammar school they did little competitions, and I'd win the competitions. I became one of the art guys in my grade where we painted the murals around the grammar school walls. And so right off the bat I was thrown in — I was categorized as "the art guy."

MS. LAURIA: Right. So you were given those kind of challenges. If there was something to do with drawing or painting, go see Randy, or have Randy do that.

MR. STROMSÖE: Or if they needed a mural or they needed something done, they'd put me in that direction, which gave you a lot of confidence. When you're young and you get accepted in something and people encourage you to do something and people, you know, like what you're doing, it gives you confidence that's hard to shake as you grow older, because all of a sudden in your mind you're "the art guy."

And when I got into junior high school I started painting murals at surf shops. I did some murals outside surf shops, and I really envisioned myself, as a young man, being a muralist. And I probably would have if I didn't fall into other things.

MS. LAURIA: Now, did you, at the time — you said you grew up in Panorama City. So you must have seen around the area — because I'm from that part of the San Fernando Valley — home savings banks, which were beautifully adorned with — Millard Sheets did these wonderful mosaic murals all over the San Fernando Valley. Was that something that you noticed in your — you know, in your environment, your routine of — the aesthetics of any of that sort of built environment?

MR. STROMSÖE: I did notice architecture. I was always a fan of architecture as a young man. And I got more appreciation by going to, like, the Huntington museum and different churches and looking at their architecture and the artwork inside. I really love decorative arts. After the Huntington museum, as I got older I'd go to the Getty Museum. It was in Malibu at that time. And I found a lot of inspiration by looking at the old masters and the skill level, the skill set.

My father would carve totems and he'd carve faces out of wood. And to this day I like drawing faces and making faces out of metal. So I think there's a little bit of that that bled through.

MS. LAURIA: And do you recall any one particular museum exhibition or experience that really resonated with you when you were a young man or maybe in high school that really, you know, said to you, wow, I really want to be an artist of that kind?

MR. STROMSÖE: I think there — well, when I was a little bit older, when I first went to community college, where I had instructor Zella Marggraf. She had assigned us — she educated us to what the English jewelers were doing and what the jewelers in the international arena were up to. And we were pretty darn excited. But then she sent us on field trips. And I went to a field trip in Pasadena and saw Joe Apodaca's work back when he was probably a young 20-something-year-old. And I was very excited and very impressed.

And I went to a show in Topanga Canyon of Al Pine's work. And that was back in the late '60s. And once again I was so excited, yeah. By looking at these men's work with what they were doing in their mid-20s and such, I was — yeah, I was kind of getting hooked pretty quick. I fell in love with metalsmithing and fell in love with the decorative arts.

MS. LAURIA: Now, Zella taught metalsmithing at Valley College, which is in —

MR. STROMSÖE: I think Van Nuys.

MS. LAURIA: — Van Nuys or —

MR. STROMSÖE: That area.

MS. LAURIA: OK. And she's a famous enamellist, correct?

MR. STROMSÖE: But she is also — in the early days she was an award-winning jeweler more than an enamellist. She did fine, high-end jewelry, and she'd enter competitions in Europe. And so she was always coming back and she'd have a first place or a second place or third place ribbon from, you know, some place in Germany or some place in France or England.

So she was competing internationally where she had more acceptance. And when I took the class it was called Crafts Workshop. And I took it because I wanted to make furniture and I wanted to carve wood, and I wanted to be a woodworker. And when I found out it was a jewelry class I was devastated. I was depressed and sad. And after making my first project, I made my first ring, she held the ring up to the class and she announced, "We have a craftsman in the class."

And so when she did that, it gave me some confidence. And she was a hard-nosed, all business, you know, scare out the weak and only keep the strong. The class, we had advanced and beginning, and she had a daytime class and she had an evening class. And she had a full — with more students than the facilities can handle. And she tried to keep people out but people were so excited by metalsmithing and jewelry making back in 1969, 1970 and 1971 that her classes were always full. Even as mean as she could act, she could not scare away everybody, or very many people.

MS. LAURIA: Now, her name — was she German or Polish or —

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, I think that she was German, but I don't know. I know that she did go and she worked with a French goldsmith that I think was in Germany, when she was young. And when she met — well, after the first semester in her class she advised me to go and work with this same French goldsmith that she had worked with that was — I believe was in Germany at that point.

And she told me the price, you know, to work for him. You had to pay him for the first three years. The fourth year was free. And the fifth year he paid you. And I was kind of scared about the finances. You know, it seemed

a bit beyond my capabilities to come up with that type of money for that sort of education. But I was delighted to have a teacher that actually pulled me aside and chose me to be the one that she told to go to this school.

MS. LAURIA: Do you remember his name, the French goldsmith?

MR. STROMSÖE: No, I didn't because the price tag was — I guess I should have but the price tag was so high that I was scared away from the guy.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I know that Zella's work is in the Long Beach Museum of Art — she has several very beautiful pieces — because when I was doing research for a show recently that I curated called *The Golden State of Craft* I saw her pieces of enamel there. They must have five or six wonderful examples of her work. So anybody who's interested in her can look on their website to see the level of her competency, her work. I do not think they have jewelry but I know they have her enamel pieces.

MR. STROMSÖE: I think she went to Chicago Art Institute. And when I was trying to research her I assumed, you know, years ago that she was departed, and I haven't been in touch with her for 20-some years. And I found out she lived to her late 90s, and she was around up until a few years ago. And I could have been in touch with her, because we did have a rapport and we did — I did follow her career and she did follow mine.

And I'm disappointed that I just assumed that maybe she had passed, because everybody else seemed to have passed in my life. Since we moved up to this area and started our own business, all my connections — everybody started passing away, and they were young people. And so I had — yeah, had no faith that she was still around.

MS. LAURIA: So how many classes did you take with her?

MR. STROMSÖE: I think I was there three semesters. And on the second semester I met Porter Blanchard. The first semester I took her class I had the highest grade in the class. I had perfect scores on everything I did. And that's with the advanced class and the beginning class. And I had the idea that maybe I'd found my niche in life, you know, and so I was looking for some direction in life and something I could be maybe a little better than other people at. And then I found that I was a natural at metalsmithing and jewelry.

MS. LAURIA: And this was right after high school?

MR. STROMSÖE: Right after high school.

MS. LAURIA: And what high school did you attend?

MR. STROMSÖE: I went to Monroe High. And at Monroe High I did a lot of cartooning, a lot of drawing. And I was another one of those art kids there, and I was supposed to do the comics for the newspaper but I just didn't have that many funny things. I did more political satire and stuff and I was more politically minded. And I wasn't laughing at things but I was poking fun at odd things that were going on in our country.

MS. LAURIA: Is it Monroe High in Reseda?

MR. STROMSÖE: It's in Sepulveda.

MS. LAURIA: OK. So right after you graduated high school you went to Valley College. And this was your first real experience as an adult at taking a metalsmithing class, which you thought was going to be a furniture class.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. And I would have dropped the class if I knew how to drop a class at that point.

MS. LAURIA: [Laughs.]

MR. STROMSÖE: But I was too naïve. And I did have a student deferment, so I did not really accept the war in Vietnam and I did not want to go to Vietnam.

MS. LAURIA: Were you a pacifist?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, I didn't believe in killing people because your country tells you to kill somebody. I thought that I would not be able to live with myself if I had been directed to shoot people that I didn't know and that I didn't know if I was fighting with them.

Many of my friends were snipers in Vietnam. They had to be strapped up to trees and they had to shoot anybody that walked underneath them. And they didn't know, you know? It's like — war makes terrible things happen, and I don't think we have to succumb to those — you know, I don't want to be a puppet and go out there and kill somebody because somebody tells me to do it. So I was ready to go to Canada and I was ready to leave the

country.

MS. LAURIA: Now, is it a religious — I mean, are you a Quaker or —

MR. STROMSÖE: Maybe a pacifist. Now, I'm not — I had strong spiritual feelings and I kind of felt like in this world you're set up to prove yourself. If you prove yourself — and to prove yourself you have to stand up against what you really think is wrong. And I thought it was wrong to take up arms against a people that I did not know and did not understand why we were there and what we were doing.

MS. LAURIA: So your principles.

MR. STROMSÖE: Principles.

MS. LAURIA: It was against your principles. So if you had a student deferment you had to stay in school.

MR. STROMSÖE: Correct.

MS. LAURIA: OK. So you were able to — you must have had to take more than this class.

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh, yes.

MS. LAURIA: So you had to have a full load?

MR. STROMSÖE: I had a full load.

MS. LAURIA: OK.

MR. STROMSÖE: And at the same time I had a full load at school, I was working full time also. I was working for the city of Los Angeles as a custodian at night. So I'd get done working at midnight and then I'd be back at school at 8:00 in the morning. And I didn't own — I didn't have enough money for insurance. I owned a car but I had to ride my bicycle around because I didn't have the finances to buy the insurance because I was saving up for other things. I had priorities.

MS. LAURIA: OK, so you said that you took three semesters with Zella and the second semester you met Porter Blanchard?

MR. STROMSÖE: Correct. Zella came in really excited one day and said she set up a field trip to Porter Blanchard's studio, and then explained who Porter Blanchard was. And she was in awe of the man and thought we really had a great opportunity to meet this living legend. He was 83 or 84 at the time, and he was making some remarkable pieces, some true treasures.

MS. LAURIA: And did you know who he was?
MR. STROMSÖE: I didn't know who he was but I did know that he was a mile away from my house where I was born, where I was living with my folks at that time. And —

MS. LAURIA: And that was in —

MR. STROMSÖE: He was out in Arleta, kind of like Pacoima. And he had 10 acres of land and a couple of houses and a woodworking shop and a swimming pool. And he had this little world out there, his own little compound.

MS. LAURIA: And that was a mile away from where you were born in Panorama City.

MR. STROMSÖE: In Panorama City. And yet for the field trip I did not have a ride into the field trip because of my insurance thing —

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MR. STROMSÖE: — on my car and my bicycle, and I wasn't going to go to the field trip. I couldn't figure out how to get there until at the last moment I had a friend offer me a ride. And they took us, and there were about 35 of us that showed up at his doorstep that afternoon.

And it was a hot day right before Thanksgiving, on the 20th or so of November, and probably 85 degrees out. And he is standing out in front in a pair of dress shoes, dress slacks and no shirt. And his shirt was hanging there so he didn't get any perspiration on it or anything, you know?

MS. LAURIA: And you're talking about Porter Blanchard.

MR. STROMSÖE: Porter. Porter, he was 83 years old but he was pretty casual. He was waiting on everybody and

pretty excited.

And when we went in there, into his shop, I was just, you know, I guess blown away. I could not believe the tools and the vintage shop they had, and the projects he was working on, the tea sets and the candlesticks and the punchbowls and the — I was just —

MS. LAURIA: Well, what had you been exposed to at the studio at Valley College? I mean, what were — what equipment did they have at Valley as compared to what you were seeing at Porter's? I mean, give us a sort of visual picture of the working studio at Valley as opposed to — in contrast to what you saw at Porter's.

MR. STROMSÖE: We had an okay studio. We had some tables and a nice area for doing your layouts and your drawings and stuff. And we had probably a dozen or 14, 16 torches — benches set up with torches on them, and one little polishing machine and maybe one or two vices, and then a couple of stakes.

And I, in my second semester, before I met Porter, you know, already I was done with jewelry. I'm on to hollowware and flatware. I'm like, you can't hold me back. I'm like, wow, I want to make bowls and forms. And so I had been in there raising up some bowls and I was having the darndest time. I couldn't get the personal instruction from Zella because she had so many people that needed her help in the class. She was swamped with people waiting at her desk and asking for advice and stuff. And I was a student that did well the first semester and really didn't need to take up here time.

So when we went on Porter's field trip, he was making some oval — sterling oval vegetable dishes. And then there was a group of us guys there — and he didn't ask any of the women. He asked the guys if anybody wanted to try their hand at raising. So several guys, maybe five or six guys, actually were in there hammering and trying their luck at it. And then he asked me if I wanted to try. And after trying it on my own and knowing what tools use, I was able to break out the right stake and the right hammer, and he was kind of interested in that.

Then he gave me a little bit of instruction as I started my process, and the next thing you knew I was raising up a vegetable dish for him. And I was doing everything correctly. And he got excited and he asked me to come back and be his apprentice, come back the next week. And everybody in the class got excited. The teacher got excited. And we realized that I didn't have to go back to France and Germany to study, that I'd found a master that was one mile away from my home and that I could just go over there.

MS. LAURIA: And you could ride your bike.

MR. STROMSÖE: I could ride my bike. And I knew that his age — that I wasn't going to do anything but that. I wasn't going to go to the beach and go surfing. I wasn't going to — I was going to withdraw from school and continue going to college in the evening, and I was going to focus totally on what this man had to offer me.

And it's probably the best thing I ever did in my life, because the shop was just amazing in those days, and the commissions we were getting were amazing. We'd get commissions for big gold and silver fish platters and gold trophy cups and, you know, candlesticks and big punchbowls. And we had to solder together two sheets of silver to make one of the punchbowls.

MS. LAURIA: Now, I have seen — a woman brought to LACMA, when I was working in the Decorative Arts Department there, a punchbowl that must have been — what is that, 20 inches in diameter, that had maybe 16 cups that rimmed it. And she was interested in maybe donating it to LACMA. And I felt the weight of that punchbowl. It was enormous and it was heavy. Would that be something that you worked on?

MR. STROMSÖE: The one we worked on had big flutes, had 3-inch-wide flutes around the body. And it was more decorative. And I think we sold it at Frederick's in San Francisco, which was a real fine, high-end store there that Porter was one of their main features. But I've seen a plain punchbowl that has no flutes on the outside, just hammered.

And one thing you have to remember too, as he's making that in his 80s, he has to support it. When you're hammering a piece, you have to balance it right on the top of the head that you're hammering on. You can't have it a little bit off. It has to be sitting there exactly. So the strength that he still had at 84 and 85 and 86 and 87 was amazing.

And I became his right-hand man when it came to trays and big punchbowls, where I would support it and I would move at the same pace he would move, and we worked together. "Two minds but a single thought," he would keep saying. And we would work together. And then when he wasn't able to work, I was able to just take over and work on the trays for him.

MS. LAURIA: So you had to work in syncopation.

MR. STROMSÖE: In syncopation, and have to anticipate every move that he was making. And at that time Porter considered himself to be the greatest living American silversmith, and the clients were coming out of the woodwork. He had clients in Texas, clients in Scotland, clients in England. People were flying from all over the world to come and buy things and order things. And we had no problem having enough work to do.

MS. LAURIA: So how many other apprentices did he have? How many other people worked in the shop with you in this compound in Pacoima?

MR. STROMSÖE: When I came there he had a spinner named Bob, and Englishman, but he left right away because he was also in his late — or mid-80s.

MS. LAURIA: What do you mean by a "spinner"?

MR. STROMSÖE: He would use the spinning lathe to help form uncertain tasks. So we had a whole room devoted to different chucks and different wood forms, and we could coax the metal over those forms. So not everything was hand-raised. Some things were hand-raised in conjunction with spinning. Some things, small cups and things, would be only spun.

So we had an expert spinner there, and the expert spinner had an apprentice, Greg Parizek, who now is neighbor of mine here.

MS. LAURIA: Really?

MR. STROMSÖE: He still lives here and we're still friends.

MS. LAURIA: And how do you spell his name? Do you know?

MR. STROMSÖE: P-A-R-I-Z-E-K.

MS. LAURIA: OK.

MR. STROMSÖE: And he hasn't been a silversmith in 30 years. After Porter passed away, the family, you know, didn't keep him on. And they let him go and they kept me on and I became, like, the hollowware man in the shop, at the Lewis Wise Studio.

MS. LAURIA: And Lewis Wise was the brother of —

MR. STROMSÖE: Lewis Wise [called Louie] was Porter's other son-in-law. Porter had two son-in-laws, Allan Adler and Lewis Wise. Allan Adler had a publicist and got more notoriety than Louie, but Louie and Allan were both very capable craftsmen and very highly skilled. Louie was a little bit better at the hand-raising and the forging, and Allan had his more contemporary design concepts and stuff.

What is really funny, in those days the three of them — Porter, Louie and Allan — would overlap and help each other a lot. And a lot of times they would have the same designs going out of their studios. I could go to Allan's shop and see something and it would be just a slight variation of Porter's thing. And Louie would have a little slight variation of that, but they all worked together. Like, maybe Louie would make up part of the work and send it to Allan, and vice-versa.

So they were competitors but they were competitors that helped each other. And I went to — numerous times I've gone over to Allan's shop and used his tools to make a Porter piece just because he had the proper tools for what we were doing.

MS. LAURIA: Well, where were their shops? Were they all then working out of Porter's shop in Pacoima then?

MR. STROMSÖE: No. Louie was in Calabasas. He had the Calabasas shop, which was on Craftsman Road then, and Craftsman Road was built to be a craft center by the people that build Hidden Hills, and it didn't really pan out the way they thought it would. I guess funding changed. And now it's a doctor's office. But for years we were out there. There's a polo field in front of the shop.

And when I was first there it was the most perfect spot to work out. We took Louie's house and we gutted it and made it a hollowware studio. And I was the only one that worked in that studio.

MS. LAURIA: And this was after Porter passed.

MR. STROMSÖE: Porter passed.

MS. LAURIA: OK. So what was the date?

MR. STROMSÖE: '73 and '74.

MS. LAURIA: And how old were you then, Randy?

MR. STROMSÖE: I'd be 23, 22.

MS. LAURIA: So still very, very young, because you started working for Porter when you were, like —

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, I met him when I was 18 and actually started when I was 19. Well, I had about a few weeks in when I was 18, but I was right around the verge of being 19 when I met him. I met him in late November and my birthday was in January.

MS. LAURIA: And this shop was —

MR. STROMSÖE: His was on Sunset Boulevard, and it was Porter's old shop from the '40s. Allan was Porter's shop manager at the Sunset Shop. And Allan only had, like, two years with Porter, in Porter's shop as an apprentice, and then he was running Porter's shop on Sunset Boulevard. And then World War II happened and the government wanted steel, and they controlled the silver and the tin and the gold flow to the craftsmen. And Porter donated huge pieces of machinery and rolls and things. He had the biggest set of rollers west of the Mississippi. And he donated everything to the war effort. He was a very patriotic man.

And at the same time, Allan — and Porter's shop kind of got really slow and Allan got some contracts with the United States government to make some pieces. I imagine they were made more for weaponry but I don't know. But he was able to hire Porter's employees and then take over Porter's Sunset shop. So that's how Allan got his studio and how he got his thing going, because he actually was able to fill the gap and hire people that didn't have much work in Porter's shop anymore.

MS. LAURIA: I think Allan Adler told me that he was given a contract to do some sort of circuitry that required — for naval sonar equipment. So that's why he was able to get some silver.

MR. STROMSÖE: He was able to get silver —

MS. LAURIA: Yeah.

MR. STROMSÖE: — and he was able to employ employees —

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MR. STROMSÖE: — and had a cash flow. So things separated then. And there was a little friction with Porter and Allan for a while, but they soon —

MS. LAURIA: Because Porter's daughter Rebecca is married to Allan Adler, and then his other daughter must have been married —

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: — to Louie. I don't know what his other daughter's name is.

MR. STROMSÖE: Louie — Alice. Yeah, Alice.

MS. LAURIA: Alice, okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: Alice.

MS. LAURIA: And Rebecca is still living. Is Alice still living?

MR. STROMSÖE: No.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. Sorry, but I know that Allan Adler died a couple of years ago, but Rebecca Adler — Rebecca Blanchard Adler is still living and now lives with her daughter in —

MR. STROMSÖE: Cindy or Cynthia?

MS. LAURIA: Yeah, Cindy Larson.

MR. STROMSÖE: And they have — Cindy has a son that is a silversmith now.

MS. LAURIA: Is a silversmith, yes.

MR. STROMSÖE: So it's coming full circle.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MR. STROMSÖE: And that's still — that's Porter Blanchard's grandson, or great-grandson.

MS. LAURIA: Yes.

MR. STROMSÖE: Now, is this —

MS. LAURIA: It's running in the family.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, the family is still there.

MS. LAURIA: Because Cindy learned silversmithing she told me.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah. I never knew — I met Cindy but I never knew that she was a silversmith. But I did — Ralph and Lewis Wise were silversmiths also. They were raised from the age of 6 years old to be silversmiths, and they actually — Ralph worked in Porter's shop for a while and his father's shop of course, and Troy worked in Allan's shop.

So everybody was pretty — working together. Everybody was helping each other and trying to get — a family of silversmiths. But as they both got to be in their early 20s, they realized that they were sharp, and they wanted to more with their life than bang on metal. They wanted to build airplanes and design airplanes and, you know, take a step up, which they did do different things. Ralph became a very good plane-builder and designer. And they just kind of advanced on a different level where silversmithing became kind of boring to them.

But Ralph actually made — we made some pieces for a gallery once when he was in his 20s, and he sold them to John Denver, the singer. So he was actually able to stretch a little bit and do some artistic stuff. And he was a great hard worker. There was a lot of talent in that family.

MS. LAURIA: Now, how did it come to pass that you now own all of Porter Blanchard's tools that he handmade?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, and then his father, George Porter Blanchard, handmade when he worked in the Arthur Stone Shop.

MS. LAURIA: Which is out of Boston, correct, or outside — Newton or —

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, where did they go for — I'll have to check on that later, where they're at.

But when I was young man, and as Porter's last apprentice, Porter and I hit it off really well. Everybody else — Porter was a taskmaster and he was really a tough man to work with. He demanded perfection and he rode his men pretty hard. And a lot of people didn't like working for him. A lot of people thought he was —

MS. LAURIA: Curmudgeon?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. And when I met him he had that young man, Greg Parziek, who was my age working for him, and he started working for him when he was 18. And he was doing a nice job but he was using all the machines. He was, like, the spinner and the machine lathe operator. And he did that end of it.

And when was hired by Porter, I was there with an art class and I was there with Zella Marggraf, who had a high opinion of me, and she told Porter he opinion of me. So at that point all of a sudden I'm the art guy again. Porter is looking at me like: Here is the designer, the art guy, the guy with the fine touch. He is going to be my right-hand man and do the find finishing, and he is the guy that's going to make the handles and spouts in the tea sets. You know, this is where this guy is going to go.

And I was able to have a rapport with Porter that was different than anybody else's — you know, that he had with Greg or he had with his grandchildren. And Porter and I became great friends. He was, you know, mid-80s but he had the energy of a young man. And he liked to be around young people. He could work 10 hours a day, seven days a week, and he could do excellent work. And he could work for five hours with his right hand and then switch to his left arm and hammer with his left arm on a tray, which is unheard of — I mean, his capabilities and strength.

But I saw pictures of him in his late 70s and I saw him when he was in his mid-80s, and I knew that he was getting a lot thinner and he was looking pretty frail, and just five years earlier he was pretty burly and pretty strong-looking, bit set of shoulders and chest and arms. And all of a sudden they're kind of looking kind of weak. But he had lots of energy.

So Porter and I made this connection, and when Porter wanted to pass his business on to myself — he wanted me to inherit his business and maybe Greg and I to be in business together. And we hired another kid from my neighborhood that was a really excellent jeweler, Bruce McCaleb. And I don't know how to spell that. But Bruce is now — I think makes platinum chains up in Seattle. He's a jewelry maker of some sort up in the Seattle area.

But he was going to leave everything to Greg and I and we were going to carry on his business. And when he finally did pass away, or before he passed away, the family asked me not to have it put into the papers, or not to write it up that way, the inheritance, because there was a property and there's a shop, and they couldn't figure out how to divide things up equally. And I could see that, you know, somebody that had just been working with their grandpa for two years, you know, inherit everything. You know, that's — but we made an agreement that they were going to sell me all the tools, all the hollowware tools for $20,000 after he passed away.

And so there was a point where we were making a lot of gold cups for Santa Anita. They were 14-karat trophy cups. And we made them in sizes from 5 inches to 8 inches. And one of our customers called me up and he wanted to have 10 cups. And this is the week we're going to — after Porter passed away, this was our first job as owning the business. But we didn't sign any papers, but understanding that: This is your business now. Everything you make is yours and all your expenses are yours. You know, we're not responsible for anything. It's up to you guys now.

And we're going to — we were looking for a place to relocate at and move the equipment to. And I got an order for 10 gold cups that week, and we made up 10 gold cups and finished them in one week. And we made a 10 [thousand dollars] to $12,000 profit in that first week of having the business, our business. And when Allan saw that — him and Louie saw that, they all of a sudden thought, oh, we're selling a moneymaker to these guys, you know. So they decided at that point not to sell me the business but to let Allan take the property of Porter Blanchard's and the houses and the land, and have Louie take the business.

And it was always — yeah, and so Louie took the business and let Greg go and hired me as his hollowware man, and we moved — [audio break 40:11 to end].

[End of disc.]

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, it's kind of funny. He's happy to have his own business than have to deal with his father-in-law too much. Even though they're buddies; they spend a lot of holidays together and everything like that.

MS. LAURIA: But they didn't share in —

MR. STROMSÖE: Not too much.

MS. LAURIA: OK.

So when he signed his work, did he sign it Louie —

MR. STROMSÖE: Both ways, or either way. When he did work for Gump's and Cartier and stores like that, quite often he'd put Porter Blanchard on it. But then when he did work for his own clientele — which some — he had some Hollywood stars that he had done — just his own circle of silver enthusiasts, and it would be Lewis Wise.

MS. LAURIA: And that's how he'd signed. So he had his own mark.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. And he was quite accomplished. He was in international competition with silver, and he was at the LA County — or LA County Fair, the Pomona County Fair.

MS. LAURIA: No, it's the LA County Fair and at Pomona.

MR. STROMSÖE: And that was a big thing back in the '50s.

MS. LAURIA: It was, it was. He was in probably the show called *The Arts of Daily Living*, the *Arts of Western Living*. That was in 1953, 1954.

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: They were big shows, and Millard Sheets was ahead of those shows, and he juried in people. Ricky Peterson did — took over the show when Millard left, and they had, you know, jurors for different sections.

So the second thing that we never finished the —

MR. STROMSÖE: Okay, I need to talk about that Pomona, because there is Ronald Hayes Pearson and John Prip.

MS. LAURIA: John Prip.

MR. STROMSÖE: We were both — entered the competition. And Louie and John and Ronald Hayes Pearson oh, you know, they all do really nice work, but Louie did get first place, and they'd get second and third. So it was kind of interesting because Louie never entered too many competitions, only one or two in his whole life, and nobody really knew who he was, but yet he was as good as Ronald Hayes Pearson or John Prip and just that he went through life more of a humble man. Louie was a very modest, very humble man that had his own clientele and he didn't have to go out there and push work or he didn't have to have a publicist.

MS. LAURIA: Whereas Allan Adler definitely wanted to be considered the silversmith to the stars, because I —

MR. STROMSÖE: Just like Porter.

MS. LAURIA: Right, right. And I — you know, I knew Allan. He lived in my neighborhood, and I had a relationship with Allan at LA County Museum of Art because I — you know, we displayed Allan's work in the *Craft in America* show, as we did yours. And Porter Blanchard, of course, his work was in the museum's collection and he — Rebecca had given LA County Museum of Art, Rebecca Blanchard Adler had given Leslie Bowman, who was the head of decorative arts, many of Porter's pieces for the permanent collection. So — but I had asked Allan to borrow those two Miss Universe crowns for the *Made in California* show, and we also traveled them with the *Craft in America* exhibition, because I found them extraordinary. They were so very unlike crowns I have ever seen. It — no pageant crowns ever looked like that, and Allan was very gracious about lending them. And I went over to their house in Studio City, and he pulled them out of the vault and we had lunch. It was he and Rebecca and I, and he let me try one of them on. And it was terrific because, first of all, they're very heavy. They weren't out of all gold. It was mostly fabricated silver.

MR. STROMSÖE: Silver-plated?

MS. LAURIA: Yeah. And it was — but heavy sheet silver. And the one that has the hanging — you know, because they were universe, so one has, like, hanging — Saturn hanging down. So it comes to a point. So the crown sits like at a point here. And it really is a very heavy piece on your head. So I said to Allan, because we had a photograph that we displayed with the crowns of two security men with Allan walking these crowns on a pillow, right? And I said, well, Allan, how come you still have the crowns? Don't they belong to the — you know, the women who were crowned? And he said, well, the problem was, was that the promoters didn't pay for them. There was some problem with the economics, so he got — they didn't pay for the crowns, so he got the crowns back. That's why he owned them. So I thought they were really — it was a really funny story. And it was — we, of course, after they traveled to seven venues — and they held up really well, and they didn't tarnish or anything, so they must have some sort of finish on them — we gave them back to Rebecca. In the meantime, she had moved. So —

MR. STROMSÖE: Always hard to find her.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah, so we had to find her. That's how I know she's living with her daughter because I thought, we have to give them back the crowns. They're a marvelous statement of Allan's talent being, you know, the modernist that he was, always looking, you know, at different — from being Porter. Porter was really the consummate arts and crafts, you know, silversmith. So each one of them had their own aesthetic.

MR. STROMSÖE: Allan had a way of looking at things and making it a streamline, a way of passing — making things done easier and which gave him a real contemporary look. In a lot of ways, he was thinking about, "Well, this is going to take, you know, a hundred hours, but if I did it this way, I can do it in 30 hours." And so he changed the whole approach. He — and plus, he only had two years with Porter as a student. So I don't know if his skill level ever got up to Porter's skill level, but he and Porter probably both had the same idea. Porter hired the best craftsmen he could find, and he knew that the only way he was going to learn more was to hire the best. So the best, once they're working for you, they have to teach you, and otherwise they're not going to share their secrets. And silversmiths are pretty secretive about how they make what they make, and they don't give out the information that easily. And Rebecca Adler was a fixture at the Porter Blanchard studio. She was there every week, and she'd spend an hour or two there, and she became real — quite close with everybody, and she was a really sweet daughter to Porter. They had a great rapport, and it was really cute to watch her and have her come out all the time.

MS. LAURIA: She was a really nice woman.

MR. STROMSÖE: That's how she seemed to me, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: And she was a wonderful wife. She must have been because Allan made terrific jewelry for her, and she loved her jewelry. I'm sure she still does. But, you know, one of my favorite Porter Blanchard pieces that I'm sure you have seen maybe even worked on was this rounded teapot. I don't know the name of it, but the —

Linda Hughes, the other daughter, owns it, and it's —

MR. STROMSÖE: It's colonial.

MS. LAURIA: It's circular.

MR. STROMSÖE: It's pretty much a round shape?

MS. LAURIA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. STROMSÖE: One thing, Porter and — well, I've said it before that Allan and Porter and Lillian's ideas all kind of look similar sometimes, and sometimes they both have — like, Allan had a cutting edge — he and Porter both have cutting-edge ideas, and they both execute things. And they're like the same design. You look at it and you think, "Oh, well, who's going to get credit for this?" And they both got credit for being the silversmith to the stars because Porter was the first one with the stars in the '30s and '40s and '50s, and up to, like — Joan Crawford was one of his best customers, and then Allan because of the Sunset shop, because the silversmith to the stars for Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin and a whole different —

MS. LAURIA: Maureen O'Sullivan, I think, was one of his clients.

MR. STROMSÖE: A whole different group of stars. But Porter still had people come from all over the world for his work, and he had families — farmer families in Texas that would buy everything he made. And they — I can't quite remember their name. A lot of them big — rice farm — yeah, rice farmers. But, yeah, they all had quite a lifestyle together. They all — they all did great work. And I guess Porter and Allan probably both went up to Gump's and demonstrated and did things.

There's a lot to be learned from Porter. I wish I would have had 10 years with him. I wish I could have learned every little aspect of everything. The amount of time I had, I — the only person that got to question him as much as I could, every day at our tea breaks I'd just pick his brain. I'd just ask him about everything. I know how he grew up. I know how many times his — he joined the Navy twice when he was underage because he wanted to play in a jazz band. So he was in the Navy jazz band twice, and he got pulled out because he was underage both — he did it both times by his mother.

MS. LAURIA: And what was considered — you had to be 18?

MR. STROMSÖE: Eighteen, so he was probably 16 or 17. And he played jazz music. And he and his brother Richard, Richard was a quite accomplished silversmith also, and Richard was — took it on step further than Porter and Porter took it one step further than Allan, is that Richard didn't want to have any machines touching anything. Everything had to be totally hand-done. And Porter was — almost everything has to be hand-done, and Allan was a little bit less hand-done than Porter because of the times. The times keep changing and the labor keeps getting more expensive and things evolve. Porter and his brother Richard, when things got slow, when Porter first started his business, he worked as a butcher for a while, but then he and Richard went out and did a vaudeville circuit. They had — they were song and dance men. So they're out there in the circuit doing their thing, and that was —

MS. LAURIA: That was back east or —

MR. STROMSÖE: That was — [inaudible] —in California. So they were a very creative family, very musical family. And Porter loved to sing in the shop and so did Louie. Louie and Porter were both, you know, singers in the shop. They would bellow it out and get the whole shop going. It was pretty fun being there. When Porter started singing, we'd all start singing. We didn't listen to any radios there, because usually what Porter wanted to sing that day, and Louie would do the same thing. And Louie was a great joke teller, and Louie had a — knew — [inaudible] —people come in and different universities [ph] come in. Louie was just hysterical, the things — the jokes he'd make.

And he wouldn't pre-warn me. We had a group of students coming in, and he wouldn't tell me ahead of time, and I'd go surfing in the morning and I'd show up to work, you know, a couple hours late and it'd be filled with 30 or 40 people in there, and he'd just razz me, giving me a hard time the whole time, make a joke out of it. And his — he had quite a wit. And he actually was the mayor of Calabasas at one time, too.

MS. LAURIA: Well, while we're still on this tape, I want you to finish that thought about how did you end up with the tools? Did you actually end up buying them finally in the end or — because we got to the point where at the end of the speech when Louie said that he was going to give you the tools —

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, at that point, that's — that date also, Mr. Montalewski was there, and that's when he did — he told me to go out — [inaudible] — Allan; he said, "Forget about the Porter Blanchard company," that they

own the stuff but they really didn't know what — he advised me, he said, "Everything you make, I'll buy for the rest of your life. Don't worry about anything. You know, you're under my wing now. Just — everything, you know, go out and start your own business. Everything you make, it will be — you know, I'll purchase everything."

MS. LAURIA: And what year is this now?

MR. STROMSÖE: This is '77, 1977.

MS. LAURIA: So you're still 24?

MR. STROMSÖE: Seventy-seven — 26 years old, 26 years old. I've been dealing with Warren Smith and Montalewski and they are both my biggest, you know, fan. Every time Warren Smith and Cartier had a special project, we were doing it. We did a big wine cooler for Elton John, and he had to fly from Beverly Hills to New York to deal with William, and then he'd call me up and we'd make — you know, he said we'd shift — you know, it's just hysterical that nobody knew how to go to the source. Nobody came directly to us, and we were always getting our big commissions through the fine stores.

And there came a point where the people of Porter Blanchard heard what Mr. Montalewski said, and they drove up to Gump's and they confronted him and said, "What are you telling our silversmith this for?" And they got into a disagreement and Gump's dropped Porter Blanchard from their product line. They said, "Well, we're not dealing with you folks anymore. It's over."

And the same people that owned Porter Blanchard knew that on several — on a few different occasions, I almost received all the tools. So when they decided to give it — call it quits — and they called it quits — we had 15 craftsmen working in the shop when I left, and then it was down to Preben, my right-hand man, a Danish man that worked at Tiffany's. He was the last craftsman there. And it was just Preben, and he wanted to go anywhere — he did not want to be in a shop by himself, you know. And, you know, that's what my fear was, that, you know, these people want to keep it together and maybe I would be the one there keeping it together. And I didn't want to do that for somebody else. I wanted to have my own life.

And so when Preben decided to leave, they had to close the door. They had no master silversmith anymore. And so they called me up and they said, "Randy, remember how you were going to buy everything for $20,000? Yeah, we'll like to sell you — we'd like to make a quick deal and just sell you everything, all the old tools." And then when I got down there, they threw in the flatware tools that were George Porter Blanchard-made. And to me, I was collecting a bit of history, and it's something that I really wanted to preserve. I didn't care if I couldn't make any money on it or anything. The value and the history of those tools was so exiting that I wanted to secure that. I wanted to make sure that it stayed around intact with somebody that knew how to use it and somebody that could keep it going.

And they're honorable people. They could have sold it for a lot more. They were also humbled and did not want to admit that they had to go out of business. They were embarrassed that they had to go out of business. They advertised around the world for silversmiths, and they could not get any silversmith. They got one good silversmith inquiry, but he passed on it. And so in their story, they're telling everybody there's no silversmiths left in the world or in America because nobody's coming there to work for them, and then they started upping what they're willing to pay somebody to actually have a good, healthy wage, and they still couldn't find anybody. And so I was happy to buy everything I could get like that for the price that I received it for.

And the hammers and everything — to me, to own Porter's hammers and — George Porter's hammers and Louie's hammers and Lee Kutz's and Peter Lash and, you know, all these great craftsmen brings back so many memories, and I feel so humbled every time I look at my shop and look at those things and think about the great jobs — [inaudible] — the tea sets they made and the trays they made and the trophies they made and the — all the stars they did work for. It's — I'm humbled and appreciative every day I go out there.

MS. LAURIA: They're also art tools in themselves. I mean, aren't they — each one of those hand-made?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, yes. And Porter's collection of his personal hammers, he had a French silversmith working for him that probably had his tools made in the late 1800s, and then when he came to — while he had them probably passed down from his father, and he came to work for Porter in the '30s and '40s, and then he sold Porter the tools in the 40s, and then — and now I have them and they're — just a very wonderful balance. You know, they're just wonderful, wonderful tools.

And they have George Porter Blanchard's original anvil he started the whole business with and have his original hammer. You know the stories on the anvils and you the stories and everything [ph] and then having the pieces that he made to use in the Arthur Stone shop. When he first set up the shop, he made all the heads and hammer and tools for the drop hammer. And with flatware, he's — you need a male and a female for the spoon bowls and the tines just so that after you hammer them out and get everything done, you can actually drop them and just

make everything kind of slick and everything more uniform, true up everything. And it's just — it's just a great collection that I think should go to some art center or some university. Part of what I'm worried about now is what happens if I get tendonitis really bad? What happens if I pass away? What's going to happen to these tools that I've worked for the last 15 years to try to preserve, you know?

MS. LAURIA: Well, you can do what William Frederick did. Do you know who William Frederick is?

MR. STROMSÖE: I know who he is. What did he do?

MS. LAURIA: Well, he bequeathed his tools to the Chicago Historical Society. They had asked for them, because his tools were given to him by Christensen.

MR. STROMSÖE: Hans?

MS. LAURIA: Hans Christensen from the Kalo shop. So they had requested them, and he put them in his will, that they should go to the Chicago Historical Society.

MR. STROMSÖE: And what do they do with them now?

MS. LAURIA: They put them on display.

MR. STROMSÖE: OK.

MS. LAURIA: That's what he told me when I went to visit him in his residence in Chicago, outside of Chicago. He lived in a suburb. Because of a friend of mine, Polly Ullrich, who unfortunately was in a car accident last summer and passed away, she had done an article for *American Craft Magazine* on William Frederick and that's how I found out about him. And I put his work in the *Craft in America* exhibition. There were two beautiful candlesticks in that show. I don't know if you remember them. That's how I met him, because he is an arts and crafts silversmith in the line of Porter Blanchard, same kind of working craftsman, you know, as learned as an apprentice.

Anyway, he showed me all of his stakes and the original stump that was — the man from Kalo had given him. I guess stumps are very important. And he had — all the original stakes that he had from this man were in these coffee cans. That's the way he kept them. And his shop was just filled, it was — with greasy stakes and — I mean, it wasn't the cleanest shop, and it did not look anything like your shop. It was the opposite on the spectrum. He was not — he was not a very neat silversmith. But he was old. He was in his 80s, and he wasn't well. I don't think he had worked for — anyway —

MR. STROMSÖE: Could we —

MS. LAURIA: This is not — this is not for the tape. We will — we will delete that part. But anyway, he was a wonderful, wonderful silversmith. But he was very concerned about the tools because they were important. They were all hand-made. They had been given to him, and he certainly did not want them to end up destroyed or not used. I mean, the only thing he said about them going to the historical society, I think he put this in — he wanted to put this in the contract, was that he wanted them to be used sometimes for demonstrations, because he said, "What good is — what good are these tools if no one ever uses them?" So I thought that was interesting.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, to be sold as scrap metal. When I was in Williamsburg, most of their hammers were falling apart and their tools were in really bad shape. And they had a great collection, but there was nobody maintaining them, and I put forth the effort to start putting things back together and cleaning things up and showing them, like, this is what you have, this is what you have.

MS. LAURIA: Well, it might be a good place. Well, I think this is a good place to — a good point to stop tape number one.

MR. STROMSÖE: Okay.

[End of disc.]

MS. LAURIA: Tape number two recording Randy Stromsöe, interviewed by Jo Lauria at the home studio on June 4, Monday. And this is continuing with Randy Stromsöe.

So, Randy, on tape one we talked about your three semesters at Valley College. And you did say that you were a model student and that Zella mentioned that your work was exemplar. And while I was changing tapes you indicated that the students had an exhibition at Valley College, and that was very successful for you. Do you want to discuss that?

MR. STROMSÖE: My hesitation when I was young about being an artist — and I was encouraged by family and by my teachers — was worrying about actually making a living as an artist. And I'd heard all the stories about all the great masters in the past and how hard they had it in making a living, how some of them died penniless. And I was, quite frankly, scared of being a painter or an illustrator.

And when we first had our first exhibit for student work at LA Valley College, I had a couple of sales right of the bat and I sold a belt buckle and a pendant. And so right off the bat I was thinking, this is my arena. I can sell things. And when you make your first art sale at 18, it excites you. It gets you going where you feel like you have potential. So I did — it made me take the metalsmithing and jewelry making a lot more seriously than drawing and painting.

MS. LAURIA: So you felt that this could be your career choice and that it could actually lead to a long — to longevity.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And were there — you did speak about your teacher, you know, specifically Zella. Were there other colleagues or fellow students that you found influential? And if so, could you describe those relationships that may have influenced your career path?

MR. STROMSÖE: Most of the — in college I did have a couple of friends, and we made a lot of jewelry together and we really pushed the envelope in what we were doing, and we played off of each other and fed each other with excitement. And one was Bruce McCaleb, who actually came to work at the Porter Blanchard Studios, right before Porter passed, as one of the apprentices. But his time was cut short by Porter going to the hospital.

But besides Bruce, I came more connected with the silversmiths I met through Porter and Lewis Wise, through the silversmith Lee Kutz, Daniel O'Driscoll — goodness, there was Frank Zika, the metal spinner; you know, people like Allan Adler and Ralph Wise, Lewis Wise's son. Hallie and Stan Katz, you know, became acquaintances and friends that we've had for 35 years now, well, because they had a jewelry supply center that we bought tools from. But they became part of the Porter Blanchard group.

Peter Lesch, who was an 80-year-old gentleman that would come into the Porter Blanchard Studios, and I'd make chalices for him for the Roman Catholic Church — very ultra-contemporary designs. And he'd come in with a sketching and he would sit there and watch me work it, and he would not leave until the piece was done. And he'd come back day after day. He'd wear a suit, a bowtie, and he was a really sharp dresser, and he would just stand back and just watch me work.

And it was really interesting because there was a history lesson going on at the same time, because he had been in business his whole life. And he was 80 years old so he had 60 years of experience. So I met the real deal, the guys that are actually out there making art and making pieces. Frank Zika, when I hired Frank Zika to work for me, he was probably 75 years old or older, and he was an incredible metal spinner.

And he was a multimillionaire and had done really well in his own business, but he gave us the security of having a craftsman in our shop that we could go and debate our metal quality with Handy & Harman. It gave me somebody that could get respectability, because as a 25-year-old it's hard to walk into Handy & Harman and tell them they don't know what they're doing. When you take a 75-, 80-year-old man driving in there in his brand new Lincoln Continental with his nice suit and nice way of speaking, well, we got respect. Things started improving.

And so my circle of men came from people that were more associated with the Lewis Wise, Allan Adler, Porter Blanchard shop and not as many as with the college.

MS. LAURIA: Were there other silversmiths in Southern California at the time? I mean, who were the major competitors outside of Porter Blanchard and his immediate family?

MR. STROMSÖE: It was mainly the family. There was Hudson Roysher, who was — people gave him a lot of respect. And there were a couple others that — I'm drawing a blank on their names right now, but it was mainly the immediate family that were doing work and competing for.

And with Allan, Allan would come to us, or to me, and I'd make chalices for Allan that he would take back to his studio and assemble. So they're basically 90 percent Stromsöe chalice, but then he would assemble them and polish them and then they became an Allan Adler chalice. But we overlapped a lot. We all helped each other out and we did things. And I didn't think about it as competition. I just thought about it as working with another silversmith that was a friend of mine.

MS. LAURIA: Well, what about Shreve & Company? Wasn't Shreve a silver company that operated out of San

Francisco?

MR. STROMSÖE: But I never met any of those men and I don't know if any of them were still healthy and still working. There's Peter Traphagen, and he was out of San Francisco for a while, and he and I became good phone buddies. But when talking to him he sounded frail and I always thought that he was older than he was. And I was really shocked that he lived another 15 years past the time when we had our phone relationship.

And I could have had a little more personal relationship with him, but I found that we were so busy in our profession and there's so little time to spare and so little money going around that it was really hard to take days off and weeks off and really to pursue relationships with other people outside the area.

MS. LAURIA: Is there a community that has been important to your development as an artist? Like, for instance, when you lived in Harmony or having lived in Cambria, or now here in Paso Robles, have you found that you've become part of a community of artists?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes and no. There's very few artists in San Luis Obispo. It was really hard to break in. There was — no, I have to pass. I can't talk on that.

MS. LAURIA: OK.

MR. STROMSÖE: There's reason to talk, but reason I don't want to mention — I don't want to talk anybody down.

MS. LAURIA: It's all right. Some arts are more collaborative than others and, you know, some communities have more of a communal atmosphere than others. So it's fine.

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, we got started early in life, and when I was young, after doing work with Cartier and Neiman Marcus and all these people when you're in your 20s and stuff, then when you go out into the real world and you're 30 years old, you get more jealousy than you get help. We found more people willing to copy us and take advantage of us than help us at a certain point.

When we were young, everybody helped us. When we were young, you'd meet another metalsmith in another part of the world and, my god, you were so close, instantaneous best friends. And that happened for many, many years. I've met many silversmiths and metalsmiths, and we gravitated to each other and we'd just exchange ideas so freely and so unguardedly and so openly, and you had your new best friend.

And then later I found other metalsmiths taking advantage of my openness and taking advantage of me, and taking credit for things that I taught them and showed them, and not respecting and sharing. And it became more a competitive thing. And it got me so that I became more guarded and less willing to share, and less willing to share with anybody.

We went to Portland, Oregon for the very first time and we saw this gallery, a metals gallery, and got excited: "Let's go in this gallery." The very first gallery we got to in Portland, Oregon we walked 5, 10 feet into the gallery and there's a whole collection of all my jewelry sitting there that I didn't make, that somebody had come and purchased from me and went back to their studio and duplicated everything we did and had it sitting there with their name under there. And we were not amused. We were saddened.

We got saddened by the way we were disrespected by a few metalsmiths that took advantage of us. And they took our information and our techniques and they pretended like they were theirs. And we decided to start clamming up and not being as open as we used to be.

So when we were in our 20s and early 30s, every time we met a metalsmith, my god, we were just like the best of friends. I'd learn so much and we shared so much information without even ever thinking about. But then later in life we had to get a little more guarded with it and changed our whole perspective on dealing with our peers. I mean, it's guarded.

MS. LAURIA: What would you say are the most powerful influences in your career? Do you associate yourself with a particular movement or a style? I mean, I know that in the literature that I've read about you, and particularly because you were Porter Blanchard's last apprentice, that the movement of arts and crafts is always cited as being the movement that you're associated with. How do you feel about that? Do you agree with it? Do you disagree with it? How would you categorize your style? Do you think you've moved on from it?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, I think that was my style until I was, you know, 22 or '3. And then I tended to go and experiment —

MS. LAURIA: Well, first of all, could you define what you think is the arts and crafts style, because everybody has a different opinion of what that means.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. Well, with metalsmithing I consider it more — with the large decorative hammer marks that you leave on the surface, and then the egg-and-dart and the sort of simple chasing and fluting sort of styles —

MS. LAURIA: And work integrity too. You mentioned that Richard Blanchard —

MR. STROMSÖE: Right.

MS. LAURIA: — Porter's brother, was much more of a purist with the way he approached the process. So could you explain what you mean by that?

MR. STROMSÖE: Richard didn't want to use any machinery whatsoever. He wanted everything to be so hands-on that he and Porter butted heads. And Porter was a traditionalist too and Porter wanted to use only the most traditional or the most — the right techniques. Porter wasn't one for really pushing it too much, but even the little bit that he did was enough to offend his brother, so they had a separation in ways. And Porter maybe used the spinning lathe a little bit more and Richard maybe never used the spinning lathe.

But they both did a lot of flatware. In those days they were both flatware artists at one point. At one point both of them were just pounding out forks and spoons every day, but then Porter evolved into being this great hollowware guy. And for the last 30 or 40 years of his life he never did any flatware. He considered flatware more the production part of it and he went into the fine hollowware, working with the thin-gauge metal and making that work for him.

My style, I consider — I like the Bauhaus movement. I like modernism. I liked constructivism — if that's right. I like more contemporary forms, and Porter got very into the contemporary forms too at a certain age. Porter, when he was in his 80s, was like a kid in a candy shop. He liked to play around with shapes and ideas, just like I do. And he pushed the limits on many different things and he made things that maybe would never sell, just because he wanted to see what they looked like and he wanted to do it.

And that's pretty much what I do now is I like to develop techniques that other people don't use so that when I design my designs they'll be made in such a way that another person would have a hard time duplicating them. So I actually prethink-out what I'm going to make and do something that somebody else wouldn't have the skill set or skill level or the tools to copy.

So instead of just going forth and just making forms, I make forms that are hard to duplicate, and in doing so I preserve my ideas, because I don't want people jumping in before I finish my play with the design concept. I like to play with a sort of concept for months, and maybe sometimes a couple years, and refine it over the period of time. And I don't want to be rushed to making the final thing immediately. I want to let it develop organically, and I want to do it in a natural state.

And I've found by being in a rural setting like we live in, and by being in small towns, that people that come from big cities think that they can capitalize on small-town artists and they can take their ideas and push them in a bigger arena. And I don't want to give them that foothold. I basically want to keep my concept and my techniques a secret. And that's one reason I don't do a whole lot of workshops and a whole lot of teaching is that I want to wait until I'm ready to retire to really start teaching a whole lot. I want to save my ideas for myself.

MS. LAURIA: And I believe you have a new bracelet design now which is called *Rainstick*.

MR. STROMSÖE: It's *Rainstick Bangle*.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah, *Rainstick Bangle* that there's a patent pending on it, because you —

MR. STROMSÖE: Correct.

MS. LAURIA: Is that correct?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. And the reason for that is because it is a design that you feel is so unique that once you can have it — tell me about the design patent process. If you can get this patented, would that protect you from another, let's say, silversmith being able to make the same design in the same way, or would they be able to just maybe alter it a bit and be able to duplicate it?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, with everything changing nowadays I'm not sure if they can figure out a different way of approaching the design concept. I'm afraid now more of Asia and more the Chinese and that part of the world getting hold of ideas that we're doing and mass-producing them by the hundreds of thousands and making something that's special become something that's commonplace.

MS. LAURIA: Right, because wouldn't I want to buy a Randy Stromsöe with your silver mark on it because it is a Randy Stromsöe? I mean —

MR. STROMSÖE: I would hope.

MS. LAURIA: Right. So I mean, but then what would be the point of making it — of patenting it? Who is that protecting? I mean, because if I'm a buyer I know it's going to be yours because I see your silver mark on it.

MR. STROMSÖE: But if I haven't flooded the market and nobody in New York and nobody in San Francisco and nobody in Seattle have seen this design yet, and then somebody from a different part of the world comes in with 100,000 of them and they flood New York and New Jersey, the whole east coast, and then once again I'm on the outside looking in. I'm watching people take credit for something that I developed and that nobody's been doing. Nobody's done it yet. It's a sort of design that should have been done —

MS. LAURIA: So legally it protects you if somebody comes and does the same design and you can say, no, no, no, this is my design, and you can file — I mean, you can say — you can have legal action against them.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, I can hopefully take some legal action.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: Because some things that are so obvious and so simple or just sometimes get passed by, and the *Rainstick Bangle* is a really obvious and simple direction that I've been playing with for years but have kind of perfected it, where it's a lot easier now. And I would like to be the one that puts a bunch of them out there and not have somebody else be the one that can get credit for it.

MS. LAURIA: Because the labor involved in that seems to me that it would be very difficult. But the Chinese or, I mean, whoever —

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, somebody like that.

MS. LAURIA: — can be very industrious and make it out of less-weight material, the silver or whatever, and make it probably less expensively. But anyway, I know it is a problem.

I have heard other artists that maybe are not metalsmiths — they're fiber artists or ceramic artists — they say they don't like to put their art on the Internet because they say, you know, they have a piece on the Internet and then suddenly — you know, a shape, a particular shape or a particular color — and then they see it all over, you know, globally. And there's no way to prevent their work from being copied. I don't know if there's a solution to that but I think, you know, maybe patenting it is a good way. At least it protects you in some way.

MR. STROMSÖE: A lot of our designs that we've put on the Internet for people to look at are designs that we feel are technically difficult for a novice to do. You'd have to be a top-notch craftsman to be able to reproduce some of these ideas. And what we're trying to save ourselves is from the corporations and companies that may be wanting to, you know, flood the market with hundreds of them as opposed to one or two at a time.

We don't mind influencing and getting some other people excited by the forms we're able to create, because there will always be a handful of really talented metalsmiths that can do everything that I'm doing, but we don't want to do something that's easy that a corporation can see and put out there by the hundreds. So we're trying to protect ourselves. And we won't put things on the Internet that we think are too easy to copy, because we've been — yeah, we've been copied before and we like to keep it simple.

I mean, the first time we were copied was back in the '70s with the big silver companies, the pieces we were doing for the Porter Blanchard company back in — you know, in '72 and '3. It became popular and we influenced the whole industry from being a couple of 21-year-old young men and doing something that we were taking a chance and sticking our neck out.

And we actually did stuff that was difficult and stuff that we shouldn't have done, but when the other companies saw it they copied and they did something really similar. And we just influenced the whole movement for a few years. And when we saw that, we realized that everybody was paying attention and you're not living in a vacuum. And if you want to keep something original, you have to be a little bit quiet on it for a while.

And in the past I've had people come up to me at shows and accuse me of copying somebody with a design that I had been doing for 20 years, and because somebody else had seen something similar — and sometimes ideas evolve together. Sometimes there's only one natural progression for things to go and people just happen to stumble upon that at the same time. And other times it's because people see something and they get influenced and they do something similar. Then it evolved similarly. And we're just trying to be a little careful about where we put our work and who sees it.

I've been at shows — I've been at shows and I've been talking to what I assumed would be customers, and I've been telling them, like, exactly how I make and how I do all my stuff, and then I'll find out they're the competition and they just picked my brains for a half an hour. And my wife is sitting there poking me and going, "You didn't catch on to that, huh?" It's like, "Oh, no, I did it again, huh?"

MS. LAURIA: [Laughs.]

MR. STROMSÖE: And I tend to be open and I tend to be trusting, and I tend to like to talk to people and I tend to tell people way too much. And I've learned.

MS. LAURIA: Well, every business has its trade secrets, as they say. I'm sure it happens to every — and technology too. I mean, could you imagine if Apple were that open?

MR. STROMSÖE: [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: But speaking of technology, I've been down into your workshop, and I noticed there is no technology down there that I would not have seen a hundred years ago in some other silversmith's workshop. Am I correct in saying that?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, I'm pretty much in the past. I can make the tools from a hundred years ago work just fine for what I'm doing. And I can make my own tools. I do not own anything too sophisticated. I don't own any fancy lasers or — I own nothing of this century.

MS. LAURIA: Do you do any of your designing on computers?

MR. STROMSÖE: No. I prefer just picking up a hunk of metal and going to my anvil or my lathe or my stakes and just whipping it out in person. I can bypass the drawing stage quite often by just going straight with the metal to the anvil. And to me that's the most fun and purest way of being. And that's what I'd like to teach other folks and how I'd like to make my legacy is more with the old-school techniques.

MS. LAURIA: So I'm thinking it would be fair then to categorize you as a traditionalist —

MR. STROMSÖE: But I'm pushing it.

MS. LAURIA: — in your process.

MR. STROMSÖE: In my process.

MS. LAURIA: Right. But I wouldn't say that you were a traditionalist in your style, because I think your style is very forward looking in the sense of your shapes and your combination of materials. Well, you combine — first of all, you use pewter, which I think in a way is very unusual. You don't see many metalsmiths doing hollow forms in pewter. I mean, I don't know too many metalsmiths using pewter in a really aesthetic way. And also you use beautiful woods in your pieces for finials or as the knobs or the tops.

MR. STROMSÖE: Handles.

MS. LAURIA: And handles. And your shapes are very whimsical. They're sensuous. They're sinuous. And a lot of them seem very animated, as if they could roll over and walk off the table, you know, not stiff and certainly not conventional. So in that sense they're on the other side of the polar spectrum from being traditional.

So how do you — do you find that you need to resolve the traditional process with the unconventional style, or that doesn't at all cause you any kind of tension? Or you like that tension?

MR. STROMSÖE: I like that. I like movement in my pieces, and I like pieces that have so much personality that they could not be duplicated by somebody else because they'd lose part of that personality; things that are so unique and to themselves that if you alter them just a tiny bit all of a sudden they become something different. And I don't mind of some people are inspired by it.

At the beginning of my career, when I saw the English jewelers and stuff back in 1969, I was so inspired. When I saw the American jewelers in '70 and '71, I was so inspired. But I took what they were doing and I never tried to copy what they were doing but I was inspired and I saw potential in what the metal had to offer.

And with pewter, pewter is always — it's my way of doing prototypes quickly. So when I have an idea that I want to make in silver — and most of the time I get it out of my system by using pewter. But most of my pewter pieces don't start off to be a finished pewter piece. I start off making a prototype in pewter, and then when I'm done then a lot of times I want to translate it to silver afterwards. But quite often, after I get the pewter prototype done, I look at that and I see variations and modifications that I can do on that. So then I go to

another pewter piece, and then I go to another — I get excited.

And then by that time I'm pretty much a little bit tired. I want to go on to another design concept but I never have — or most of the times I haven't taken it to the silver piece that I've been striving for, and most of the time I manufacture and make the pewter piece the same way I would a silver piece so I can have — I have templates. So I can have a template for making the silver piece and I know exactly what it's going to look like.

The worst feeling I can have is if I make a $20,000 silver piece and I don't like the proportions. And it could be an eighth of an inch here and a sixteenth of an inch there and that can maybe drive me crazy. I look at it and I'm not looking for anything less than what I've striving for. And if I miss it by just a tiny bit, I'm just happy it's in pewter, because in pewter the prices are not prohibitive. In silver, unless I execute it just a hundred percent perfect, you're not going to get the $20,000 you want for it.

Nowadays things have opened up a lot more with silver. There's a lot more — the funky silver that's been accepted and promoted; the raising of straight vessels with some flutings and different things. I go back to when I was a student making my silver pieces, then my repoussed silver pieces, in 1970 and '71, '72. We took a chance and I made a lot of them, containers that were fluted and repoussed, and they were ahead of their times. If I had made those in 2002 instead of '72 — like, if I made them 30 years later, I would have been on the right direction to be — in England — I would have been in England and it would have been top of the class.

But because I did them 30 years prior, it was hard to get the right response. I sold all those pieces and had people love them, but I didn't document them correctly, I didn't get photographs of them. And I should have actually just put them in a box and saved them, because sometimes when you're experimenting you get ahead of the curve and people have nothing to relate them to and no stepping-off place, where they look at the forms and they're just kind of too far out there.

But things all come full circle. Nowadays what I was doing when I was younger is becoming popular, and it excites me to go back to those days because I was excited by those pieces. And my problem is I'm excited by — I probably have 20 or 30 different designs that I want to do, and it's really important to me that I do these designs while I'm still alive and working and healthy. And to me this is — my goal is to finish up what I started years ago and finish up the concepts that I started. And most of them would be in silver.

But the difference in silver is sometimes a piece can take me two months to make a piece, and in pewter it may take me three days. So sometimes it's so much easier just to jump into pewter just to see what the finished product is going to look like.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I mean, let's just say that in our society now, if we're not talking about design associated with the value of the material — if you can dissociate design from the value of the material and still say the design has value, what difference does it make, especially with the fact that now designers are designing in every material — you know, rubber or nylon or, you know, with these Z Corp machines, you know, that are basically printing in starch. If you have a good design and you can do it in pewter, who's to say that it won't look just as good? Is it something to do with the weight?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, no, you're right. I agree a hundred percent. It's just that my clients were looking for things in silver.

MS. LAURIA: They want the value of the material.

MR. STROMSÖE: They want the precious material. And in my mind it's all about design and form and shape, and it doesn't matter if it's ceramic, glass or pewter. If it's exciting and it's stretching what people are doing and it's cutting edge, to me I don't see it — because a lot of times in my pewter pieces I'll incorporate a beautiful spout and handle that will be only — you could only equate them to, like, a silver spout or handle the way they're done and manufactured, or hammered out.

And I don't think there's hardly anybody in the United States who is capable of doing what I'm doing. I know there's more and more top-notch people learning metalsmithing through the ranks and there's a lot more people that are becoming aware of the hammer skills, but in doing handles and spouts and hollow-forming vessels for so many years, I believe I have an inside track, but believe that I have a good design sense for that part of it.

And a lot of times I'll throw those into my pieces, and very seldom do I really find anybody that really appreciates really what I'm doing. And I don't think a lot of people even understand what I'm doing. And I don't think a lot of people outside my medium — I don't think there's a lot of metalsmiths that understand exactly what I'm doing, let alone painters or sculptors or ceramicists. And it's —

MS. LAURIA: Well, do you think it's important then that you educate them? I mean, can you write about it or do a video? But then again you might not want to do that because then it would get back to that whole issue of trade

secrets.

MR. STROMSÖE: No.

MS. LAURIA: But that could be for — you know, that's kind of a conundrum then. How do you solve that issue?

But let me ask you about this pewter question. Why is pewter not a precious material? Because it's too readily available? I mean, why is silver a precious material? Because it has to be mined?

MR. STROMSÖE: I think there's a couple of answers maybe. Pewter is a softer material and it can dent and scratch. And pewter, if treated right, it can be given some wonderful patinas and some wonderful texturing. And I developed my own texturing on pewter and I developed my own patinas for pewter, and I've been really selective of where I've shown my patinas for pewter right now, because I don't want everybody knowing exactly what I'm doing.

So I've stayed out of books with them. I don't enter them into some exhibits, and I don't put them in magazines or books because I want to keep that technique to myself. My texturing on my pewter, I've noticed that other people have copied my texturing and then some people are actually teaching my techniques to other people, and I should be the one teaching people my techniques.

But I'm a little bit — with the videos and stuff we're careful — my son's a videographer and we have some videos planned, and we will be doing videos. And I will be omitting certain things from my videos to help people link it all together. And I don't want to be like that. I'd rather be the same open, sharing person I've been my whole life, but I think I'd have to have a different income, if I was working for a university or something, but my background I've never worked full time as a teacher. I've taught at the Revere Academy with the metalsmithing classes there, but I've never taught at a university full time. And I have no retirement and I'd like to keep my money coming in to myself.

MS. LAURIA: So you have to protect your — the pieces that you make is your income. So I understand.

Well, I was just interested in this whole idea again of value, because especially with jewelry today, with this whole movement of what's called contemporary jewelry, so little of this is really made out of precious materials anymore. I mean, you can go to a show that has a title of where the subtitle says, you know, "contemporary jewelry." And you can look through the whole show — let's say there's 60 pieces — and I'd pretty much venture that 40 pieces out of that 60 are going to be made out of what we call alternative materials. I would pretty much say that only 20 percent is going to be made out of what we consider to be precious stones — silver, gold — I mean, less than 1 percent would be made out of platinum or diamonds.

So, you know, the perspective on what is considered to be jewelry today is completely shifting. And your jewelry, from what — you know, that I've seen in the studio — and I highly regard your skills and your jewelry — all of it is made out of precious materials. I mean, you don't use glass beads. The beads that you're using — I mean, the stones — I mean, they are stones. They're not beads. You only use silver or plated — or gold, right?

MR. STROMSÖE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmation.]

MS. LAURIA: So that's a very traditional outlook. But your forming techniques are — the twisting, the necklace, the — what do you call it — the collar, that's a very unusual way of having a neckpiece. It has no — there's no fitting. I mean, I thought that was a really —

MR. STROMSÖE: Tension, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: — yeah — interesting way that it's all — a piece that's just one solid piece. You don't have a clasp or anything. You just fit it on your neck, I think. Is that correct?

MR. STROMSÖE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmation.]

MS. LAURIA: I mean, it's an ingenious way of using the material. It's just one material, one piece.

MR. STROMSÖE: And it's the same thing. Kenneth Trapp purchased one of those pieces for the museum, and he had a way of talking about it. And he understood exactly what I was doing. He called it "working silver like it was taffy." And he said that it was —

MS. LAURIA: Like stretching it.

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, he was like, almost like doing it in such a way and challenging people. Like, Okay, then do it. You know, if you want to copy it, copy it. Let's see what you can do here, you know? It's like doing it in such a way that is so difficult to do that you can put it out there and not worry about anybody doing it, because if they

did, they did a good job.

MS. LAURIA: Well, no, I was just saying that you're only using one material.

MR. STROMSÖE: One material and one piece.

MS. LAURIA: One piece.

MR. STROMSÖE: One piece of metal and —

MS. LAURIA: One piece of material. It's like a teacher giving a student an assignment: Here, you can only use, you know, eight inches. It can only be this thick. You can only — you know, you're going to not use any fittings. You know, and you've got to do something really glorious. Go away; come back. And this is what you did. And it's pretty remarkable, you know. But you have to have so many years' experience before you can reduce it to that.

And looking at your bracelets, the same thing, where you — I mean, the ones that — I don't know if they're named, but one side is textured and the other side is not. And they have a different form cut out. You know, they're not just round.

MR. STROMSÖE: Right.

MS. LAURIA: They're almost like abstract shape. So how you wear them, you have choices. You can wear the side out to your — you know, to the viewer, that has texture, or if you wear two of them you can wear it either way. And then you have a bracelet where the part that is on the inside is round but the outside is a triangle. So you're deceiving the mind in a way, because you know that you're seeing a circle and your wrist is more or less a circle, but you know also you're seeing a triangle. So it's a very complex kind of equation.

And I know Lisa, your wife, told me it's a very difficult thing to fabricate. And I'm sure it is, but it's also a very difficult thing to conceptualize. I mean, why challenge yourself to do that? I mean, what difference does it make to make a bracelet — you know, know a bracelet only has to be round. Why even go to say, well, why should I complicate this to make it triangular?

MR. STROMSÖE: The subtleness — or you create a lot of specialness with the subtle variations. And sometimes I do it so it fits and feels so comfortable on the inside. I'm doing it for the comfort level, but then also I like to just make subtleties that are sophisticated, I like to think of them.

And when we were thinking about, like, collars and things — like, Ronald Hayes Pearson, a contemporary of Lewis Wise's, the collars he would do back, you know, years ago were just — to a young craftsman like myself, those were remarkable. They still are remarkable. And it was 40 years ago and nobody is really doing anything as wonderful as that today. But I mean, that's a hands-on skill, being a flatware forger and being somebody that lives with there with the anvil, their hammer and their anvil.

And I like the process. And what I do is love the process of forging. I love the process of making the pieces. So I don't feel like I have to have shortcuts. If it takes me an extra half-hour, I'm having a good time in that half-hour. I seldom make things that I don't enjoy making. If I don't enjoy making something, I'm not going to continue making it. I have to be able to make money on the pieces that I find pleasurable and that I find aesthetically pleasing when I'm done, and hopefully sophisticated.

And I'm going by my own tastes for sophistication. I'm not relying on somebody else to tell me that I achieved it. I'm happy when I, myself, think that I achieved what I'm after. And that's a good place in life to be at, where you don't need other people's approval. And I don't need to be in a shop with other silversmiths.

But I would — if I had my choice, I would have two other people down in my shop working with me that had similar skills as I do. And I'd be interacting with them all day long and we would be talking about designs and we'd be having a good time. I just haven't found those people that live in the central coast of California. I don't have the right people that live around here. And if somebody did come out here, I would love to have somebody in my shop with me like that. That would be —

MS. LAURIA: Well, that leads me to the next question. What are your daily activities here? Describe your working environment. What is a typical day?

I should say that I've been privileged enough to stay in your guest cottage — which I would say is much more than a cottage — on this beautiful property here in Templeton, looking out your windows. Wonderful landscaping, which I know you and your wife Lisa spent many, many hard days of labor clearing the property, and very hands-on building this house.

Why don't you give us a little background about how you came to this land? I mean, because I really am a

believer, like Eudorah Moore, who wrote the book *The Gentle Revolution: The Craftsman Lifestyle*, that you don't just become a craftsman in your studio. It is a lifestyle choice.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: So, you know, you choose to live the way that you work, and your work is your labor. I think it was Charles Eames who said, "Make your passion your labor and your labor your passion." But will you just sort of walk us through how you came here and why you chose this property, and how your day becomes — the process of how you work through your day and how you work in your shop?

And hold on. I'm just going to take on break here for a second.

MR. STROMSÖE: Okay.

[Break.]

MS. LAURIA: Anyway, we were talking about Charles Eames, just the idea that he is, you know, the 20th century's probably most iconic designer. And you probably respect his designs as well.

MR. STROMSÖE: Definitely. His whole concept and his whole design sense and his whole studio was inspiration to many of us. And I was really inspired. And I really expected myself to go more into furniture making and architecture, and I only got sidetracked to silversmithing because I ran into Porter Blanchard and Zella Marggraf. If it wasn't for those two I would have been in a whole different direction.

MS. LAURIA: Well, but your house, which you're going to explain to us how you got here —

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh, yes.

MS. LAURIA: — obviously you got sidetracked by this property and building this house.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So you did end up here.

MR. STROMSÖE: We chose where we wanted to live before — where we wanted to live was the most important part of our lives. So we chose the area of Cambria, California. And we found out from being there that there wasn't any workshop space available and they had no three-phase power.

MS. LAURIA: Three-phased power you need for machinery? Is that what you mean?

MR. STROMSÖE: For my machines.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: The machinery I have is Porter and Louie's and George Porter Blanchard's old machinery, and it's the vintage stuff from the early 1900s. And I didn't want to change things out. I wanted to use things as they were. And the three-phased power ends right here eight miles from the ocean on Highway 46 West. So we picked this location for the power. This barn was a shell of a barn that somebody had started and then decided to move on. And I think they ran into a problem with the neighbors, you know, dealing with the ranchers.

And we found a great opportunity. This is the right price and the right location to the ocean, the right climate, and had everything we wanted but we had to build it. And I was paying quite a bit in rent in Cambria for our studios there. It was expensive. It was like making a house payment. And we figured if we were going to put money into something, we were going to put it into something we'd own. And we were able to sell our house and buy this cash, you know. We owed nothing on it but then we had to build everything.

And we couldn't really afford workers, and at the time we bought this 12 years ago there was a boom — building boom going on, on the central coast, and there was no good craftsmen available. And we had to do a lot of this work ourselves. And I had to get my son and my wife and everybody involved. And we had to buy a tractor and we had to get a mower. And then we got the smart idea to build a vineyard at the same time.

So we had to build a studio, and as I was building my studio the country came in and advised me that I had to live in my studio if I wanted to work in my studio. This is ag property and you cannot just build a studio and work in your studio. You had to live there. So we had to change everything, our floor plan. Where we had envisioned having —

MS. LAURIA: When you say "ag property" you mean it's agricultural property. You have to actually grow? So

when you had a vineyard, that wasn't enough?

MR. STROMSÖE: No, that was enough. That's enough, but —

MS. LAURIA: Oh, okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: — you know, that's what makes it ag property for us, having a vineyard. We have a small orchard and we have — we grow other vegetables and items around here. And we have a great water source.

So we're motivated to fix up our place and to live here. And we really enjoy living here, but in doing so we couldn't just build a regular house or a regular anything. We had to do things that we found aesthetically pleasing. And we did things in a way so we would have permanence. I want to be here through my 60s, through my 70s, through my 80s. I came here hoping to have another 20 or 30 years of being a metalsmith here.

When I met my silversmith mentors, Porter Blanchard and his friends, they all advised me to enjoy your youth, but when you're, you know, 50, 60l 70, 80 and 90 you're going to want to be in your workshop working most of the time. And pretty much that's what we have our life geared around, being here and enjoying it.

We designed our house in such a way that we really enjoy being in our house. And in doing so, we also took a small, rustic house at the top of the hill and gutted that, and redesigned it and relandscaped it. You would not recognize what it used to look like. It's nothing like what it used to be. We moved a lot of things around and we made a nice little "Shangri-La." I enjoy landscaping. I enjoy architecture. And I —

MS. LAURIA: Yes, I'm never leaving that house, you know. [Laughs.]

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah. We have people — I would like to live up there and rent this part out, but my workshop is below here, and having my workshop — it's so nice to have a nice, ample workshop that you don't have to worry about paying the $2,000 a month rent on. The fact that it's all paid for, and we can go and work at our own pace and we are not being — we don't have to worry about losing this property ever. The only thing sometimes is the property tax is a bit expensive.

But I think we'll be here for another 20 years, unless a winery comes in and offers us more money than we can refuse, because this whole area has grown with the grape industry and there's millions and millions and millions of dollars coming in. Each winery that comes in, they must put in $20 million or so into their wine-tasting room and their facilities and their vineyard. So it would be easy for somebody to come in here and buy us out at some point.

MS. LAURIA: Also, though, it might be a great opportunity for them to have a silver shop in their winery and sell your high-end chalices and goblets and wine bowls. Aren't wine bowls a tradition?

MR. STROMSÖE: They are. We've sold a lot of wine coasters and bottle coasters, a lot of ice buckets. And we've done work with a lot of the wine makers in the past.

One family, the Gallo family — no, they're not known for their top-of-the-line wine, but they are known for having exquisite taste in flatware and silver. I know the Porter Blanchard Company and the Lewis Wise Company and the Old Newbury Crafters have all done a lot of work for that family.

MS. LAURIA: Who would know?
MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah. We've all done — I've done trays and I've done wine-related art for them. Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: So how long have you lived on this property, and have your children — have you sent them through high schools and colleges while they've lived in this area?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. We've been here 12 years. This property was the piece of property — when we would be coming home from a show or coming home from anywhere, as soon as we crossed Old Creek Road on Highway 46 West, we'd look over and we considered ourselves home. This is where we want — our life was. Even though our actual home was, you know, 10, 15 minutes away, as soon as we crossed this piece or property, we considered us home.

And we always loved this piece of property. So when this piece of property became available, it was almost like a no-brainer to investigate it. And I think I went and inquired about it the first day it was on the market for sale. And I think in that first week we bought it, and it was — and our kids were going to school in Templeton at the time. We were living in Cambria but we were sending our kids to a school in Templeton, Santa Lucia School. And so I'd be driving by here in the morning, dropping the kids off for school, when I first saw the building for sale.

MS. LAURIA: San Lucia?

MR. STROMSÖE: Santa Lucia.

MS. LAURIA: Like a parochial school or —

MR. STROMSÖE: It was a Peace School. They had really a good educational program. They've turned out some really sharp kids. A lot of their programs were different than the regular schools.

MS. LAURIA: And alternative school.

MR. STROMSÖE: And alternative school.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. So you saw this property. This property spoke to you for —

MR. STROMSÖE: Many reasons. Yeah, we were in love with this area, and we saw two fixer-uppers. We saw a fixer-upper cottage and then we saw this unfinished barn and we could afford it. It was the right price. And so we took a big, big gamble and we jumped into this. But we never envisioned really living here. We already had a little house that we had a workshop built into it, and we kind of thought of this as being our gallery — the main room being a gallery, and then our office and our shipping and receiving areas. And we had visions of having five or six employees and keeping our momentum that we had built up going.

We never intended to slow down and take a sabbatical, but when all was said and done and the county stepped in, I realized that I had to get working and I had to start doing electrical work and plumbing work, drywall work. I became more of a builder. I became the contractor for this project. And then we had to redo water systems and we had to — I learned how to use trenchers and I learned how to use tractors. And we expanded.

And we got the bright idea at that point — pinot grapes were selling for $3,000 a ton, and there was a pinot maker a few miles away from here and he really loved this piece of property. And so we got in cahoots with him and we built a vineyard over here that he helped us decide — he was a vineyard manager but he was actually the grape buyer. And we were set up and we supplied him with grapes for many years. But now, because of health reasons, he's retired from the grape-making business. And it leaves us a little void because what was really easy at one time now is hard to find the right person to buy our grapes and to do everything. But that we'll figure out later.

But we took a cottage that was up at the top of the hill that my wife saw as a perfect storage area for the vineyard supply stuff and I saw as this location with this great view. And I thought, well, what if you cut down this and you move this and you did this? And so I saw the potential. And we had renters there, and the renters were there for about eight years. And when they finally did move out, I was so relived. And I had this — they had been there for 20 years and they had every square inch of the property full of stuff.

And after a while we cleaned everything out and I disassembled the house. I took the roof off. I took the porches off. I took the windows out. And I took some of the plumbing and electric out. I took out the drywall. I took out the floor. And I redid everything from the inside out to be in a real sanitary — we did it in a Zen way so it would be easy to maintain, it would be healthy, and it would be nothing that could trap allergies or dust or dirt. We made it streamlined and simple and gave it this great wraparound porch with sitting areas in three or four different locations.

It has a forest in the back of it that you can sit back and watch the birds in the forest and the animals in the forest and listen to the forest sounds. Or you can sit on the front and you can have this panoramic view of the hillside, or the coastal range right before the coast. And we're about six or eight miles from the coast. And you can't have a — you don't have an ocean view here but you have a view of the valley before the ocean view.

And I pretty much am happy almost every day that I'm working at the cottage or working on the property. I've taken a lot of pride and enjoyment in watching this become something of substance. And right now we use the cottage as a vacation rental. It's a nightly vacation rental. And my wife and I — Lisa and I both take care of the cottage. And every day I go up there and I do work up there. I'm just thankful that I own it and thankful that I get the time to commune with nature a bit.

I like being in nature, and I like beautiful views, and I like aesthetics. I like the challenge of landscaping in a ground squirrel and gopher-ridden type environment. We've taken a lot of pride to do the best job that we possibly could do with the resources and the conditions we have to deal with. And we feel like we've done a really good job.

Our kids went to school and the kids enjoyed living here. We have house concerts here. We have music here. We built a stage for our kids to perform on. Our daughter is a vocalist and our son is a percussionist. And the two of them have had, you know, fun — a lot of fun in here. We have a music room that is full of old percussion instruments and keyboards and guitars. And it's been a good place to make noise.

We bought this because being a forger and making a lot of forging, the sound rings and you do get a lot of people complaining. And in the past, in our Tin Town experience, in our home experience we have felt sorry for our neighbors. We felt like we wished that we could do something and not subject anybody else to the sounds that we're creating. And so here we have the opportunity. We can make as much noise — I can turn my dust collector on all day long. I can forge as much as I want. I can do all the stuff and there's really nobody for me to disturb.

So we kind of have the perfect world. But in doing so, my day-to-day work activities, I'd love to say I get up at, you know, 7:30, I'm down there working every day as soon as I get up. But that's not usually the reality of the situation. The reality of the situation is I may have to go out in the vineyard and get something done.

The beginning of the vineyard I did most of the pruning and I did most of everything. I was the vineyard manager, the vineyard worker, only to get it started. And at first we were selling our grapes, you know, easily and we were making money on the vineyard. Now things have changed in this area a little bit, with bad frost the last couple years where we haven't sold the grapes for a couple years because of frost damage. And this year we have a great vineyard again and great fruit, so we'll see what happens.

But the cottage has been another source of income, plus a place where we have friends and family stay. And we can utilize it for many different activities.

[End of disc.]

MS.LAURIA: Well, how many hours a day do you think, you know, on an average basis, can you work on your own metalsmithing?

MR. STROMSÖE: I get eight or 10 hours a day. And — but I make it up at 6:00 in the morning and may not start my work until 10:00 or 10:30.

MS. LAURIA: But you also — you don't — you don't really use the computer, or you don't do, like, email and —

MR. STROMSÖE: I try to have my wife, Lisa, do a lot of my correspondence for me. Well, you know that I'm a one-man shop, and I need to work as many hours as I possibly can. I really enjoy working afternoons and evenings. I love working to 7:30, 8:00 every day. Eight o'clock is a good time for me to finish work. We come up for dinner, 8:00, we unwind for a short amount of time, and then we're in bed relatively early, and then I wake up the next morning. And there have been quite a few mornings when I'm getting ready for an exhibit or a show where I'll wake up at 4:00 in the morning, you know, go downstairs in my little twilight mood, and I'll start drawing out new designs at 4:00 in the morning, you know, lay out everything I'm going to do when I get back to work. And we do have an orchard too that we maintain, and we don't have —

MS. LAURIA: Apples?

MR. STROMSÖE: Apples.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: Apples and Asian pears. And we — [laughs] — and I enjoy having an apple a day. I try to make it so I have applies that bloom early in the —

MS. LAURIA: Season, mm-hmm.

MR. STROMSÖE: — yeah, season, and late in the season, and I save them, and I put them in the refrigerator, and I keep them around for months. So we have apples almost every day of my life, and I really enjoy that as — I enjoy having organic, healthy food that I know where it's coming from, and I enjoy going out to the garden and picking what I'm going to eat within minutes of when we're going to make our dinners. And we do that all summer long and all fall long, we're out in the garden. And this is the first year I haven't had a robust garden going at this time of year, and usually it looks like a garden on steroids. There are just huge plants, and things are just thriving. And I take a lot of enjoyment out of that.

MS. LAURIA: Now, you also have galleries that represent your work, and you have clients, private clients that — a lot of your work comes through commission. Can you talk a little bit about how that works? I mean, do you — do you give your clients, like, a certain time frame? If they order, you know, a bowl or a tea set, do you tell them, I'm — this is how long it's going to take, and you stick to that?

MR. STROMSÖE: Within a year.

MS. LAURIA: No, I mean, seriously, do you tell them, you know, this is exactly — I know how long it's going to be, or you have to order the materials, or do they — do you ever get, like, strange requests like, you know, I'm

having, you know, a wedding, and I need 24 of something, and you say, oh, my goodness, that's a pretty, you know, demanding commission, and that might — do you make them pay for the materials up front or a deposit? Because that could be a very, you know, vast amount of money on your part to put out.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, that's been our problem is getting things done quick enough to satisfy a lot of the customers. We've had many times in different exhibits, including, like, Pritam & Eames gallery, where we've had —

MS. LAURIA: This is the gallery that's on Long Island?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. And so we've had pieces in the front window where someone'll come in and say, oh, that's a wonderful piece, but I want, you know, two or three of them, you know? And there'll be big pieces, and it'll take us months to do. And sometimes in the past we've had — run into the problem where we'll tell people a deadline, and then we'll go and make the piece, and by the time we get it done, which is well within the deadline, we'll have people who say, "Well, I no longer want it now," you know? And sometimes people just forfeit their down payments, you know? And sometimes you — right now the only reason we have some duplicates of some pieces is because people at the last moment decided that they're — they didn't want to wait that long or something. But it's worked out good for us because sometimes we only have some samples because of that fact.

We've had really good customers. We had a couple of architects, real successful architects that just were in love with our work and were buying a lot of my work. And they pleaded with us — pleaded with us — this is only — you know, this is 10 years ago or five years ago — and — to stop doing any shows, don't do any more shows, don't take on any more work; just do our work. And we had a list of 20, 30, 40 pieces to do. You know, each man wanted, you know, 20 pieces, and we — everything from water pitchers to trays to coffee — full coffee sets. We did full flatware sets for them. And they pretty much had me turn down all my customers and all my shows to just focus on them.

And then the unthinkable happened, where one man's wife came down with a rare form of cancer that was really — well, just terrible, terrible situation, and it was really, you know, sad situation where he lost interest in collecting, he got depressed, and he — and that's something they did together, and he just — you know, he declined, you know, any more work. He just wanted to bow out. And then his friend that — and they were feeding off each other, this frenzy of both buying everything I can make. He got divorced and married a younger woman and bought a yacht and was sailing around the world on a yacht, and he decided that it — silver wasn't the right thing for a yacht.

And so my two best customers, within a month or two of each other, reneged on all the orders after I canceled every show and turned down everybody. And it kind of goes to show that the way I did it to start with was better, you know? I never took everybody too seriously, and I kind of just dribbled out a little bit of work to you and a little bit of work to you. You know, I'd do a couple pieces a year for you, but when I fully put all my energy into — or time into just a couple individuals that, by every indication, were my best customers in the planet and had — people that had been buying stuff from me for 10 years, 15 years, and then they just had the unthinkable happen in their lives and just rocked the whole boat, were — it kind of changed my whole life.

You know, the fact that — and in the past, when I did work for Gump's and went out on my own, Mr. Monalusky [ph] from Gump's was going to buy everything I was ever going to make the rest of my life, and then he had a heart attack. And then I was out my best customer, so — and it gets really tricky trying to balance these things, and it gets funny holding onto people's money for years, like you take a down payment, and you have that down payment; after a couple years, you're starting to feel a lot of guilt in getting things done. But sometimes I feel more like experimenting with shapes and ideas than I do in executing somebody's commission. Sometimes I'm just so turned on by a certain direction that I don't want to put it down, I don't want to stop what I'm doing, even though it's — the business liabilities there. I mean, it's been a really tricky thing to balance out.

And then on top of that, with my kids being students, I became involved in coaching. I've been, like, a basketball coach for my kids and been a basketball coach for the high school, and then trying to keep everything — life gets really interesting, really challenging.

MS. LAURIA: Well, do you have a — like, an exclusive gallery that represents your work now, or do you mostly just send work to galleries that request your work for shows?

MR. STROMSÖE: We haven't done a show in five or six years because the economy got so bad and because we had clients we could sell to out here, and we had orders. We've been making a lot of flatware in the last few years, and I've been down there just forging hundreds of pieces a year. But I don't have the perfect gallery representing me right now. There are so many galleries that don't even know I exist, and galleries I met 10 or 15, 20 years ago that wanted my work that are still in business. But we don't have the best representation right now that we can have.

MS. LAURIA: So do you think your work has changed over time? And consider the motivating factors for major shifts in forms, techniques in materials; what have they been, if there have been changes? What do you — what would you say they have been? What have been some of the —

MR. STROMSÖE: I think now the gold aspect — the price of gold is so prohibitive that there was one time when I did a whole lot of gold cups and gold pieces, gold hollowware. I —considered an expert and the person you would go to in California for a gold chalice or a gold cup. And that's where I made my most profit is — the materials, once you — yeah, the more expensive materials are, the more profit you can make on the finished item and the more of an expertise — you know, that was my expertise. And that only happened because of being a young man and being in Porter's shop and getting mass orders for trophies, gold trophies, and that experience of working with gold — it became a comfort zone, and I actually realized that goldsmithing was easier than silversmithing. Making a gold cup or a gold vessel was —

MS. LAURIA: Because it's softer?

MR. STROMSÖE: It's actually — well, 18 karat's softer, but we did a lot in 14 karat. But it — just that it holds together easier, and then when you have to solder something, repair something, the solder seems to be so much more hidden. And then you can work something after it's been soldered, and it holds together. So it's — it is an easier to use material. It may take a little more time, but you usually do it thinner also, and by doing it thinner, it makes it more — makes it quicker also. So with my gold expertise, with the price of gold now, it must really — [laughs] — this would be hard to get gold orders, I imagine. But what we do realize, that there is money all over this world, and at this point in our lives, we're going to try to approach just the highest-end customers. We're going to show illustrations and have sample pieces that are just the most expensive, and we're going to go to the top-of-the-line and top-end people now. We're going to remove some of what we've been doing. We've been trying to give the middle class and the lower upper class a person to come to, but now we decided that we need to go directly to the richest people in the country and — because I don't think there's a whole lot of competition. But we'll find out. That's where we're going to approach next.

MS. LAURIA: What about corporate gifts or diplomatic gifts or gifts to royalty, papal, liturgical? Have these been big markets for you in the past? Do you see them continuing? Can you talk a little bit about that?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, all the above. You know, the corporate gifts were a really big thing for us 20 years ago, and so if we did a lot of corporate gifts — and we could — we had that contemporary high-end sort of look, and we could do it in pewter or in silver, and we could do some simple things that had a real elegant, high-end look. So with corporations, at one point we were really busy doing corporate gifts. And you know, I can think of — you know, we did everything — we did so many different corporations, and we did so many retirement gifts and presentation gifts. And it was — and now we're — what was the second part of that?

MS. LAURIA: Liturgical or — you talked about when the pope came to visit Saint Vibiana's, you had made all of the papal gifts.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, like —

MS. LAURIA: What year was that?

MR. STROMSÖE: In 1987 — [laughs] — we got really lucky, and we did a religious congress show in 1985, I think it was. And it was a show that we were doing some chalices — bunch of chalices, quite a few chalices for the Roman Catholic Church and different seminarians. And they liked our work, and they encouraged us to go to this congress. And we didn't know much about it, and so we thought we'd give it a shot. And we took just a flat table with a half-dozen chalices and different bowls and forms, and we hit a home run. I mean, we met so many people that wanted quality chalices, and they wanted the chalices made by individuals like ourselves. And it was probably our most lucrative show we ever did was the Roman Catholic religious congress in '85. And in doing so, we got interiors of churches that we were doing. We got the pope order when the pope came to LA We made, you know, 649 pieces to be used at the ceremony. And not only that, but we also had the LA and — the LA Coliseum's — we made the pieces for both of those, and we got the order for the chalice down there. Then we also had inquiries from San Francisco for the — the chalice for San Francisco, and Arroyo Seco [where the Pope's northern California mass too place –RJS] also had a need for a chalice. And we got — but we couldn't fill — you know, after 649, as many pieces as we could do, so we couldn't do the piece for San Francisco or Arroyo Seco. But if we had a couple more employees or, you know, another half-year time —

MS. LAURIA: Was this when it was Porter Blanchard —

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, this is when we were on our own. And the problem was we — oh, 70? Yeah, after around — gosh, we got so embedded with them. We had so many opportunities, and we did — so we did work for bishops, and we did — oh, the thing just went wild for, you know, five or 10 years. We were — because of one show, we just had all types of repeat customers. And at one point, we thought we'd do nothing but chalices.

That'd be our only thing that we did. But we found — part of the problem was being a one-man operation — I like to call myself "we." It's something that I've learned to do many years ago because nobody wants to buy it from a one-man operation. And when you got the whole interior of a church to do and you're starting everything a year or two before they even build the chapel and you're working out the designs and everything, you're trying to let everybody know the urgency of getting to it quick, and a lot of times they wait to make the order when — until they only have a year or half-year to go before they need everything, and then they'll procrastinate on some things, and then at the end they expect you to be a magician. They expect you to be able to produce things — [inaudible] —

MS. LAURIA: Produce it, right.

MR. STROMSÖE: And you've been working diligently on everything, and you got everything lined up, and then they'll go and get some pieces donated, and then they'll bring in some pieces that are — conflict with the design sense. And they kind of made us lose our interest until we had a bigger workforce where we can get things done within a couple months. We knew that you couldn't give them too much freedom, or they'd change things too quick. We had to — to get the order, we had to get things done really efficiently. But we were getting so many orders in that time that it was a real juggling for us. And it made me — I was working 70 hours a week, sometimes 80 hours a week to keep up on things. So we had no time, and we had no time to photograph and document or even — you know, we were just — I was just making things as fast as I could humanly make them and sending them out.

MS. LAURIA: And these were large presentation pieces, right, like the chalices that would be on the altar and the one that they'd hold up, so they had to be rather large.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And were they gold-plated sometimes?

MR. STROMSÖE: Usually they're gold-plated on the inside of the cup.

MS. LAURIA: In the inside, so it would reflect to the worshippers. That's great. So do you ever know — do you ever go and see if these pieces still exist, you know?

MR. STROMSÖE: No — [laughs] — and in fact, I forgot probably where half of them have gone, or three-fourth of them. But we did have — we had a lot of fun, and we got to make processional crosses and altar candlesticks and monstrances and ciboriums. And it was a great — and everybody wanted things that had contemporary design and kind of elegant. And prior to that, when I was a young man, I worked a lot with Peter Lesh, and he was a — he was an 80-year-old craftsman for the Roman Catholic Church. But his real contemporary designs were what I was reproducing for him was in my early 20s, and it gave me a sense of what they might want. So it was a good transition. And we probably would have continued that, but then we felt — heard about the ACC shows and other shows, and then we started going sideways.

MS. LAURIA: American craft shows.

MR. STROMSÖE: Shows — and then the La Quinta show, and then we learned about — you know, we had Smithsonian and the Philadelphia show. And we start learning about those shows and applying to those shows, and instead, and going a little bit sideways — we always were curious of what was around the corner, and we were always — we had the LA diocese and the Orange County diocese pretty much locked up for years, and we got most of the referrals and most of the orders, but there was a time in 1987 where the pope proclaimed a time to buy from the artisans, a time to buy from your local craftsmen, and don't get things out of catalogues and don't do this. And so by him saying that, we had gangbusters. We just did fantastic. We had — at the same time, CNN came and did a story on us doing the pieces for the pope order, and it was shown across the whole United States. And at that point we had — [inaudible] — silver gallery in Cambria, and we had a collection of work. And within a couple weeks every piece we had was gone. You know, it was like, that publicity from being on CNN and having people seeing us — I had phone calls from friends from New York, friends from Florida, and everybody is — you know, "I saw you on TV," you know.

But that was what we needed to push us over the top and sell everything we had. So there's times where we had really good earning years and we were really satisfied and really had some great friends that we met and people that loved what we were doing. I mean, we'd always have bishops and cardinals and priests stopping by and just thanking us, you know. And it was a wonderful period of time. But then we got excited by doing the other shows, you know. And we want to see what —

MS. LAURIA: What other artists were doing.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, what American Craft Council was and what — how we fit into the show. And we started —

we did the San Francisco show first, and right away we got into a couple magazines. They used our images, and we had a really productive show, and we felt like, you know — you know, we felt like rock stars. It felt really comfortable in that setting, and we noticed other metalsmiths were, like, looking at us like, what the heck; where'd they come from? But people never realized that when I was in my early 20s, I was doing work for Cartier's and Gump's and Neiman Marcus and Shreve, Crump & Low and all the fine stores in the country, and I had to do the best possible craftsmanship, and it had to be perfect. And so when I was a little bit older but still young and we were doing the shows and we had more avant-garde, more contemporary designs and more artsy designs, it still — the craftsmanship was there, and people wondered, where the heck did they come from; how did they just drop out of — you know — you know —

MS. LAURIA: Right. Well, they also didn't know your name because probably you were signing your things, when you were working for Porter Blanchard, as Porter Blanchard, or did he allow you to sign your name and Porter Blanchard?

MR. STROMSÖE: Everything that had my "R.S." that I wanted it to, you know. Pieces like the pieces I was just showing would have my "R.S." on them, but I didn't put "R.S." on our everyday pieces. I don't — I saved it for — but I was the handle and spout and tea set maker. So whenever we had special tea sets and special things to make, I would work on them, and a lot of times by myself. But then as we got more and more employees and employees got more and more skilled, we'd do group work, and we'd — there'd be three or four of us working on a piece, and then nobody would sign it. You know, if you didn't do 80 percent or 90 percent, you didn't put your stamp on it. And that was fine by me. I enjoyed having comrades and likeminded craftsmen that did fine work. I enjoyed handing something off to somebody I knew could do as good of a job as I could, and that was a really good feeling.

MS. LAURIA: Well, now, when you did go to the American craft shows, were there other artists whose work that you said, wow, that's kind of interesting, you know, whether or not they were metalsmiths or — you know, that you felt had an aesthetic that you found appealing? Were there any other people that you felt like-minded?

MR. STROMSÖE: I made so many friends from doing those shows, and the artists that I had a good rapport with are all very successful now. And we've — I went and I had people coming to my booth and liking my work, and they'd take me to their booth, and I liked their work, and we became friends. And we usually dropped it after the show; we didn't continue corresponding. But that's before computers, Internet and communication became easy. But now, 20, 30 years later, those guys are the big names in the craft field, and —

MS. LAURIA: Like Paley, Albert Paley? Was he one of them?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, he is older, but you know — I don't know how to pronounce most people's name. Michael Sherrill was one of them.

MS. LAURIA: Mm-hmm, Michael Sherrill.

MR. STROMSÖE: See, I don't know how to pronounce — and then Christian — how do you say — the wood turner —

MS. LAURIA: Oh, Burchard, Christian Burchard.

MR. STROMSÖE: Burchard and — yeah.

MS. LAURIA: I just saw him at the Smithsonian show.

MR. STROMSÖE: So there's so many people like that, you know, that I just —

MS. LAURIA: Which ones, Lisa?

MS. STROMSÖE: Dante Marioni.

MS. LAURIA: Dante Marioni, yes.

MR. STROMSÖE: And — Marilyn Levine and —

MS. STROMSÖE: Wendell Castle.

MS. LAURIA: Wendell Castle.

MR. STROMSÖE: No, who's that other — oh, yeah, there's so —

MR. STROMSÖE: Carol Squib and — you know, it's — We had —

MS. STROMSÖE: So many strains within so many trades. Oh, my God.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, at the very beginning we weren't very savvy, and we didn't understand. But people came up to us immediately and started wanting to trade, and we started trading, then finding out that we weren't getting the — [laughs] — you know, we needed to get our little bargaining or negotiating —

MS. LAURIA: Negotiating better. [They laugh.]

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, we were just — we were humbled and amazed that they would want to trade with us. We'd look at their work and go, wow, you know, because — you know, people that do the ACC shows, they get so refined, and their work becomes so spectacular. They do them for five or 10, 15 years, and they just keep improving year after year after year after year, and — now, we — I like Charles Crowley's work, you know, and —

MS. LAURIA: Crowley?

MR. STROMSÖE: God, he — what is really weird with Charles's work is that he's — his wife's a metalsmith too — you know her — named — and I can't think of it right now. But his work evolved on similar as mine, like parallel universe. And when we were at the show together, I walked over and looked at his work, and went, wow, that's like my work. And he came over to my work and looked at it — whoa — and we — you know, we realized that sometimes people, you know, a thousand, 2,000 miles apart can evolve in the same direction without ever seeing each other's work. And so yeah, we met so many wonderful people from doing the shows, and —

MS. LAURIA: Well, we probably have time for one more question on this tape. Do you think your work is particularly American in style? If you had somebody from Europe look at your work, would you say — would they say, that looks like an American metalsmith, or do you think it has more of a global appeal?

MR. STROMSÖE: I think totally global appeal. I say that because I — once I was sent a Finnish magazine, and I — and they had a picture of one of my pitchers in there, and it looked so appropriate. I looked at that — and I lost that magazine. I don't have it now. And I just looked at that and thought, wow, I belong in Finland, you know, like, this looks so cool. And I couldn't read it, didn't understand anything. And the same thing goes with — I have a friend that's a designer. I've never met the man. He's a customer of mine. But he calls me up and talks to me, and he's a real successful designer. And he goes to Spain and Italy, and he — yeah, he's really successful. But he tells me — he goes, "Randy, get over to Spain. Get over to Italy. You're wasting your time." He goes, "If you go over there, they'll love you. You'll have so much work. Your life will change instantaneously." And he's European, but he's come to America to work, but now he goes back there to sell.

And he — we just have a phone rapport. He goes and buys some of my work at the Saint Louis Museum of Art. And he — I don't think — he's not around here anymore, but he calls me up and gives me pep talks, and he just tells me to go to Europe and go to Spain and Italy in particular, they — and get your work seen, because he says, "Once you do, your life is going to be on easy street." He goes, "Trust me; this is my life." He goes, "I am so comfortable right now, I make so much money, and my life is so good," and he goes, "And you could have it all too, but you need to get over there and do it because nobody in California is going to appreciate what you're doing; you're living in a dead zone." [They laugh.]

And I believe it. I think my worst clienteles are now in the community we live in — that I can take the same piece and send it to New York and have it sell the first day it hits a gallery, or Santa Fe. That's the problem I had in the past is that when I send my work to the different galleries, they'd sell it the first week they got it, and then they'd place another order, but then the order would take another three months, four months to fill, and I'd be — why don't you just order, like, five times as much, you know, get five of those necklaces and 20 bracelets, you know; why just — you know, that's not the way they do it. And then if you, you know, linger too long —

MS. LAURIA: Well, I wanted to ask you about — did Porter Blanchard ever make jewelry?

MR. STROMSÖE: No.

MS. LAURIA: I didn't think he did. So where did you learn the skill of making jewelry? Did you have to teach yourself?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, Zella got me started and got me researching what other people did. And I never really had much trouble making things. At that Porter shop and at Louie's shop, I was a designated jewelry maker in our 20s, and I did all the jewelry for them, and everybody loved it, and I had an easy time. And — yeah, we had an easy time selling the jewelry, and I did it after hours. And at Louie's shop, I worked many hours, and when I got into silversmithing, I didn't take it lightly. I immersed myself in it, and I would spend nights — I'd be in the shop working to 8:00, 10:00 every night, then I'd be back there in the morning at 7:00 or 6:30 doing it again. And I kind of loved it, you know? Once in a while I'd leave early and go to the beach and go surfing, you know, and then come back and do it again. But we were only 10 miles from the ocean.

MS. LAURIA: All right. Hold that thought. This is the end of tape two, and we're going to talk about surfing on tape three.

MR. STROMSÖE: Okay.

MS. LAURIA: He made jewelry too, but he didn't learn it from Porter either.

MR. STROMSÖE: But I think Allan was like Porter. You probably hired the best —

[End of disc.]

MS. LAURIA: This is Tuesday, June 6, continuing interview with Randy Stromsöe at his home studio in Templeton, California. This is tape number three.

So, Randy, to pick up again on our continuing conversation let's talk about your relationship with dealers and exhibitions — your exhibition history, more or less. Can you kind of give us a chronological recall of some of the more important exhibitions that you've shown in — nationally, starting with some of the exhibitions that had more meaning to you in the past?

MR. STROMSÖE: OK. Before I did exhibitions I was already a silversmith and working for the fine stores in the country — the Cartier's and Neiman Marcus and — [inaudible]. And we had our technique down where we make a — can make a quality product efficiently. And so when started doing exhibitions, the first one we did was just a whimsical one called a Pumpkin Festival in Calabasas where — our workshop was in Calabasas. And we —

MS. LAURIA: And what year are we speaking of?

MR. STROMSÖE: This would be early '80s — around 1980. What year?

LISA STROMSÖE: I'd have to look it up. 1975.

MR. STROMSÖE: '75? Oh, 1975. I'm sorry.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, so that was Lisa Stromsöe, Randy's wife and chronicler of his archives.

MR. STROMSÖE: That's where Lisa and I met. So I guess I should have known that. And she was selling jewelry and I was making jewelry. And I just had a little three-by-four foot display case, not much of a display case. And I wasn't taking it too seriously. It was the type of show that you built your own booth and it was there for five weeks and there was really good bands everywhere. And celebrities were there. You're down in the Los Angeles area and Diana Ross and Cher and Henry Winkler and different people were there.

So it was kind of funny that —

MS. LAURIA: Excuse me, what did you call the event?

MR. STROMSÖE: The Pumpkin Festival. So it was just pumpkins — Calabasas had a lot of pumpkins at one time. And our workshop was in Calabasas. So it — we did the festival once when we were young —

MS. LAURIA: So it must have been in October, I'm guessing, since that's the pumpkin time.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, exactly. Exactly, October 2nd and 3rd, or the 1st, that's where we met, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: Wonderful. So you actually were selling jewelry.

MR. STROMSÖE: We were selling jewelry and didn't have any hollowware in there, any flatware. It was just all jewelry. And we didn't put that much effort into it, but we did get third prize. And we did sell a lot of work. And it got us motivated to

MS. LAURIA: And what kind of jewelry, since Porter Blanchard's studio did not make jewelry. This was purely Randy Stromsöe jewelry.

MR. STROMSÖE: Exactly. It was — it was very artsy. It was —

MS. LAURIA: Describe "very artsy" for me.

MR. STROMSÖE: It was not traditional or classical. It was very unusual. It would — it looked you wouldn't be able to tell what country it was made in or where it was made.

MS. LAURIA: Ethnic?

MR. STROMSÖE: Very ethnic looking.

MS. LAURIA: Made out of silver?

MR. STROMSÖE: Out of silver and gold and anything. We had lots of carvings involved. There'd be stone setting, but there'd also be wood and ivory manipulated and carved into different forms.

MS. LAURIA: Do you have any photo imagery that we might be able to include in the archives of these early pieces, because I'm totally amazed. I have never seen these pieces and now for the first time you're telling me about them and I would really love to see them.

MR. STROMSÖE: I might. I might have a couple pieces that we can bring out again.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, and photograph them?

MR. STROMSÖE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: And when you say they have carved wood and ivory, were they found pieces that you incorporated or did you actually carve them from the raw materials?

MR. STROMSÖE: From the raw material. They'd be scrap pieces from the shop that I'd take and rework. You know —

MS. LAURIA: Oh, okay, because you'd used the wood and the ivory for finials and knobs and things?

MR. STROMSÖE: And insulators and handles. And so we're very adept to carving — [inaudible] — on. And we enjoyed the look and the contrast. And the second show we did — I think it was the San Francisco ACE show. And it was —

MS. LAURIA: What does ACE stand for?

MR. STROMSÖE: American Craft Enterprise. American — maybe it was ACC. I know there's American Craft Council. But it was their San Francisco show, which was the closest show to our community. And we had immediate success. Our images were used for PR. We had our images used for — in different magazines at that time. And we did good sales and we were very excited as to we actually had images used because not too many of the artists get their images in magazines and stuff at the shows. And so it gave us a little boost and a little momentum and confidence.

MS. LAURIA: Is this also the late '70s or the early '80s.

MR. STROMSÖE: This would probably be the early '80s because we — quite a few years passed.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, so just for clarification, I — we went back to the notes and Randy found out that the Catholic Congress that we — of which we spoke about yesterday, the date of that Catholic Congress was — what was it, Randy?

MR. STROMSÖE: '84.

MS. LAURIA: 1984. And now we were talking about the ACC show in San Francisco. What date is that?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, I think we skipped to 1990 was when we really started doing exhibitions.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: We had been working silversmiths for many years, but then we started exhibiting and we did La Quinta and San Francisco both in 1990. And San Francisco was very good for us and the La Quinta show was very good for us. We made a lot of sales and a lot of good contacts and we won an award of excellence in sculpture and we gained momentum and confidence in doing the exhibitions or the shows.

After that, we did the last New York Armory Show, which I believe was 1991. And then —

MS. LAURIA: Why was it called the last —

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, it wasn't — it was the ACC New York Armory Show, but they — but it was the last one they did. The thought behind the Armory show was to have the top craftsmen in the country come to New York and exhibit their work.

And what they found out was that the top craftsmen in the country had gallery representation and didn't really

need to leave their studios anymore. They had elevated their lifestyle beyond the craft exhibits and they were no longer needing of any craft exhibitions. And so it had more emerging craftsmen, like myself, that were going there.

And once again, they used our images for some of their PR and for some of their posters and made us very excited. And then when we got to the show and showed our teapots, the American Craft Museum and the — and the employees got very excited. And we created a little bit of excited energy about our teapots and later got us involved in exhibiting at the American Craft Museum for a couple of their teapot shows.

And then our next show, I think, was in Baltimore. And we did one Baltimore show. Oh, we also — we did a Baltimore show once in 1992. And through that Baltimore show we met Michael Monroe. And we sold pieces to the MCI world headquarters. We had work placed in the Smithsonian from that show. And we were — because of that show and meeting Michael Monroe, we were included in the White House craft collection, all from that one show. So that was exciting.

And then we moved on. We did the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show. And we did that three times. Each time was very beneficial. It was probably around '93, I'm not sure, but we won the Rolex Award one show and had strong sales.

MS. LAURIA: And what was the Rolex Award? Did that come with a prize, a purchase prize, or with a monetary award? Or was it just a privilege to win?

MR. STROMSÖE: It was a thousand dollar prize — they gave out several thousand dollar prizes. And in the metals category, they had two for design excellence. And a — Charles Crowley got it for one and I got it for the other.

MS. LAURIA: And Charles Crowley is a metalsmith as well?

MR. STROMSÖE: He's a metalsmith. He had — he and I had created similar styles. We were 2,000 miles away, but our work looked like we could have been working for the same company. You know, it was very kind of exciting and fun to see. I really appreciated what he was doing. And I'm sure it was equal admiration, I hope.

After that, we did the Smithsonian show and the Philadelphia show a couple more times. And —

MS. LAURIA: And these shows are vetted — they're all juried shows, is that correct?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So each time you — even if you're an established, known name, there are always different jurors. I know this because I was asked to jury the Smithsonian Craft Show, the last year of 2011 — well, this year, I guess. Anyway, so we have three — you have three jurors and they all sit, you know, together and jury by a vote that — they give every artist a vote. And you're either in or you're not in. But it's a three-way voting system.

So they don't know the name of the person necessarily — or they do, it doesn't really matter. But they don't know how the other two jurors are voting. So have you ever been rejected from one of the shows?

MR. STROMSÖE: We've had good luck where we haven't been rejected from a show yet. And I imagine it's going to happen sometime in my life. But so far, so good, where everything's been positive and every show's been a stepping stone to something better.

When we started off, every show just built momentum and we never felt like we wasted any time by doing a show and every show we collected new clientele and new — well, we got more — well, what we were usually after was this — if we got our images used in the promotion of the show or the newspapers and magazines used our images. To that, that was as good as doing the show. We just wanted to get our images out there so people realized that we were around and we did exist and we were actually some craftsmen out there making silver like we did.

MS. LAURIA: So do you always enter in the metalsmith category or do you sometimes enter in jewelry or do you enter in both categories? How does it work for you?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, in the past when we've done shows there hasn't been the contradiction or the problem there is now with — you can enter with the hollowware and flatware and be considered a metalsmith and you can show your jewelry also. We never had a problem showing our jewelry alongside everything else.

Occasionally we would enter shows just with our jewelry, but it's — so usually with the hollowware. But nowadays, things have changed and now they want people to enter different categories. Something like the Sausalito show wants you to enter with metalsmithing — functional metalsmithing and with jewelry. But when once you get accepted you have to choose between the two. What are you going to do, jewelry or

metalsmithing.

And in the past, we were able to do it all. And we considered ourselves silversmiths and we did work — hollowware, flatware and jewelry. We did silver, gold and pewter — some copper pieces. And so we had a wide range of things that we could do and tricks that we could pull out. But nowadays they try and isolate it. And it's kind of a complication because we have always been what we are, but now we have to enter in a different way.

And what they're trying to do is keep more of the glass artists and different people from overlapping into the jewelry field. And what they have done is sort of shot us in the foot where we can't really do what we want to do without making things complex. And with the economy like it is nowadays, it's really hard to want to jump into a show if you can't show everything you do. We don't want to be pigeonholed as just a hollowware guy.

We want everybody to see our flatware. If we get a couple orders for flatware, that can make our show. If we sell a couple dozen pieces of jewelry that can make our show. So if we have to only show hollowware, it could make for a difficult show. We do hollowware because we love hollowware and that's where our heart is, but it's not really where the money is. It's not the most lucrative part of our profession, but it is what we want to do.

MS. LAURIA: I notice that you use the word "we." What that really refers to is you and Lisa because Lisa helps you with the business end of your business, correct?

MR. STROMSÖE: Correct.

MS. LAURIA: I mean, I know you don't like to do the computer or answer emails or any of the business side. You like to be in your studio, which is what an artist wants to do, making the work. But it's really just you, Randy, and your tools. So if you get an order for — you know, of flatware, you know, in a certain pattern, Lisa's taking the order through the email and working with the client, and you're down in the studio making the pieces, correct?

MR. STROMSÖE: Correct.

MS. LAURIA: Can you — can you sort of walk us through how a commission might happen?

MR. STROMSÖE: Okay. But I'd like to —

MS. LAURIA: Finish that thought? Okay, we'll go back to that.

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, with a — with stores and dealing with customers, nobody wants to work with an individual that does everything. They want a company that has a few employees. The stores we've dealt with in the past, they want — they want to know there's a couple other people helping out. Nobody — most of the stores don't want to deal with a solo artist that's limited in his production, as we are. So in the past 30 years, we've always called me "we," just so we didn't lose any of our stores we're dealing with.

MS. LAURIA: Well, also if you had a big order, could you possibly bring in someone to help you — I mean, someone that you know who is a master craftsman? Should you know someone to say I need to contract out for — I've got, you know, a 12 flatware orders, you know, and you know you can't do it all in a certain limited time and would you consider that?

MR. STROMSÖE: I wish I could. I wish I knew people that could help me right now. In the past, I have used some of my friends to come in and help me with big productions. Most of them have kind of slowed down in their smithing. And I don't really have anybody I can call in at this point. I would like to. I have — in the past I've had a couple people who have come in and helped me on big orders. And it's been a lifesaver. But now it's pretty much just us.

MS. LAURIA: Right. But it is a possibility.

MR. STROMSÖE: It is a possibility. And maybe in the future I'll find those people again, other parties or —

MS. LAURIA: I mean, should the Obamas call you —

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Or their secretary of the White House and asked for, you know, a state dinner of needing a certain amount of pieces by a certain amount of time, it would be a consideration that you would consider.

MR. STROMSÖE: I have a few numbers I can call. Some of my better craftsman friends are retired and they don't' really want to pick up a hammer anymore, but if I talked really nice to them, it's possible I could get them to jump in and help me. And that's not too farfetched that — we would like to do something for the White House again and we would like to make presidential gifts again, like we did for the Reagan administration. We would

like to —

MS. LAURIA: What did you do for the Reagan administration?

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh, we did — so quite a few gifts for them. We did paperweight and letter openers that they're very fond of. And we did work for — [inaudible]. We did presidential tankards for — that they used for several years as gifts. And they're reproductions of a Samuel Casey silver tankard that we were able to pick out of the Smithsonian collection and then bring it home and then duplicate it. And —

MS. LAURIA: Samuel Casey, as in C-A-S-E-Y?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: OK. And who commissioned you to do that directly?

MR. STROMSÖE: It was done through the White House [via –RJS] Williamsburg. The Williamsburg Foundation asked me to take on these projects for them. And we made another piece, a letter [box for François Mitterrand, a letter opener, and presidential gifts –RJS] — yeah. Gosh. Turn it off for a second.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah, Okay.

[End of disc.]

MS. LAURIA: Well, Randy, let's pick up where you were talking about some significant exhibitions in your background.

Also, I noticed that you mentioned some exhibitions were important because you met Michael Monroe and you met Kenneth Trapp. And I just want to say before I forget, certainly, the White House Collection of American Craft was important for me because I was working at the LA County Museum of Art when that exhibition traveled to LACMA and you were in that collection. And it traveled to LACMA I think in 1998. And I was the installation curator at the time. And I did a symposium and I invited you to speak at LACMA. And that was the first time that I met you because you had a beautiful bowl in the show. Do you want to talk about the piece you had in the exhibition?

MR. STROMSÖE: Correct. Yes. At the time, when we met Michael Monroe, he was after our *Torch Bowl*, the silver and pewter bowl that was — reminded me of a torch on a stand like a Statue of Liberty bowl. And that piece was gone. And he asked me to make anything I wanted for the White House Collection. And I had a concept in my mind of something I thought would be very appropriate for the White House — something that I thought would be very fitting, something that had symbolism, that was subtle, that would reflect upon our country in the White House, and something that had silver with gold leafing or gold plating that would mimic the flatware that was being used at the White House.

So I took on the challenge more as a designer or a product designer and I made a piece I thought was White House appropriate. And with doing so and sending it, it was appropriate. It was a piece that they used almost nonstop at the White House. It —

MS. LAURIA: What'd they use it for?

MR. STROMSÖE: For governor dinners and any dinners, it was a centerpiece on the table. And I have many photographs of it. It usually has something sitting it, which I wasn't really excited to see, but I was happy that they appreciate it and that they loved it and that they wanted to use it all the time.

The first lady appreciated it, Hillary Clinton. And she talked about it on CBS Sunday morning show. And she showed it and it was a real good opportunity to have people from all over the world see it. And it was also, you know, one of the more favorite bowls. So we got — it was used in a lot of the publicity. I remember being in New York and opening up the *New York Times*, when I was in the Philadelphia show, and they're used for the promotion for the White House Craft Collection was a big ball up and my bowl — in the arts happening events, in the events calendar. And that happened to me repeatedly, I see that bowl over and over and over in magazines and newspapers. And it was exciting every time I saw it. I felt like I did the right choice in making a bowl that was specifically designed for the White House.

MS. LAURIA: And I think we actually met before you came to speak during the symposium I organized at LACMA because, as I'm thinking back on this time period, you called LACMA to say, you know, "Gosh, that bowl has been used at the White House so much and it has been on tour, and I think it needs to be cleaned." Didn't you call up and say "I need to come to the museum and clean that bowl?" Wasn't that the circumstance?

MR. STROMSÖE: I had the State Department call me up and apologize and tell me that they've been using the

bowl so often that it needed to have professional polishing and to be brought up to the quality that it was when they received it. And we had the idea with the State Department and myself of making a second bowl. And this isn't the second. It was probably the fifth bowl. I'd sent the bowl to Pritam & Eames, in their gallery during an American Works in Metal exhibition. And they sold a couple of them. And so I had to remake the bowl several different occasions.

And so I made a copy to take to LACMA to trade out with the bowl that was there with the suggestion from the Secret Service or from the White House. And when I got there to trade it out, I was informed that I didn't own that bowl. I had no rights to trade it out, even though I had been contacted by the State Department to do so. It didn't work out. I brought a bowl down there that was in perfect condition that could have been swapped out and it could have had this perfect bowl on display, but instead, it was a 105 degree day and I had to take my little polishing machine outside and try to polish it outside in that heat. And it was a fruitless effort. And it was way too warm. And I was dripping sweat all over the piece. And after I'm trying for a half hour, 40 minutes, I gave up and just hand polished it and made it look better, but never looked as wonderful as the day it went in.

And I was a little disappointed, but I just shrugged it off. This is one of those things, you know, but I wished there was more communication with the State Department and with LACMA, so that it would have been easy transition from one to the other.

MS. LAURIA: Transaction.

MR. STROMSÖE: Transaction.

MS. LAURIA: But possibly, now that that has all transpired, you can contact the State Department. The White House collection is now in Arkansas.

MR. STROMSÖE: In the Clinton Library.

MS. LAURIA: In the Clinton Library. Just contact the Clinton Library and see if you still have the desire to do that, you can trade them out the bowl.

MR. STROMSÖE: That'd be great. And the same bowl, I entered in two different competitions and it won me best of show and best of show in two different ones, two different exhibits. One was California Design and the other one was —

MS. LAURIA: California Design, you have to specify because there were two different shows. There was the original California Design that Eudorah Moore was the director of. That was from — actually started in 1954 that ran through 1976. And Eudorah Moore was the director from 1962 through 1976. And then the name was sold to somebody — or given to someone up in Bolinas.

MR. STROMSÖE: Correct.

MS. LAURIA: So this —

MR. STROMSÖE: This is '94, California Design '94. And I did enter the California Design '79 with a repousse box.

MS. LAURIA: And this was a show in Bolinas?

MR. STROMSÖE: No, this — well, the first one was. This one was in — in '94, it was in San Francisco and in '79, I did enter the LA County Museum or LA County Design show, but I had my bowl rejected. It was first time I entered a major show and first time I was rejected. So that was my first and maybe only rejection that I had at that time and with a piece that I loved immensely and one that if I had today would probably have been accepted today, but at that time it was a little bit out there for the Design Center.

MS. LAURIA: So the — I guess the upshot of the White House Collection of American Crafts, when I did meet you, did get to know you, I realized that you worked for Porter Blanchard and I had already had a relationship with Allan Adler. And then I started to put two to two — two and two together, your connection with the Porter Blanchard, you know, atelier and Allan Adler's relationship being the son-in-law, and Rebecca Blanchard-Adler. It was remarkable how there were these connective strings between all of you.

And then having started my connection to you, I then put your work in the other show that I organized with Craft in America, because then I began to know your work. So you've, through exhibitions, have gotten to know other curators and that's why exhibitions have been very important to you. And you said you got to know Kenneth Trapp through an exhibition. Which exhibition did you form a relationship with Kenneth Trapp, who was then at the Oakland Museum of Art?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. And he came through and he saw my jewelry and he's putting together the California Gems

— Gems of California, a group of jewelry show. And he purchased my *Center Twist Collar* and my *Tapered Band* bracelet. And he gave me —

MS. LAURIA: And they are in the permanent collection of the Oakland Museum?

MR. STROMSÖE: As far as I know, they're part of that group. And he was in love with both of the pieces. And he came and met me and talked to me and gave me advice on marketing and advice on pricing. And we established a good rapport. And then, when it came time for the 50th anniversary of the Oakland Museum, he did want to purchase the White House bowl for the 50th anniversary, but it was a time when we're taking a vacation and somehow we could have passed like ships in the night. It didn't work out, but the motivation was there and the encouragement was there.

MS. LAURIA: And you said he just got your twisted necklace. And why did you tell me that last night?

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh, he appreciated it and he was writing an article for *Metalsmith* magazine. And *Metalsmith* magazine said, "Well, yeah, this is a great article, but we'd like to omit that *Center Twist Collar* from the article." And Kenneth Trapp said, "Well, if you omit that from the article, you can just omit the whole article." He said, "This is one of my favorite pieces and I think if that's not in there, you know, we don't have an article." So *Metalsmith* magazine had to do — [laughs] — what had to be done. And they put it in there. And Kenneth Trapp looked at it as a piece of taffy and something and something that I'd made look so fluid and so effortlessly and so challenging. And he knew my philosophy. And he realized that it was beyond most metalsmiths' capabilities and he felt like I was putting something out there that's challenging other metalsmiths to maybe step it up and try something like that. He did — that was — it was a very positive report, a very positive response that he had to that piece. And I was very, very thankful for his firm conviction and his dedication to what he thought was right.

MS. LAURIA: And *Metalsmith* wanted to omit it because of space issues or they just didn't like it or —

MR. STROMSÖE: Space issues. They decided they wanted to make their article a little bit smaller. They had quite a few photos in that article. And in his mind, it's one of his favorites. And in his mind, that's something that should not be eliminated. It was something that was traditional metalsmithing taken to a different level and past what other metalsmiths had done with their collars. And when you see the collars that Ronald Hayes Pearson has done, and that it felt really nice to be put in that category of a special silver collar. Yeah, don't see — it's really nice to have a curator stand up for you like that.

MS. LAURIA: And so the Craft in America exhibition *Expanding Traditions* that your piece *Santa Rosa* teapot was in —

MR. STROMSÖE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: — that ran from — that was a touring — national touring exhibition from 2007 to 2009. Have you had any other pieces in exhibitions since 2009? I mean, now we're in 2012. Anything — any other exhibitions you've been in since that time?

MR. STROMSÖE: I don't think we've had anything going on lately. We've been exhibiting, you know, local — we exhibited in our local San Luis Obispo Museum of Art craft show, this time last year. And we won best of show for another teapot, for a *Mardi Gras* teapot and got best of show. And then we're just in a local competition of fine arts No Craft Involved, this last month. It's a phantom show. It's a popup show with over 500 entries, but we won first prize for a repousse face and bowl that you can look — peer into and take it from being a three-dimensional piece, maybe a four-dimensional piece. Not only could you look at it from all around, but you can also look on the inside and see the inside. You could also see the inside reflecting the face from the inside, and it created a male face, maybe a male Mayan face. So the outside was Ethiopian lady and the inside was a Mayan sun god. And it was illusions.

And it was — I created it to make people look a little bit longer at a piece of art. I noticed that the average running time that people look at art is one to two seconds. And I wanted to really make somebody have to study something and figure out what was going on. And most people couldn't really figure out how was done and it created something that a lot of people photographed, a lot of people stared at. And that's my only consideration was making something that would make people look at for five or 10 seconds or 15. I just wanted to do something that would draw people into it and make them wonder how is this happening and what's happening here? But they had to be seduced enough to actually walk around and peer inside. When you have an exhibition of 400 pieces, it's hard to make people slowdown and look at each piece for 10 or 20 seconds.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that's interesting because I just saw the piece at the Studios on the Park.

MR. STROMSÖE: At [our] studio, just —

MS. LAURIA: And of course, my mind doesn't work that way, how are things done I don't really care. I'm more interested in, you know, the visual experience. And I enjoyed looking at the piece very much. I didn't — I wasn't thinking of, you know, the process of it. And I didn't even notice, to be honest with you, that the ethnicities were different, nor that the gender was different. I just noticed that there were two polar opposites, you know, that the scale was different of the faces. And that they were staring at each other, you know. I felt the polarity, something — I felt I was getting, you know, negative and positive. That it was different — the scale — I felt there was a big contrast of differences and I didn't know what they were. That was what was intriguing. I didn't realize it was all about the genders were opposite and that the ethnicities were not opposite, but different. So — but the challenge that you set up for yourself to have people engaged with your artwork on a longer timeframe is exactly what museums are encountering.

In fact, I attended a seminar that the Getty gave and the exact phrasing that you just said was told to us as curators — that through studies, they have found that the public, the visitor, the average visitor to a museum will only spend between two to three seconds on any given artwork, and that the challenge of a curator, either through didactic text or through the way our work is installed, was to make that visitor stay longer at any given artwork and how are we going to do that. But they never said it was the challenge of the artist to make the visitor stay longer at the artwork. So I kind of like that, to put the responsibility on the artist, not the curator.

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Because, you know, when you think about it, if the onus is on the curator, we have to think about how are we installing the work? How are we making it more challenging to the viewer? What are we writing about the work that maybe the viewer will spend a little longer with it? You know, maybe there's something that they read about that makes them more interested to stay longer. But if the artist is doing that already, maybe it doesn't need any text. But even so, you know, if I were to write a text, if you had just told me what you told me and I wrote about that, maybe that'll even make the person staring at the piece stand — you know, go back and look at it even longer. So you're doing a good job if you do that. [Laughs.]

MR. STROMSÖE: Thanks. I try to create things on the surface that would create interest. And most people weren't — aren't very alert. They don't notice little subtle things. The eyes on the woman were just a slit open, as somebody waking up from a dream, somebody — maybe having an orgasm, maybe, you know, there's many different things that could be read into just the eyes and then the way the mouth was. And the shape of the head, I made it so there's a sculpture approaching that from one direction and another direction you're kind of wondering why — what happened to this part.

And then when you looked inside to see a reflection of a male image that had his eyes totally looking differently and more like a Mayan sun god or something with the flutes going around the hat, the woman's hat, all of a sudden became rays coming up projecting from the inside man. I was happy, but I was baffled that people — you know — in watching people, whenever I gave them suggestion to look inside, then all of a sudden, people looked to the piece for, you know, several minutes, you know, five minutes. And that's what I was hoping. But — and then, this world — I watch people in galleries and I watch them in museums, and people are so quick.

We went to Boston Museum of Fine Arts — oh, no, the Contemporary Museum in Boston, and the exhibit there was mainly photographs with subtle differences. And I noticed that the average person walked into the room and they lasted about two or three seconds in a room of 100 photographs. They didn't look at any particular — they just glanced at the whole thing and dismissed it, went to another room, dismissed it, went to another area and dismissed it. There was no engagement. And the artist had tried to show subtleties in his portraits. But I didn't see anybody connecting and it made me feel a challenge.

You know, this is the first time I entered in a fine arts exhibition that was a competition. Crafts were not allowed in those. I could see some crafts in there. Most of the time, I don't consider what I do a craft but more a sculpture. But in keeping with the attitude of the show, I decided to make some brand new sculptures for new directions and give it a shot. But I didn't — if I had more time, I probably would have done it a little bit different. But what it does is, you know, opens up the door for me to go and explore that form and that idea some more. And I like the idea of making people look at the three-dimensional qualities and then to look inside and then to look inside at the reflection. And I'm not sure how many dimensions they're actually looking at. It's —

MS. LAURIA: Do you have an image that we might submit with — so people reading the interview could look at the piece, too, because, I mean, I think it's very hard to —

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: — understand unless you can see —

MR. STROMSÖE: We can take it to a photographer and see if they can isolate —

MS. LAURIA: It's going to be difficult to photograph, too.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: But anyway, they could see something, so they can look at the piece while you're talking about it, because I think it is an interesting — is it going to be one of those — because it's so illusionistic, it's going to be tough to photograph, but I think you'll get a sense of what you were trying to do. But trying to do this in repousse, which means that you're working from the back of the piece, the repousse technique is —

MR. STROMSÖE: Both directions.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, it's both directions. Repousse is — I thought repoussé is —

MR. STROMSÖE: Embossing would be from the back, but if you're going back and forth and back and forth and back and forth, it's repoussé. You're knocking the metal and then you're knocking it back the other way, then you're knocking it back, then you're knocking —

MS. LAURIA: Okay, so your hammer work is from the back and from the front.

MR. STROMSÖE: Correct.

MS. LAURIA: So chasing is from just the front.

MR. STROMSÖE: Usually, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: You can chase up on the inside, but it's usually just one direction. And — but —

MS. LAURIA: But so you have to — when you're working this out, are you doing this on paper first to get the idea of how to do it? I mean, how did you work out the illusion of the face deep in this bowl?

MR. STROMSÖE: I had tried it in the past, but never finished a piece with that. So it's one of those techniques that I've been waiting to use. And I'll probably — I like to get lost in a direction for a matter of months and sometimes a year, but I don't have the time, the luxury, and so this is my quick stab. With this piece, I'd only worked on it for a couple of weeks and I'd only worked on it for 15-20 minutes a day. I'd only allowed myself the luxury of, at the end of day, at 7:30 at night, I'd go in there, and I'd do 15 or 20 minutes of work. And so I didn't feel like I was wasting my daytime, real production, making my hollowware and my vessels. I felt like I was taking a chance with this and I wanted to see the response.

And after doing it and liking the fact that you're making people perceive something in a different way than they've ever perceived it in the past, and now, the ideas are flowing how to elaborate on it for the next time and how to really make it pop. And I talk about, but I'd rather just show people on the future what I'm doing.

MS. LAURIA: So what would you, Randy, consider to be your masterwork at this young tender age — still being in your 50s, but having worked really for 40 years?

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh, I'm pretty proud of some of the tea sets I made in the past and some of the trophies and awards, some of the chalices. I'm happy if I produce something that I feel like I've made well-balanced and a perfectly constructed piece. I take great pride in that. But I still — I'm looking towards the future. I believe my best work's to come, I believe that I'm going to get better and better as time goes on. I know I won't be as strong, but my ideas, my concept, and my balance, and my subtleties — I think the best work's to come. And I know my biggest — my highlights of my life have been from '90 to 2000. I love the work I did for that 10-year period, where I felt very strong about and I — the shows I did and the response and the awards I got at that point were wonderful and I was on cloud nine. I felt like a million bucks.

Now, I've been working on property and building houses, building workshop, accumulating tools, building the cottage, setting up at vineyard, and keeping my work going. I've been making flatware sets for customers. And I was never the flatware guy. But I'm making up sets and I'm having people come to me from New York and from other parts of the country and the world and buy my flatware because they had me send samples to them. And so when they see the samples and compare them to the other craftsmen's samples, and we've been charging sometimes two or three times the price of another craftsman's work, and we're getting as many orders as we really care to take on, I've spent — I spent one or two years just doing nothing but flatware pieces. And when it's all said and done, you get one picture — you usually photograph, you know, five or six of the pieces and you pack up 100 in some pieces and send them out. You never see it again. And it's almost like it didn't happen. You had the cash flow and you had the money to pay the bills, but you feel like you redid yourself over and over and over. And —

MS. LAURIA: Because — you mean because you have to make multiples. You have to make —

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, 12 or 14 —

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MR. STROMSÖE: — they all look alike and then —

MS. LAURIA: Right, it's like production ware.

MR. STROMSÖE: It's production. It feels —

MS. LAURIA: But you make every one of them by hand. You make, like, a set of eight plate settings, but they're all, every fork, every knife, every spoon is all done by hand. You don't use any machinery.

MR. STROMSÖE: I use my polishing lathe.

MS. LAURIA: Really? Because even — I went to Allan Adler's work studio, which used to be Porter Blanchard's, in Pacoima. We had a decorative arts event when I was at LACMA and we took some of our council members. And a Hungarian man of which we spoke —

MR. STROMSÖE: Jim, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: — he showed us how he made a spoon. So the first thing he did was he showed us the pattern, the template, you know, he had — and the flat silver had already been cut out. And he took that flat spoon and he stuck it in a machine that I think — I may have the sequence wrong, but at any point, at some point, he used a machine that either flattened the spoon or made the spoon round —

MR. STROMSÖE: He trued up the bowl of it —

MS. LAURIA: Yeah, trued up the bowl.

MR. STROMSÖE: But he — most likely, he already pre-sunk that shape and pre-shaped it, and he just used the drop hammer to —

MS. LAURIA: That was a drop hammer.

MR. STROMSÖE: — come down like a guillotine and just true it up. So — whereas you're making the bowl and the spoon, everything's there, and you have the shape of the spoon bowl, but by striking it with that piece of steel and those dies, they're all hand done. And originally, when Allan set up his shop, each one of those steel forms would have to be ground out by hand and then hand filed and got perfect. And then you make up a led mold to go on the bottom, and use — put in your drop hammer, which is like a guillotine. And it's 100 pounds. It comes straight down four feet or three feet and just strikes it with enough power to take it from looking homemade to handmade. Makes it — just refines it, just enough to put it over the top where it looks just perfect.

And I use a drop hammer also. And the drop hammer is not really a machine. Around the late 1800s and the 1900s. It's an old — my drop hammer is about 150 years old. And —

MS. LAURIA: Does it take off the hammer marks?

MR. STROMSÖE: No.

MS. LAURIA: No, okay, so you can still have the hand hammer marks. What it's doing is it's just making that bowl form perfect, refined looking.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, it's just you're trueing it up a little bit and making it — pushing over the top where it looks more professional.

MS. LAURIA: Since we're on that subject of Allan Adler, Porter Blanchard, Randy Stromsöe, could you just for clarity's sake tell us how does someone who works in an atelier setting — you're all silversmiths, you're all trained, the bloodline, let's say, is flowing back to Porter Blanchard. And if it's stamped Porter Blanchard, but then it might have somebody else's initials on it, in your case it will have R.S. Can you explain to somebody like myself who might purchase a piece on and turn it over and it might be stamped Porter Blanchard R.S., what does that mean?

MR. STROMSÖE: It usually means you did 90 percent of the work —

MS. LAURIA: Say that again. It usually means that if it's stamped R.S. that that person R.S. did 90 percent of the

work. But if it's Porter Blanchard, it is a Porter Blanchard design where R.S. did the work.

MR. STROMSÖE: Was the craftsman. And a lot of times, in a shop, we have three or four people working an individual piece. There's no additional stamp. Nobody can take credit for it. It's just several people working together on a design. With Porter, I had to do the R.S. because I had a brother that was a silversmith also. He was Lewis Wise's apprentice. And he was Craig Stromsöe. So I couldn't just put an S. on there because then people wouldn't know if it was Craig or Randy. So I had to put the R.S. Most craftsmen only put on a single letter.

So you can find — I've seen work come out. I've some spoons come up that I did with Lewis, back when he was showing me some flatware that had the R.S. on them, and some have recently come up on eBay. And it was pretty exciting to see something I did 20-some years ago and have it look nice and feel proud of it. And that's what I'm wondering now. I'm wondering when I see my work, while I've been looking at it, you know, like, "Wow, that's a good job." Or I'd be looking at it and go, "Not as good as I thought it was," or, you know, I don't know. There's thousands and thousands of pieces out there because we worked — we were very productive in our work and we didn't really know about failure. And we didn't know about slowing down and we were confident. And we worked very efficiently and very quickly. And part of it's working next to Porter and Lewis and how efficient they were.

MS. LAURIA: So — but if Lewis and Allan Adler worked with Porter — in the beginning, they did, didn't they?

MR. STROMSÖE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: And something — well, they're in the workshop and it came out of the workshop Porter Blanchard, even if they worked on it, it still would have said Porter Blanchard and it would not have had an A.

MR. STROMSÖE: It would have — it might have had an A. and would have had a W. Lewis had a W with a circle around it that he put on a lot of pieces.

MS. LAURIA: Even if it said Porter Blanchard.

MR. STROMSÖE: Even if it said Porter Blanchard.

MS. LAURIA: And if Allan had worked on it, he would have put an A. on it?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, most likely. And as we talked about before, so many of Allan's and Porter's and Lewis' designs kind of overlapped. Sometimes, they did designs that were almost identical to each other and they both took credit for the design and they both took credit for the piece. If it had Allan Adler on it and had a Porter Blanchard on it, individuals did it. And I'm curious myself why they overlapped so much. A lot of times, when you're working with friends and stuff, you get inspired by what they're doing, but some of the really cutting edge and really modernist, you know, things they did, they both took credit for. And I wished they're around today for me to ask them, you know, like who was the mastermind in this direction. And —

MS. LAURIA: Well, there certainly were pieces, though, that only got identified with each of them. For instance, Porter Blanchard *Punch Bowl*, everybody knows it's a Porter Blanchard Punch Bowl. Nobody's ever associated with anybody else. And then there's the Allan Adler *Teardrop* Coffee — I think it's coffee service or tea service. In any way, it's called the *Teardrop* —

MR. STROMSÖE: Right, yes.

MS. LAURIA: — and nobody's ever said it was anybody else's —

MR. STROMSÖE: The very Danish looking —

MS. LAURIA: The very Danish looking and he — Allan Adler always said that his greatest influence or who he was mostly inspired by was George Nelson. He found that he loved George Nelson designs.

MR. STROMSÖE: Georg Jensen?

MS. LAURIA: I'm sorry, it's not George Nelson, Georg Jensen. So he was very enamored of Georg Jensen designs.

MR. STROMSÖE: I was — Georg Jensen's designs were a turning point when I first saw those. And I made very contemporary Scandinavian-looking designs myself because of that. And Porter was mainly influenced, I think, by Arthur Stone. And he just loved —

MS. LAURIA: English.

MR. STROMSÖE: English. English and American and his father worked in his shop. And when it even came down

to being photographed, Arthur Stone always had a photograph of him wearing a Irish smock — smock —

MS. LAURIA: Smock.

MR. STROMSÖE: And Porter has the same sort of —

MS. LAURIA: Look.

MR. STROMSÖE: — photographs of him wearing smocks like that in the profile, with a hammer. So you can tell there's — you know — who their heroes were and who they really respected. And —

MS. LAURIA: So as a silversmith, somebody that you feel aligned with or that you feel inspired by, you would say was Georg Jensen. Is there anybody else historically or contemporary that you feel you are highly influenced — or respect their work?

MR. STROMSÖE: Jensen had so many different designers that worked for him and each one was a master and a genius. You know, Henning Koppel would be one of my first, you know, picks. I was really inspired by John Prip, whose daughter, Janet Prip, with her pewter vases, face vases, and stuff, to me, that was just so much fun, you know. And I've loved to do variations on that theme. But I want to give people respect. I don't want to get too close to what they're doing, even though I can look at them and love them. And I do faces all the time. I love doing them. I love drawing faces. I love making them, hammering out faces. And that's something Porter never did. And Porter's sculptural pieces weren't as strong as his hollowware pieces.

MS. LAURIA: He did do some torsos. I think LACMA has a couple of his torsos in their collection.

MR. STROMSÖE: They were not as strong as forms, though. Yeah, he needed to have a model there. He — yeah — Porter did pewter tables. Porter liked to push the envelope. He did funny — he even — as he was making up —

MS. LAURIA: Tables, what kind — coffee tables?

MR. STROMSÖE: Coffee tables.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: And he did very streamlined contemporary coffee tables. And when I first went to his shop and saw the pieces he's working on, his silver — refined high-end silver pieces were just mind blowing, staggering. Yeah, some of the first pieces I saw were tall 18 inch, 20 inch candlesticks with the S-curved — three S-curved legs at the base. And the transition and the way he executed them was flawless and just remarkable, something like you'd see maybe hundreds of years prior, but then a more contemporary sensibility of a little bit less labor, streamlining things a bit. Porter believed in trying to make things a little bit quicker and streamlining a lot of things.

He had a very good sense of balance and very good sense of proportions. And he also — we would be at the workshop, making up some solder. And we mix our own alloys for solder and we had a tool that we poured the melted material into, then we poured across the steel table and we'd get strips of solder that we made our own — solder. And in doing so, Porter dripped some stuff on the steel table and then he got excited. And then he went and melted down a bunch of pewter and got ladles and he spent days upon days just pouring things on to tables and looking for these special effects. And he was like — he's like a kid in his 80s.

MS. LAURIA: Experimenting.

MR. STROMSÖE: Experimenting and having so much fun and being excited by what he was pulling off. And then he would be able to sell the pieces. He had the reputation, in his 80s, that everything sold. And we had people coming from everywhere. So he had that advantage of — I guess at a certain point in life, you can almost do no wrong.

And what it worked out for was myself because I could be assigned a project and make everything from the very beginning to the end. And as an apprentice, it's never going to be master's quality. It'll be maybe good, but it's not going to be perfect. But because of his reputation, customers loved it. And sometimes, you know, I made a lot of fans and I sold a lot of my first pieces because of his name, the reputation. I hate to think, if I was out my own and doing the craft shows with the first pieces I produced for Porter, I hate to think that they probably wouldn't have sold.

MS. LAURIA: And you said he sometimes got confused and called you a master craftsman —

MR. STROMSÖE: Andy.

MS. LAURIA: — Andy Nordhagen.

MR. STROMSÖE: Nordhagen.

MS. LAURIA: Could you tell us that story because I know that your wife, Lisa, bought a tray off of eBay that was Andy Nordhagen, who, Lisa told me, started out his life as an indentured servant.

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, the Blanchard family also started off their existence in America as indentured servants, when they had to trade their — a period of their life, 10 or 20 years of their life. And when they came from England to Canada, they had to work and pay off their —

MS. LAURIA: Their passage on the ship.

MR. STROMSÖE: And so at one point, Porter hired the best craftsmen he could find from all over the world. He knew that the only way to get to be a better silversmith was to hire the best because at that point there was no schools that he could learn from. And so he'd hire the best craftsmen. He hired Andy Nordhagen. And Andy, early into his career with Porter, got the bright idea of striking up silver dollars and counterfeiting silver dollars and exchanging them. And in doing so, he did a perfect job with the dollars, but each dollar had over, you know, $1.20 in silver value. So he's losing money on every transition that he made. And to make a long story short, he was caught with a bag of these coins on a ferry in the San Francisco area, and he was arrested.

And when it came to court appearance, Porter went and stuck up for him. And he was put under, like house arrest to be — work five days a week, you know, 40 hours a week for Porter as a silversmith and he's on probation. But they did not see him a hardened criminal or a criminal element because he was naïve. He was losing money on everything, actually stimulating the economy. So he's doing a good deed. But you know, at that point, Porter has guaranteed that he had this great hammer man.

And Andy was a great tea-set maker. He was a great hand-raiser, flutter, chaser, file carver, hand on spout maker.

MS. LAURIA: Excuse me, but where did Andy get the silver?

MR. STROMSÖE: Good question. Probably from Porter.

MS. LAURIA: He poised — [laughs].

MR. STROMSÖE: Probably from their scrap pile. I don't know. Yeah, usually — you know — we had a lot of silver around. When I started with Porter, gold was $35 an ounce and silver was $2.35 and nobody really worried about the scraps too much. It was like — but we did — yeah — we put traps in the sinks and we buried 55-gallon drums and we let all the water from the sink run through these traps into these drums. And every 10 years or so we dig up the drums and we sent them to the refineries. And we'd get enough for everybody to take a nice vacation. So it was a little extra bonus.

MS. LAURIA: Great, so Andy then worked for Porter, for —

MR. STROMSÖE: As his right hand man for many years, taking on all the difficult jobs. And then, when I was working for Porter — with Porter. I was hired when Porter was 83 or 84, but — 85 or 86, maybe 87 or 88 when he's getting a little bit —

MS. LAURIA: Forgetful?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, it's because of the cancer. You could see him losing body weight. And he was still sharp as a tack when it came to talking about the past. The stories he'd tell and all that information he had about his life and about his vaudeville days and his jazz days. He's a jazz musician, a singer, a dancer. He had this whole different life that not too many people know about. But Porter would think I was Andy and we'd get a commission for a coffee set or something that was way beyond my capabilities. And — or a tray or a trophy or awards or tankards — tankards with big wonderful hand-hammered handles, hand-shaped handles. He'd delegate the responsibility to me and he'd be — usually, he'd go, "Andy, can you do this?"

But I find that I sometimes called people by the wrong names, sometimes. My son and my brother, sometimes I — so, but I was Andy, and he would give me responsibilities that he would never give a young craftsman in the shop. But I jumped at the opportunities and I relished them and I executed them satisfactory. And I had praise from the customers. And everything worked out wonderful.

MS. LAURIA: What happened to Andy? How long did he work there?

MR. STROMSÖE: I don't know when Andy left there. He wasn't there when I was there.

MS. LAURIA: No stories about Andy going on to becoming a man on his own as a silversmith or maybe a better counterfeiter? [They laugh.]

MR. STROMSÖE: No, I never heard any more stories about Andy. I did meet a couple of the other silversmiths that were in their 80s after they worked for Porter and I did go at their homes. I did borrow tools from them. And we didn't talk too much. They were getting elderly at that time. And they had no interest in working. So did lend me tools and we did talk about metalsmithing a little bit.

MS. LAURIA: How many metalsmiths do you think went through Porter's shop? I mean, I'm asking you, Randy, because you're probably the only surviving metalsmith now, except for Lewis Wise's sons, I guess.

MR. STROMSÖE: Who no longer make silver, but they have the capability of being silversmiths. But they're busy making airplanes and making more sophisticated —

MS. LAURIA: But they didn't work there as long, so they wouldn't know the history.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah and I don't think anybody else is as curious. Porter was very — he was a hard worker and diligent worker. And he pushed people and made some of his workers not really enjoy being around him. But when I met him, I treated him like a grandfather and I was really curious about his past and I asked him many questions. And I was the first person he really opened up to and told all these intimate stories to that were just hilarious.

I have, you know, many stories on Porter's life. As far as the other craftsmen that worked there, Porter had — probably trained over a dozen young men to be silversmiths. He even, once in a while, would put advertisements in the paper looking for apprentices. And he'd work with people for a while. And we had a couple of people come in that he had to hire and let go because just didn't have it.

MS. LAURIA: Did he hire any of these workers that came out of any of the schools, the local schools from the San Fernando Valley or any — did any of the schools train silversmiths at the time?

MR. STROMSÖE: There was Fred Lorenzen at CSUN.

MS. LAURIA: That's California State University at Northridge.

MR. STROMSÖE: But they were — he told people about Porter, but I don't think anybody ever came out of there wanting to do hollowware. I took a semester with Fred and I made nothing but hollowware. And he was a great guy to be around and great guy to talk about hollowware with and he appreciated everything and —

MS. LAURIA: What about Long Beach? Cal State Long Beach, they had metals —

MR. STROMSÖE: They're more connected with Allan.

MS. LAURIA: They were more connected with Allan Adler?

MR. STROMSÖE: They'd quite often — he would do work for them. He told me stories of students bringing in their projects and needing a little help, where he made solder something together for them or maybe silver plate a piece. So he was working as a craftsman for some of these young artists and helping them finish up their work. And once in a while, Allan would hire — he hired about — three of my student friends worked for Allan's shop. Allan didn't want to have anybody who was too good working for him. He had a certain criteria. He didn't want anybody that's going to be his competition. He didn't want to train his own competition. But he did — he did hire a few people — he did hire one of my apprentices and a couple of other guys that worked in our shop.

I even had — at a point, I had to lock him out of our shop at a certain point because he would come in there and sweet-talk my workers and then get them to come help him a little bit. And we were way too busy to lose anybody for a day or two. We didn't want that extra stress, just wanted to keep things going.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I meant the — weren't other teachers training, I mean, somebody like Al Pine at Long Beach State or maybe somebody at Fullerton. They weren't training students to become metalsmiths that you might be able to take from that pool of people?

MR. STROMSÖE: We did have one man that came from one of the well-known universities that worked for us for a half a year. And he was doing a fine job. There was in a big growth period that we had and we're really building up our workforce, but then, at one point, the finances at the Porter Blanchard Inc., we then had a hard time because a lot of the stores were being sold and purchased by other companies.

And at one point back in the '70s and '80s, the stores would pay in 12 days. We gave them 30 days to make their payment, but we got 2 percent less if they paid within 12 days. Usually, they pay like 18 days, but take 2

percent less, you know. We're happy with that. But then, after the stores were sold and Gump's being the big one, they were taking three and four months to paying us. They were taking so long in paying us that our cash flow is winding up. We'd have to buy our silver ahead of time for the projects we're going to make and we'd have to pay for the silver right when we got it. You know, it came COD. And then, we'd have to pay the wages of the employees. And then we'd get the work done and sent it out, and in the old days, within 30 days, the money would come in, and that was working fine.

We could not get over the hump of dealing with waiting three or four months to get paid. And nowadays, as an individual, I could probably live like that, you know. I could live waiting three or four months to get paid. But then, the shop running, trying to expand, is going from four or five workers to 10 or 15, it made an impossible task. And we had to once in a while lay people off for a couple of months. And that's what happened to my brother Craig. He was laid off for a couple of months and he got a job as a fireman instead. And he was already working as a lifeguard at Malibu. So he didn't really need to come back, even though he wanted to. To this day — now he's ready to retire from the Fire Department, ready to retire from the lifeguard department. And he'll have two full retirements and he would like to come and make silver again. So it may become full circle. So I'm pretty happy about that. I love to have my brother in here helping me that has my back and knows what we're doing here.

MS. LAURIA: Right, well, that's great because then he'll have retirement to fall back on.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. And then he has kids that want to learn the trade. His son, one of his sons is really curious about it. And once again, I showed you, one of the things I make the double-headed nail swords, they're forging those out. And it delights — these 8- and 10-year-olds just get so excited by that sort of stuff.

MS. LAURIA: Are there any health issues that are involved in your profession that you would caution your children to stay away from? I know hearing loss is a real problem for metalsmiths. It's a lot of hammering.

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, my son already has a hearing loss, so — matter of him turning off his hearing aids —

MS. LAURIA: That might be — might not be a disability then for him.

MR. STROMSÖE: I did have — I had an apprenticed picked out about five years ago. He was a young man that had some skills and capabilities, but he was profoundly deaf. And he went to a special school up in the Bay Area. And he came to me one Christmas with his father. And we talked for a long time. And we decided he'd be a perfect candidate for my shop and to learn the trade. And the next week, he was in a bus, going up to San Francisco to his school. And the bus had a crash and they don't have seatbelt laws on the school buses and he was thrown from the seatbelt — seat and killed. Now they do have laws on seatbelts because of him, because his parents stepped up for him right now.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, my goodness, that's so unfortunate. Well, I mean, you also said because when you get older, you'll be better, but your strength will be less.

Does — the hammer repetitive action — is it — do you need a lot of strength to — you said that Porter, he was incredible because after he would use the hammer in his right hand for two hours or whatever, then he would switch off — four or five hours — he'd switch off and use his left. And that was very unusual because usually, when you have precision, you're not ambidextrous in that precision. You're usually either right-handed precision or left-handed. So he was unusual that way.

MR. STROMSÖE: Very talented. The man could hold a 2-pound hammer in his left hand and hit perfect blows. When we're tray setting or making trays, if you hit a little bit on the side of the hammer, you make an ugly mark that takes hours to get out. So he had to do everything very precise. And Porter was a great tray maker and tray setter. And he could work either hand. And that's something that I've pushed myself to do is to work a lot with my left hand.

I want to be interchangeable to some degree, in case I get tendinitis again. Because sometimes, you get big orders and there's nobody around to help you and you have to just keep working. And sometimes the polishing part with the vibration from the polishing machine, it can be — doing a great job, when the vibrations starts happening into your shoulders and your joints, it can make you very sore. And what silversmiths have to do, what Porter did and what I do is you have to live a healthy life and you have to exercise. And you have to use weights. You have to use dumbbells and you have to have a — I have a universal gym downstairs and I have dumbbells downstairs.

MS. LAURIA: To keep your strength up — to keep your muscle strength.

MR. STROMSÖE: You need to keep everything tight and everything in good shape. Porter was also a health fanatic. Porter was into eating raw foods and carrot juice and various things.

MS. LAURIA: Sounds like Jack LaLanne actually.

MR. STROMSÖE: He was. He was into exercising. He would make his workers show up an hour early and he'd take them all out on the run and stuff. And when we're with him — he had a swimming pool — we did a lot of swimming. And both my employer — both Lewis Wise and Porter Blanchard, gave me the freedom to go surf and do things like that. But from Porter's location, the ocean is so far away, that once I met Porter and saw his age and what he's capable of doing, I decided that I was going to forsake everything until he passed away. I was going to be his right hand man until the bitter end. And the bitter end did come.

I was living at his house. I was his caretaker or taking care of his house. I even lived at his house with him in it while he was sick, and I kind of kept things going. I was his —

MS. LAURIA: What kind of cancer did he have?

MR. STROMSÖE: Stomach.

MS. LAURIA: Stomach.

MR. STROMSÖE: And he had part of his stomach removed in '87 and stuff. He did recover for a while. But then it came back. But — oh, I was the one — I was in charge of payroll. I was in charge of correspondence. And I was in charge of keeping the books. And I was in charge of communicating with the buyers. So it was at that point that I really became close with the silver buyer from Gump's, Mr. Montalewski, and I got really close with the silver buyer from Cartier, William Smith. And we also did work for Gary's and Foster's and Lynn Westward.

Foster's turned into family friends after that, the store — the owner of the store's daughters became my personal friends. And their husbands became my friends. And one of the husbands — one of the — well, one of the brother-in-laws of the husband of one of the sisters became a talent agent or he owned a talent agency in LA and he became a very successful talent agent. He brought many celebrities up to this area. And he would introduce them to us, bring the celebrities into our studios, and gave me opportunity to sell to celebrities. And plus, he'd have these big parties and he invited Lisa and I and we'd be the young folks there with the producers and directors and — and it was a great opportunity and great time where everybody kind of — they understood I was an artist and I didn't — they were very generous with me, generous with their — and we also did his interior of his house.

We — I worked on this man's house for probably eight months out of one year, where I did lamps. I did fixtures, door knobs, hinges, showers, everything — everything I could do to make it a hand-made, whimsical, cool house that fit what he was trying to achieve. And he had a huge kitchen and dining area that could seat a couple of dozen people if he wanted to.

MS. LAURIA: And where is the house?

MR. STROMSÖE: It is in Cambria.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, okay, so do you have — did you photograph it, document the house, all your details?

MR. STROMSÖE: No. No.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you can.

MR. STROMSÖE: I was young and — I might still have the opportunity, but I didn't think too much about it in those days. I didn't document too much. Photographing silver was so difficult back before digital cameras. It was so expensive. And every time we'd make a silver piece and we took it to have a photograph, it was $1,000 at least. And so we didn't have that figured into our price break too often. And we very seldom photographed anything. And when we did photograph something, we had to make sure it was a perfect photograph. And we'd sit there with the photographers and we'd look through the viewfinders and we adjust everything. We'd adjust —

MS. LAURIA: It's because you're talking about the reflection on the silver.

MR. STROMSÖE: And yeah, to sculpt the piece — you put too much light on it, the piece —

MS. LAURIA: Would go flat.

MR. STROMSÖE: — goes flat. You have to create three-dimension; you had to be a sculptor with light. And we learned that technique while dealing with Frank Bez. And now, we deal with his son, Ron Bez, who does our digital photography. And we have a great rapport with him. And most of our work's done through trade. We just keep making more and more gifts for his wife and more gifts for his home. And he —

MS. LAURIA: That's Bez, B-E-Z?

MR. STROMSÖE: B-E-Z.

MS. LAURIA: And does he live in this area, here in Cambria?

MR. STROMSÖE: He lives in Paso Robles.

MS. LAURIA: Paso Robles, okay, good. Well, I know, because now digital, you can Photoshop out the photographer's reflection in the silver, which was always, you know — you have to — otherwise, you have to create — there's a whole black curtain because otherwise you see the photographer in there.

MR. STROMSÖE: Or white sheet in front.

MS. LAURIA: Right, right.

MR. STROMSÖE: And you have to introduce a little bit of something some place, so you can pick up the edge and the rims, and you have to put in a little bit of black and a little bit of color to help shape it. It was very tricky. But now, you can photo out the irregularity or the reflections and you can even take —

MS. LAURIA: And put in a shadow.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, you can take a picture of three things clustered together and then remove the reflection off of each piece.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, right, yeah.

MR. STROMSÖE: And so many times, when I make pieces nowadays, I'm dealing with reflections and I make things that are subtle to some people, but I make things in such a way that they capture the world around them. And in a sterile environment, the designs look nice. But they look much better in a home setting, where you put them in there and you catch what's happening around the home. And in my mind, I'm designing for placement in a home or exhibition area, not a sterile environment. I like to see the reflections. And I get things — ripples and chase flutes and things that will pick up things in different ways.

And to me, it seems like I'm the only one picking up on that. I'm doing all this work and all these mind thoughts and I don't notice other people perceiving what I'm perceiving. So it's a little bit frustrating of a challenge not to have the world tuned into what I'm trying to accomplish. And I'm not using patinas. I'm going from bright finishes and in a lot of cases, just to pick up that reflection.

When you see the giant bean in Chicago, you know, people love that. And that's just one shinny pieces, picking up a lot of surface rounding reflections, and —

MS. LAURIA: A lot of fun to walk underneath and stare at yourself.

MR. STROMSÖE: I haven't been there yet.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, you got to do it. It is a lot of fun.

MR. STROMSÖE: I have to be there. But yeah, is the same sort of mentality I have with what I'm doing and said [ph] people —

MS. LAURIA: But it's experiential, that's why people love it. It's not —

MR. STROMSÖE: You can walk right through it.

MS. LAURIA: — just the fact that it's shiny. It's the fact that you walk underneath that and you see yourself.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, but everything, like the things I make, too, have — some have balls, reflected balls in — they may be reflecting the stuff inside. It may be make an illusion. Most — some of the things I've been doing recently, people don't have any clue to how they're constructed or what it is. When they're look at it, they're seeing reflections that confuse them, and then they wonder, you know, is that something that's coming out? Is that something — you know — placed in? What am I seeing here? And that's what I'm trying — I'm trying to get people to look things a little bit closer.

And the problem is, when I have museum shows and things, I would love to have a little bit of color introduced. But at last show I had at San Luis Obispo Museum of Art, I wanted to introduce little elements that would catch a reflection. And I didn't want the light to shine straight down on the piece, because I didn't want it to wash out the

piece. I had certain concepts of how I wanted it lit and how I wanted it displayed, and how I wanted them grouped. And none of that was fulfilled. I discussed it with the curator and discussed it with everybody. I told them exactly what I was after, and they went and did it their own way. And I walked into the show and I looked at it, and I thought, "Nonsense, I'm done with this."

You know, I was just like, "You guy didn't get anything. You didn't pick up on anything I said. Everything and the spot right on it and had nothing around it to reflect and play off it".

MS. LAURIA: Well, we've spoken about some of the important exhibitions that your work has been featured in. Let's talk about some of the important commissions you've received over the course of the, you know, 30 to 35 years you've been working as a silversmith, and why were they important and what have they meant to your career?

MR. STROMSÖE: I felt there's been lot of different important commissions, some through local and some through national people. One exciting commission or opportunity was through Colonial Williamsburg, who needed an additional silversmith to do presidential gifts for the Reagan and Bush administration, and back in the '80s. I think it was '82, '83, and '84. And they took — brought us back to Williamsburg after we saw an ad in *Metalsmith* magazine asking for a silversmith that can raise and make tea sets and coffee sets and do all those specific projects.

So we contacted them and they liked what our résumé said. And I flew out there and met with them and looked at their studio and their workshop. And we put together a plan. And our plan was to go back there for three months and make gifts for the Reagan administration to give out to different dignitaries. And they usually go to — each country they go to, to the kings and queens or the prime ministers or presidents, will give a couple of gifts.

So when I went back there, they gave me an opportunity to go through their collection at the Smithsonian of the colonial tankards. I've always been a big fan of tankards. The reason I'm a fan of tankards is I love the handles. The handles are usually hand hammered straps that are enclosed in both sides, hollow formed, and they have a great fat to delicate to wide again proportion in shape.

And for a craftsman, it's a real challenge to make them perfect and to make those. So the idea of reproducing tankards really appealed to me. It wasn't our only job. We had several other projects to work on, but the tankards were my first interest. And I picked the Samuel Casey tankard, as I said before, and I made a dozen of them for the White House at that particular time. But then as years went on, they kept coming back to me in our own Harmony studio to make more. And it felt wonderful to be making something on the Central Coast of California and having it go to dignitaries across the world, seeing King Olav in Norway get them and seeing King Hassan of Egypt and — well, to see the different dignitaries. And we were getting good report from them.

And then, everything that Williamsburg does is a class act. As far as the tankards, I worked with the bookbinders and they made boxes. They're made exactly to fit the tankards. I worked with Lyndon Johnson's personal engraver to engrave the presidential seal on the heel of the handles. And we worked with the printers there to print up special cards explaining everything. So the whole package was just a class piece. And that was a real fun experience.

MS. LAURIA: And how many of the tankards did you make?

MR. STROMSÖE: I think in total, it was about 36 of them.

MS. LAURIA: Wow, how long did that take?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, I did 12 and 12 and 12. So I did 12 the first time I was there and I did those in a couple of months. And I took them back to my own studio. You know, they probably take me a few months to make 12.

MS. LAURIA: And were you doing a residency at the Williamsburg or were you working out in the open so people could watch you demonstrate?

MR. STROMSÖE: The only backup shop that Williamsburg had at that time was a silversmith shop. So they had a backup shop with a high security fence and high security system in the forest in a beautiful setting, and that we had the run of. I had my own pass. I could work there night and day. I could work there on weekends. And I did. I put in more hours there than anybody's put in in a week ever. I got the highest paycheck what was ever distributed in Williamsburg at that time.

But what happened that really thrown me was upon receiving the first dozen that I did for President Reagan, Vice President George Bush, Sr., number 41, he appreciated them so much that he had a message sent back to me, and his message was that he loved the pieces and he wanted me to make all the presidential gifts from

thereon out. And they wanted me to start my own department at Williamsburg. So then the Williamsburg Foundation came to me and asked me to start my own department and to feature — make presidential gifts through that department, and to be a master silversmith, but also have my own pewter and silver department where made these gifts.

In doing so, I realized that I had a little bit of clout. And my friend there, George Wilson, who helped me — he was a violin maker at Williamsburg — he helped me with some of the finishing process on the tankards. But he gave me advice that if I could — if I had my own business in California and it was existing successful business to not come back and live in Virginia and don't come back to Colonial Williamsburg. His suggestion was that they only paid you enough to keep you there.

So he kind of encouraged me to go out my own. And I told you yesterday that when it came to raises from the pay scale and for my pay to start my own department — which they gave me a budget of $300,000 to buy tools and setting things up, and they're going to build a studio for me — they told me that they couldn't give me a raise for, you know, eight months, nine months later because they'd given me a raise the first week I was there.

They brought me up to the top of their pay scale. And they only gave raises once a year. And for me to stay there and start a whole new department and do all that stuff just hoping that I was going to get a raise, it didn't seem right.

I figured that if they like my work, they'd come to me back in California. And they told me that I can — wouldn't have my cake — I couldn't have my cake and eat it, too, that if I want to do those projects, I had to stay there. But the next year, they contacted me and they had me make the tankards again. And the following year, they had me make the tankards again also. And it was a big boost for somebody from a small town in California to be making presidential gifts that were traveling the world. That was a great, great opportunity.

MS. LAURIA: And what about the Vatican? You said you're in the Vatican collection. What of your pieces are in the Vatican?

MR. STROMSÖE: When the pope came to California, LA, we were contacted by the LA diocese and the Orange County diocese to make a chalice for the papal mass. And they contacted us probably a year and a half early. And they gave us a down payment and we did drawings for them. And in doing so, we went back and forth. And then, like, four months before the pope was to come, they decided they needed ciborium — ciboria, the wafer bowls and they needed some covered dishes, some flagons, and various objects. And they increased the order to include all the above. And then they — at the last moment they added on a special ciboria for a gift for the pope to be given by Bobby Vinton of — *Roses are Red* — Bobby Vinton, "The Polish Prince." He was the man to hand it to him. So —

MS. LAURIA: Singer Bobby Vinton.

MR. STROMSÖE: The singer, entertainer Bobby Vinton. He was, you know —

MS. LAURIA: Roses are red, violets are blue.

MR. STROMSÖE: That guy. And so we made a special ciboria. It was a special bowl that was covered in a special design, and that was the piece that they gave to the pope and was taken back to the Vatican.

MS. LAURIA: And was — that was at a ceremony at Saint Vibiana's down in Los Angeles, the cathedral.

MR. STROMSÖE: It was — we have been at Dodger Stadium and the Coliseum.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, my goodness.

MR. STROMSÖE: And so there're big, big opportunities. And probably one of the highlights of my life was to be there. They had a great entertainment, great entertainers. The entertainers that were popular at that time were all performing. And before everybody came into the Dodger Stadium and before everybody came into the Coliseum, they introduced us to all the laypeople and all the workers. And there must have been several hundred, maybe 1,000 workers. I don't know. Those arenas hold a lot of people, but we received a standing ovation from all the people working on the project. And that was pretty exciting to hear when you're a craftsman sitting there in the front row of the papal visit.

And we were not Catholic. And we were given front row seats, right next to Bobby Vinton. And it was — our friends — the priests we have been doing work with and making chalices with for years were running the whole show. And our friend, Rod Stevens, was in charge of the architecture and the layout and the style of the whole event.

So we felt pretty included. We had a wonderful time. But we did happen to finish our order only a few hours

before — we finished it the day before the event and we drove it down that day and we delivered everything. And then, the next day it was the papal visit.

So even though we started a year and a half ahead of time, we were — just barely got things done on time. And the compound things, we had the diocese in San Francisco and Asilomar contact us a half year ahead of time to make the chalices for those events, but we already had 650 pieces we had to make. And we didn't quite have the time. I had one assistant — I had one lady, Stephanie Arehart, who's a teacher and an artist in Cambria now, who was my assistant and my apprentice in those days. We're making lots of earrings. And she had to jump in and polish and help me finish up the whole kit and caboodle.

And there was, you know, hundreds of pieces to polish and we would work — we'd get up in the morning, at 8:00 and we'd work to midnight every night. So we had a very full day. [Laughs.] So, a 16-hour day just to get things done. We had to do that for four months straight. Every day was the same. The only breaks we had is when the press came in and interviewed us. At that time, we had CNN came and interviewed us and the story was broadcast around the whole United States. And we sold everything that we had in stock in those two weeks.

We had a showroom in a gallery, Quicksilver Gallery, in Cambria, at that time. And we had merchandise. And at the end of the two weeks, after the papal visit, everything we had was gone. And we had a very lucrative year and we had a lot of fun and a lot of excitement. We felt a lot of respect and a lot of warmth. And the Catholics that we dealt with were very wonderful folks to deal with. And the whole experience was just perfect.

MS. LAURIA: And which pope was it? I don't remember the year that you said —

MR. STROMSÖE: Pope John Paul. And he spoke out and he's the one that told the United States that is very important for them to buy from local artisans. He said, "Do not be buying chalices through catalogues. Do not begin this from that. Go directly to the artisans and keep the arts alive." And so that's why they came to us and that's why everything got started because they wanted to — and we —

MS. LAURIA: How did they find you, Randy?

MR. STROMSÖE: We had been making work for various priests in the LA diocese over the years. We've really enjoyed our chalices and our chalice making. We did that religious congress prior to that, five years prior to that, that we made a lot of contacts. And we made tabernacles and processional crosses, monstrances, ciboriums. We did interiors of churches.

At one point, we thought that the only thing we'd do the rest of our life is work on interior Catholic churches until we found out that art by committee is not the best way to go. Everything we did for the Roman Catholics had to go through a committee of laypeople. And I'm not sure who the committees were composed of. But everything would get watered down. The designs would start off fantastic and then they'd start — they'd get homogenized. They started to change and they were not so exciting anymore.

And so we decided — and the fact that they would want things — they'd take years to decide on things and then they'd want the delivery to be in a matter of a half-year or a few months, but they wanted 20 or 30 pieces. And we had one man and myself doing it with my assistants. And it just wasn't economically or timewise doable for us.

MS. LAURIA: And what did the piece that was presented to the pope look like? Do you have a drawing of it or —

MR. STROMSÖE: No. It's one of those things where it was at the last moment and when we only had days to spare. And we hardly even photographed anything we did for them because we were usually — all we wanted to do is have the project over with and a success. We weren't thinking about promoting or anything like that. We didn't have the time to go to the photographer. And we know that every time we went to a photographer in those days, it was $1,000. And everything would take, you know, four hours to do one piece because of the reflections on the shiny surface and —

MS. LAURIA: But what was it made out of?

MR. STROMSÖE: We did do — we did a pewter bowl that had a cover and it was just a little special design. It's contemporary. It was —

MS. LAURIA: Was it engraved?

MR. STROMSÖE: No. No engraving, just a simple piece. It had a handle on it that was made to look like wafers. And I can only remember bits and pieces of it, but each one had a bright hammered finish. And we had a form fitting cover and then billowed [ph] out, you know like ballooned out a bit, and it had wafer-looking pieces on top for the handle to lift the lid off with and wafer-looking pieces for the handles on the side.

MS. LAURIA: Wonderful. So it's probably part of the Vatican Museum now. So if one requested — Vatican Museum has an online collection, we might be able to pull it up.

MR. STROMSÖE: You might be able to. We haven't tried yet, but that might be something to try next week, just to see what happens.

MS. LAURIA: And you're — I mean, I remember Allan Adler telling me that he did all the pieces for the church in Arizona that was right behind the Biltmore, the one — the Frank Lloyd Wright Biltmore. And it was in Phoenix, I guess, because he said, "Well, if you ever want to see" — you know, he did all the silver pieces for that church.

So I think it must be something that silversmiths get big commissions for liturgical pieces for I guess Catholic or — mostly Catholic or Episcopalian or — well, I don't know, maybe mostly Catholic churches.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, Episcopalians, we did work for them also. We've done processional crosses for Saint Andrew's in Saratoga. And we did the altar set for the bishop in Carmel. And we've done many chalices up and down California coastline. And mostly, we've done some cathedral and churches in San Diego area, in Rancho Mirage area. Most of the places, I haven't been back to. And our life kind of just takes off into the next project and the next project. We've done work with the Greek Orthodox churches in LA, downtown LA, and one in San Fernando Valley. And we've done work with the synagogues. And we've done all types of different commissions, again, in Basins. If I — yeah, just — there's just so many things that have taken us sideways. But usually, from — these commissions come from a priest or a bishop or a cardinal or somebody driving through the area that happens to come into our gallery and happens to make contact. And then they tell their friends.

We were set up — where we're doing work for a lot of seminarians. We were the silversmiths of choice for — in Ventura, there is a seminary that we're promoted and all the seminaries were informed about us, and we did a lot of chalices for individuals. And we took a lot of pleasure in making chalices. Chalices is a one-shot item. You're giving it to a man who's going to be performing ceremonies with thousands of people throughout his whole life, maybe millions of people, and is a very personal piece.

And most of the priests already have a preconceived idea of what they want. And they want it to tell a story or some are going and looking for contemporary slick pieces. Some were looking for pieces that have symbolism. Some were looking for very unusual, eye-catching designs. And each time you do it, it's pleasing an individual man that's going to use it for his whole profession. And so we never took them lightly. We always enjoyed them and we always put every bit of effort we could into them and made them — trying to make the finished product match the priest that was purchasing it.

MS. LAURIA: Well, when you say very personal, I know you told me that you also did a commission for a film.

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh, yes.

MS. LAURIA: So — I think the film was called *Death Becomes Her*. You want to talk about that for a moment?

MR. STROMSÖE: That was another project that I guess in Hollywood they were having troubles and they needed this perfume bottle, this bottle produced for the movie, but they also needed to have multiples produced for everybody that worked on the movie. It was going to be a gift, memorabilia from the movie to be given to the different actors and directors and producers.

And so we were given a sketch and we're told that if we could have it done in a week, that we had a certain pay scale. So they're going to pay us a lot more money to get it done very quick and then to make multiples as time went on. And so we jumped at the opportunity to do something for film. We all love film and we love to see the pieces we made on the big screen like that. So we were very happy to jump in and execute that design and very happy to make multiples that they could give away to the different people associated with the film.

MS. LAURIA: So what size was it? It was a silver bottle?

MR. STROMSÖE: It's a silver bottle, but it had glass. It was a glass bottle that had silver neck and top and foot. And we —

MS. LAURIA: I saw the film. It was a potion actually —

MR. STROMSÖE: Potion, yes.

MS. LAURIA: — that fit into the — it looked like a perfume bottle, but it was a potion that would keep you young, I think.

MR. STROMSÖE: Correct. Yes. And it was probably 5 inches tall. And had really nice proportions. It was a pretty piece. And we just had to be able to jump to it right away and then get it done for them. And I have some friends

that are moviemakers and directors. And nowadays, with technology, there doesn't seem to be as much call for our skills as I was hoping. I was hoping that — we've done work for different actors and different directors. I was hoping that we'd get a lot more movie pieces.

MS. LAURIA: Movie work, yeah. Like prop work?

MR. STROMSÖE: Prop work, yeah. And I'm still hoping for that, you know, and I don't know if it's ever going to come. I need to — we need to promote ourselves down there.

MS. LAURIA: But did you get to keep one of the perfume bottles?

MR. STROMSÖE: No, no, once again, it was one of those hurry up type things and it was right before the Christmas holidays and such. And as soon as I'm done with one job, I'm on to the next project.

MS. LAURIA: How many did you actually have to make?

MR. STROMSÖE: I think we made about — I think it was eight of them.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: Maybe nine, with the original, the one they used. Or maybe seven with six for the gifts and one — you know, it wasn't a big run of them, but it was substantial. And they looked a little different on screen than I remember the ones that I executed. I seemed to think that they were able to lift it off the stand where it was all secured at one time. I'm not sure. But things — things change.

MS. LAURIA: [Laughs.] Well, that's the movie business. So that's going to end tape number three.

[End of disc.]

MS. LAURIA: This is tape number four, interview with Randy Stromsöe on Wednesday, June 7, at his home studio in Templeton, interviewed by Jo Lauria for the Archives of American Art.

[End of disc.]

MS. LAURIA: Randy, let's pick up again on — we talked about many, many things already, but we haven't really discussed your teaching career. Did you ever want to be a teacher? Have you taught other than teaching as a master craftsman to apprentices? Have you taught in the university? Can you give me sort of a background of your teaching career?

MR. STROMSÖE: I did — I went to school and I received teaching credential and adult education and community college teaching credential, accredited for life. But with that, California Proposition 13 was voted in, and Proposition 13 — I won't go into all that, but it cut a lot of the money funds from the community college and adult education programs. So even though I studied and I was certified, the opportunities vanished right at that same time. I did have three community colleges lined up to start teaching at, but then the money dried up right off the bat.

MS. LAURIA: What year are we speaking?

MR. STROMSÖE: [Laughs.] We're speaking probably 1976 or '77, around then.

MS. LAURIA: And how many years had you been working as a master craftsman?

MR. STROMSÖE: I was running the Porter Blanchard company for a couple years at that point, and I had had about six, seven years in metalsmithing at that point. And it would have been a good fit for me. I was young enough and — it would have been a good opportunity.

I did teach at a local school that was run by Hallie and Stan Katz. They had a jewelry school, and I was a metalsmithing teacher there. And I gave lectures and workshops there. And we always had a sold-out, big crowd. And it was always exciting, and it was stimulating. We had some exhibits there. It was one of the first places I exhibited at.

MS. LAURIA: And what town was that in?

MR. STROMSÖE: That was in Studio City, and that was also back in the '70s, probably '74, '75. And then later in life, in the 1990s, when everything else was going great for me, Alan Revere at Revere's contacted me to be a metalsmithing teacher there and do different workshops and summer programs. So I would go up there and teach a few times a year. I'd go up there for a week at a time.

MS. LAURIA: And go up there means —

MR. STROMSÖE: In San Francisco. And everybody knows the Revere Academy. It's a great place to study jewelry making. And it was a good, fun experience, met a lot of fun people, had a great time every time and stimulated a lot of excitement. We had a forging flatwork class, so we taught flatware, we taught some pewter — a pewter class and we taught their metalsmithing program for, oh, about six or seven, eight years. And finally, I just got too busy with my projects here in Templeton with our house building and our kids' education, and I had to withdraw from the Rivere Academy.

Since then I've taught, but I've — the teaching I do is usually going to grammar schools and having junior high schools and things come over here, well, to show them my forging. I'll show them silversmithing, and — just to give a general understanding to young students about what is metalsmithing. And the response is always overwhelming, always get bunch of kids that want to sign up as an apprentice, and I get kids that start buying tools and going, making things. I get kids that want to be silversmiths. And at the Santa Lucia school where our children went, every time I teach a class, two-thirds of the class will decide what they want to do for their life work would be silversmithing, metalsmithing. And — [laughs] — I knew that wasn't going to work too well for them, but it was really rewarding. We taught — we had a stamping and chasing classes and bracelet-making classes. And we tried to keep it simple, but the kids got pretty involved. And a lot of times their parents would come in and want to get involved and their older brothers and sisters. So it was an exciting moment for them and rewarding for me just to show the new up-and-coming artists what the possibilities were, but —

MS. LAURIA: And have you ever had an apprentice or someone who has contacted you and wanted to apprentice themselves to you specifically here at your studio at Templeton? Have you ever taken on a student like that?

MR. STROMSÖE: Since we've been in Templeton, in this location, we've been setting up our house and our workshop and our vineyard and our cottage, and I haven't done as many shows as I used to do. I'm not out on the show circuit where I'm meeting lots of young people. When we have done the show circuit, we have had a lot of universities come up to us and a lot of goldsmiths groups, you know, the Florida guild of goldsmiths and different universities. And usually, they want to coordinate my workshops with — when I'm back there doing shows, and if I'm not back there doing a show, it's not cost-effective to do the workshops for them.

But here in my own community, I had taught a couple students, and I've taken them from beginners to pretty accomplished little metalsmiths. But in life, as life has it, they can get better-paying jobs as teachers and as — in other directions. They use their skills they've learned from me, but they take them sideways, and it's never — I don't encourage too many people to be silversmiths or metalsmiths because it takes so many tools and such a large commitment and time to become an expert on everything that I don't really see much hope in making a good living.

And it's almost I need to have an apprentice that's independently wealthy or has income and doesn't have to worry about income — I need to have a wife of a doctor. And I just don't have the right people that I want to encourage them to take on this up-and-down lifestyle that we had. And silversmithing is a lifestyle. it is exciting and fulfilling, but you never know where your next order's going to come from, and you never if somebody's going to pass away or retire. Everything changes, and it's just too much vulnerability, and I'm just not encouraging people to take that risk in their lives. And I see this — see the economy and see everything in this world kind of getting more difficult, and I don't want to encourage somebody to have to struggle and suffer their whole lives. So I'm not a big advocate and being a silversmith, sorry to say.

MS. LAURIA: Well — [laughs] — the economy is certainly one factor, but don't you also see culturally that people don't live the same lifestyle having so much, you know, silver at their tables anymore? So you make beautiful hollowware. Whether it'd be out of silver, out of gold or out of pewter, regardless, it is very formal and quite large-scale presentation pieces, many times. So don't you think that culturally, hollowware is something that is not sought after as much anymore?

MR. STROMSÖE: In America, yes, I see that, and I know that if was in Saudi Arabia or in different locations — most everybody knows where the money is nowadays — I could be doing a great business. And we have had the Khashoggis and people come into our studios before. But they had so much money, all they wanted was gold. And we did have bad luck one time when I had Khashoggi, who is the third-richest man in the world, come into our studio in his helicopter. And we had a very violent storm that day, and he couldn't land, and he had to hover and then take off and go back. And it was really disappointing because it takes so much to get a man of that worth to come out to your studio. But he was not interested in any silver. All he wanted was gold everything. And in the past, when I was a young man, I did many gold trophies and worked with gold quite a bit, and I find gold to be my favorite material to work with. And I would have loved to have the opportunity to work with one of the richest men in the world and then just decorate his house with gold items everywhere.

MS. LAURIA: And he never came back?

MR. STROMSÖE: No. Usually, when you miss opportunities like that, you just get one shot at it, you know. For his schedule to work to come out — he was in Santa Barbara at that time, and for his schedule to work — he's a busy man. He has people coming to him all the time trying to get fundings for his and that. And we lucked out that he was coming here once, and the weather — it was in winter time, and the weather just didn't cooperate.

MS. LAURIA: Interesting. [Laughs.]

So do you feel that, you know, moving into jewelry is a diversification for you? I'm — as I said before, I had no idea that you had had started making jewelry so early on, even when you were working for Porter Blanchard studio because, as I remarked on one of the earlier tapes, I know that Porter Blanchard did not make jewelry. Did any of his brothers or father make jewelry?

MR. STROMSÖE: As far as I know, none of them did. And Lewis Wise made a little bit of jewelry. But I started off as a jeweler before I met Porter, and I already had some success in selling pieces and enjoyed the process. And I took the same techniques that we were using in the shop that were popular back in the '60s and '70s — the forging, the file carving, the chasing, the repoussé — and I continued those techniques throughout my whole career.

And it's the same techniques we use for making hollowware and flatware. The hollowware of the hollow handle and the spout of a teapot can be translated into jewelry forms very easily, and the fork can be made into a bracelet pretty easily. And so I was excited by perfecting and improving my skills in forging and improving my skills in the hammer techniques. And I enjoyed just, you know, translating them into pewter — or into some jewelry.

Jewelry is like a first love. You know you can sell a lot more jewelry because everybody can afford, you know, a $500 piece and a thousand-dollar piece, but when it comes to a $15[,000]/$20,000 coffee sets and teapots, it's a lot more prohibitive. You reduce the amount of customers you have. But at this point in life, we are thinking more about trying to find the real money out there. Instead of, you know, trying to make work for the — middle America, we're taking the avenue now that we're going to try to find the richest people in America and show them what we do and see what happens there.

MS. LAURIA: Well, how would you characterize your — the style of your jewelry? How would you describe to me — if I were a customer, a global customer on the Internet and didn't know who you were, what — how would you describe your jewelry to me?

MR. STROMSÖE: In some ways, our jewelry is — was made to be easy to maintain, was made to be very sturdy and made to last for 500 to a thousand years. So I'm not trying to do any tricks or gadgets. Everything has to be strong and sturdy and —

MS. LAURIA: But what does it look like?

MR. STROMSÖE: It looks — it can take many different forms, but it's contemporary, it's more Danish or Scandinavian sort of influences. I do use file carving, and I do use repoussé, and I do try to make some pieces look like paintings. I try to incorporate contemporary art concepts into my jewelry. I try to make proportions. And I like to make things that look, oh — tension; I like to have tension. I like to have thin and wide and I like to have —

I — my jewelry is — it's always evolving, and I use it as experimental. I take a lot of chances. And I have made — in my early days I made very '60s-looking jewelry and very '70s-looking jewelry and keep expanding. I'm trying to make art in pieces that look like the year I'm living in. So now, when I make jewelry, I try to make jewelry that's 2012, and in the past I — each year or each century or — each century, yeah, even in each century. I try to keep things relevant to the time period.

MS. LAURIA: So I looked at your body of work or at least a slice of it that's at the Art in the Park studios. I would say that you mostly excel at making — from what I — what was on display, at any rate, bracelets. You have a huge array of diversity in bracelets. And maybe that's just what you had there. But they don't seem to make many brooches.

MR. STROMSÖE: Right now I haven't made too many brooches lately. And bracelets have been so popular and the money-maker and stimulator of cash flow. In the past, when we first moved to Cambria, I became — because of lack of tools, I became, like, a town goldsmith, a wedding ring maker, and I really took a lot of pride in carving my wax and constructing wedding rings. And the weddings rings were what kept us going and kept us in the public eye in our local community through a whole, you know, 10 or 20 years. Many of the local folks and my friends all have our rings on, so it was pretty fun to look at it. Still fun; I'd see a friend I had known for 30 years, and they'll have our rings on that we made back in those days.

And I still enjoy making rings and stuff, but I have a retail outlet, and I feel the pressure to fill that up. And having that much square footage, I feel like I have to make bigger pieces to fill it up. Belt buckles were a big thing over the years with me, and I exceeded and excelled in belt buckle making. They were not Western-style buckles. But I did use techniques for Western style and that sort of mechanism, but I made my own concept, my own designs. And that was also a big item for us at shows. I haven't done them lately. It just —

MS. LAURIA: I don't know — what does that mean, Western-style belt buckles?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, just that the front had a mechanism in the back that would swivel, and it would be — and the part you attached the belt to would move and swivel, and you'd just have a prong coming out the front, so you just had a big two-by-three foot — or three-inch design element.

But the nice thing about belt buckles is you — you know, you can do them all different. And we experiment, and we do things every year, and we have a different sort of look going on because it's more or less me experimenting and having fun and getting caught and lost in a technique for a while. And sometimes it takes a year or two for me to fulfill all the variations I could do with that technique, and then I'll go back — the first piece I ever sold was a belt buckle and a — and a brooch, and — back when I was, you know, 19 or 20, and —

MS. LAURIA: Your scale seems to be very modest. You're not a person who does huge over-scaled jewelry. Do you want to talk about that? Do you think that jewelry should be very wearable? I mean, there is a movement in contemporary jewelry, if you look through some of the magazines like *Metalsmith* and *Ornament* where you see people wearing things which, you know, you might have to wear a kickstand to hold up. You're obviously not a believer in that.

MR. STROMSÖE: I do love making big, wild pieces. My problem is cash flow. We've had children we had to get through school and we had a lot of desires and dreams to build a certain lifestyle, and I'm always going towards things that are more marketable right now. But at this point in my life, now that we're situated like we are, finally opened up. The kids are out of school. They're out living on their own and our overhead's been reduced. The only main overhead we have is our health care, insurance and the property tax on having a nice building and workshop. I have to work full time just to pay health care and property taxes, but after that we have no expenses. And so everything we have, we own — and I haven't accumulated any new tools. My tools could all be found in a turn-of-the-century 1900s shop.

And now if I have time and if — as life progresses, the scale of our work will change. Because a lot of times I believe that the bigger-scale pieces aren't going to sell very quickly, and the idea of sitting on something for months or years is difficult. Sometimes with our hollowware, we'll do a really great piece of hollowware, but we won't have the following, that maybe — so nobody will understand it quite like we do, and it may sit around for a year or two. And I can't afford that with my jewelry. We have to have something that would make instantaneous money that we can pay our bills with. And not having the teaching — or not having a university to teach at or a school or arts center, it makes it hard to have supplemental income. And we chose — first we chose a place we wanted to live, and then we chose how we're going to try to market ourselves. And we've had more success selling salable-size jewelry.

MS. LAURIA: But I think, philosophically, anyway, you would prefer that the jewelry be elegant and wearable as opposed to outrageous. I don't — I mean, I don't see you making a conch shell necklace that would go down to someone's knees. I mean, I don't really see that as being a Randy Stromsöe design.

MR. STROMSÖE: We — in the past we were experimenting with lots of chest plates and then what looked like armor.

MS. LAURIA: I stand corrected.

MR. STROMSÖE: So some big pieces that people could wear and women could wear and guys could wear. And we were having a lot of fun with that, but we never exhibited those. And we never really — I like fantasy. I like taking things into fantasy levels. And we have experimented a lot and we do have a lot of prototypes and things sitting around that are more outrageous and larger. It's just that in the area where we have our own gallery, we live — well, we show in Pasa Robles, and there is no track record of Pasa Robles and any avant-garde jewelry ever selling. We live in an area that is not quite the perfect spot for us to sell our jewelry.

MS. LAURIA: All right. That's fair enough.

What kind of historical jewelry do you find exciting or inspirational, if you could point to any historical movements or periods in time that you really — excite you? And also, what about more modern jewelers? Like, do you find someone like Alexander Calder or Claire Falkenstein, any of — you know, the contemporary artists who moved into jewelry, do you find that fascinating?

MR. STROMSÖE: I do. Calder I'm inspired by and excited by. I would have a hard time — I have a hard time not being more refined in my jewelry. When I look at his pieces, I look at them, I just want to redo them for him. I just have to — I cannot make certain things in a quick non, you know, perfectly executed way. It's difficult. I guess I like to — I like to make order out of chaos, and if I'm making pieces like Calder's, I would have a tendency to finish them a little bit more and I would have finished — yeah, I have a tendency to take —

MS. LAURIA: But the concept, you appreciate the concept.

MR. STROMSÖE: I appreciate the concept. And nowadays, like, I guess a lot of it is just about salability. If I didn't have to worry about selling anything, I'd be experimenting a lot more and it would be a lot more like his. And I understand every piece of jewelry he ever made sold, and so it's kind of — but I think as the years go on and the eye of the customer gets more and more refined and people expect it — are expecting a little more refinement into their jewelry —

MS. LAURIA: Are you aware of the jewelry that Anni Albers did?

MR. STROMSÖE: No.

MS. LAURIA: Well, this is rather fun, because Anni Albers, who's known mostly as an expert weaver, there was a show in 1963 at the Museum of Modern Art called *Modern Jewelers*, and she submitted at least two pieces of jeweler that she designed that you can now buy in a museum store, and it consisted of this: It was a package of a chain, a commercial chain. You know those chains that you just snap together, the kids usually have them, that you find like chained to like a sneaker that has a tag on it? Well, anyway, so you'd have one of these chains that you snap together, and then in the package would also be hairpins, and then you would arrange the hairpins on this chain in such a way that it makes a beautiful design necklace. That was one. And then there was another one that were paperclips. And these were her necklaces that she submitted.

MR. STROMSÖE: Amazing.

MS. LAURIA: And they — and I bought one for my daughter to put together, and she put it together and she wore it. And it really was a very abstract, wonderful necklace. And it was all about — obviously not about the craftsmanship, not about the material but about the concept and about the abstraction of how it looked on the person. So I think, you know, that was a real breakthrough, 1963.

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh, boy.

MS. LAURIA: So is that something that — you know, that you could make that leap to appreciate even though, again, we're not talking about materials and we're not talking about craftsmanship?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes, I appreciate a lot more than what I would attempt to do for monetary gains. I can make — or I can appreciate — I appreciate almost everything that's been done in the past. I can find beauty in everybody's work, and I'm a big fan of so many different metalsmiths, and I appreciate what they do. It's just that they had different financial liability or motivations. And my motivations are basically just trying to keep money coming in.

MS. LAURIA: It's a balance. It's always a balance.

MR. STROMSÖE: It's a balance.

MS. LAURIA : I mean, being a craftsman and not being a teacher full-time is — it's a very difficult lifestyle, and it's a — I think it's becoming more difficult. And, you know, it's something that really is not discussed, I think, too much in schools. And, you know, students coming out wanting to live that lifestyle have to, you know, face up to the reality of it.

But let's talk about historical jewelry. I know that one of my favorite pieces of all time I saw at the Getty — well, it was then the Getty Museum, is now called the Getty Villa, which was the — a diadem made by the Greeks and made out of gold, and it was a — you know, a diadem of the crown out of — made to look like laurel leafs that you — obviously it was given to somebody, maybe an athlete. And I would stare at that piece, you know, for several — multiple minutes. I just thought it was the most beautiful thing in the world.

I think I read recently that they had — it was repatriated. I mean, it had to give — they had to give it back to Greece. And I was weeping when I read the article because I remember, as — going on a field trip, and that was the piece that I would immediately go to in the museum to look at.

And it was actually very, very simple. It was cutout pieces, very thin sheets, you know, of gold, and wired onto, you know, a form. But all those years, those thousands of years, it still was absolutely stunning.

So do you have any type of relationship that you saw of historical jewelry, maybe Egyptian or Greek, that, you know, really resonates with you?

MR. STROMSÖE: There's so many different cultures. I'm so envious of the cultures that got to work with the pure gold and the 18-karat and 24-karat gold, and then the masks they make and then the collars and necklaces and the chest plates. And I just wish that I lived in a time now where gold was reasonable to work with, and I'd have such a fun time making big wild pieces.

I would imagine in my mind I would — if there's reincarnation, I'm sure I was a jeweler in other societies, and I was a repousseur or in a — I was working on masks for kings in Egypt and, you know, the Mayans. And all this work in Peru — I mean, everything resonates with me, and I look at it. I would love to do it, and I just don't know how to get on that avenue where I can get the funding. If I had funding and I had apprentices and things worked out in a different way — but my excitement is that I'm set up now for the next 20 or 30 years, and what happens at my shop is no longer as financial — important as it used to be, where I can go and emulate the things of the past, and I can be inspired, and I can do big wonderful pieces out of precious metal, and I don't have to worry as much about my cash flow.

MS. LAURIA: Well, does it have to be out of precious metal? Is there no other material that can look like gold that isn't gold, can work like gold?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, the beauty of gold is that it works differently than anything else. Eighteen-karat gold is a dream to work with. It's easy to assemble and solder. It's easy to repoussé. It has a crispness and it a beauty that —

MS. LAURIA: Has a crisp —

MR. STROMSÖE: Crisp. You can do crisp details very easily, and it holds those details.

And nowadays I do a lot of masks and faces and things out of pewter, which is a fun material, but it never gets rigid, and it doesn't hold the details like you could have in 18-karat gold.

And silver is nice, but silver is a different luster and different color. And silver's always been my favorite material, but in certain designs it's not appropriate. I think that the gold designs — I could make things out of silver and gold plate and get an effect that I like, but 18-karat gold's much softer than silver and easier to manipulate and easier to repoussé and holds just a wonderful detail. And that's one reason I'd like to start locating the ultrarich and actually see if I can make some high-end pieces for them, as I think the material is a bit more fabulous.

MS. LAURIA: So there isn't anything that — it — that duplicates the quality of gold sheets.

MR. STROMSÖE: Copper, brass — they're not the same. And silver's — I mean, silver's closer, and silver's nice, but then it's a whole different color. And a matte finish on a gold piece looks wonderful, and a matte finish on a silver piece retains fingerprints and is harder to maintain.

And so I think as time goes on, there will be more innovations as far as materials to work with, and maybe I'll discover something here in the near future.

I'm looking at my life, thinking my best work's still to come, and I can take a lot more chances. When you're a young man, you have to worry about buying your first home and buying a car for transportation and raising kids and all the things you have to do, and monetary considerations are very strong, where — at the point I'm at now, the midcareer part of my life, the monetary considerations are not really my considerations.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MR. STROMSÖE: But —

MS. LAURIA: But what about traveling, Randy, and surfing? I mean, that is a big consideration. Now you have more leisure time, and I know you're an avid surfer, and you just got back from taking a surf trip. Do you want to tell us about that? Why do you surf? And I know you like to surf the big waves, and what does that do for you? Does that help you in your — I know it keeps you active. You said you need to maintain your strength and your muscle strength for the job you do as a silversmith. But mentally and spiritually, does surfing help you progress in your daily life as a — and go back to being a silversmith when you return from your trips?

MR. STROMSÖE: It does. Surfing teaches you many things, and one of the things is, ride the waves that come in life, movements — there's a direction or a flow — don't resist it, and go with what's coming toward you, and don't — and with surfing, we started — well, I come from a family of swimmers. My great-grandfather was a swimmer, my grandfather, my father. And we start bodysurfing at an early age, and we start board surfing at an

early age, at 10 and 11 years old. And we'd go to the premier surf spots, Malibu and Rincon. We surfed Southern California and the Santa Barbara area all the time as a young boy.

But when I met Porter, I put everything on the back burner to focus solely on being a metalsmith. And that's what I did for my late teenage and my 20s. I did very little surfing in those points because my whole life was geared up to making art and learning as much as I could about the metal arts field and the jewelry and metalsmithing. And I was inspired by all the great jewelers of the '60s and the '50s when I was a young man, and I was — I was very excited.

But I came back to surfing when I was about 30, and we moved to this part of the world also for the surfing and to live close to the ocean. We always lived a mile from the ocean, and I had a workshop only a mile from the ocean, and I'd drive by the ocean every day and look at it.

And the ocean does give you spirituality. It does make you realize that, you know, life is not forever. You could be killed out there by an accident or by a shark. We do have great whites in the ocean around us. And you never take life for granted.

And I think that's an important aspect of being an artist, is always feeling like life is tentative, and you don't really — I don't live my life like I'm going to live forever. I take advantage and enjoy different aspects of it, and I enjoy the beauty of nature, and I give a lot of thanks when I'm out in the water and when I'm in nature. It centers me and grounds me and gives me a peaceful feeling.

And I mean, we're in the Los Angeles area, and the Los Angeles area, with the hustle and bustle, waiting on the freeways for hours and all that mean a stressful life to me. And I would have loved to have lived in New York and been a silversmith on the East Coast, but I could not deal with traffic and wasting time. Where I live at now, I don't waste time. It's the most beautiful drive in the world to go to the beach in Cayucos, and taking the state highway, 46 West, to the ocean and San Simeon and Cambria is probably the prettiest drive a surfer can have or anybody could have. So I'm recharged and renewed every time I drive to the ocean, and I don't want that to change. I want to enjoy that aspect of my life for a long time, but I would like to make more contacts in the cities and find better placement for my work in the cities.

MS. LAURIA: Well, where did you just come back from, your surfing trip?

MR. STROMSÖE: We were in El Salvador. And El Salvador has volcanic mountains and rocks that go right into the ocean. And it makes for very nice-shaped waves. In the months of May and June the surf is pretty solid, and you — they have quite a challenge. We would surf five, six hours a day and we just had the most wonderful time.

The Salvadorian surfers and the Salvadorian people that live on the coastline are just wonderful folks. And it's a very pleasurable, non-Hawaiian sort of vibe there. You get a lot of friendship. Everybody wants to know your name. Everybody knows you name. Everybody calls you by your name. Everybody interacts with you. Everybody shakes your hand and everybody wants to sit with you.

And no one gets anything from you. They're not doing it for any monetary gain. They're just doing it because they want to have friends from around the world. And that's what are surfers, or what metalsmiths used to be. When I was young, the interaction with metalsmiths is so wide open, so open and so — you became a bro. You became a brother to every metalsmith you met. They were like part of your family and it was just the greatest feeling.

And the same thing happens when you're surfing. There's some surfers that don't open up, but most of them you become friends with instantaneously and there's a sort of brotherhood and friendship, camaraderie. As you take off on a wave, you know, all your new friends will be hooting and hollering for you and you have a big smile on your face. And you're taking chances and you're pushing your athletic ability and your strength, and you're doing things that are tough to do. And I'm out there surfing with guys that are half my age and we still — we interact like we're, you know, great friends. It's just a great and wonderful experience.

MS. LAURIA: Did you meet any artists while you were surfing, other artists that were out there surfing? I mean, did you have time to see any art in other countries while you surf?

MR. STROMSÖE: I usually do. I usually do. And I'm really inspired by Peruvian art, and I'm inspired by the Mayans, and really enjoy Mexican art. And when I go to Mexico and such, I usually meet artists in Mexico. I'm surprised; there's lots of sort of neo-hippies in Mexico and there's guys that live simple lives that make just really wonderful jewelry that nobody gets to see ever, you know? Somebody should go down there and bring back a collection of their work and exhibit it for them because it's usually very hand-done and very original and very one-of-a-kind.

MS. LAURIA: Why is that, that nobody gets to see their work? I don't understand.

MR. STROMSÖE: Because they don't have galleries that represent them.

MS. LAURIA: Oh.

MR. STROMSÖE: They're more or less walking up to people on the beach and opening up a briefcase.

Now, some of these people are very cutting-edge looking people and very forward thinking, and most of the people I meet would not want to live in America. Most of the people in the other countries, they wonder what's happening to America. And they live in a more peaceful environment and they are more modest and they have less needs in life. And their overhead's very low and they can live there very simply for very little money. And they can take chances with their art. They can make very experimental jewelry that they never really care if they sell, but they go out there and they show it to people nonetheless.

And my only sorrow is sometimes I go down there and I don't have enough money to accumulate some of the pieces I see. One thing I find when I travel to other countries where there's so much poverty is you don't take too much money in your pocket because it may disappear. And I do find that there's a lot of really honest people and people that are very helpful. And not everybody done there that's desperate was willing to take your money. Some were just the salt-of-the-earth type honesty.

MS. LAURIA: Sure. Speaking of showing your work, I realized yesterday when we were — on the other tape you were talking about an exhibition that you had had at the San Luis Obispo Art Museum, but I didn't realize until later that that was a solo exhibition. Could you talk about that? When was it? What was the title of the exhibition? How many pieces did you show? Because I think that was important.

MR. STROMSÖE: Was it *Randy Stromsöe, Master Silversmith* — was the name of it. And there must have been 21 pieces or more.

MS. LAURIA: Was it hollowware exclusively, or was it a combination?

MR. STROMSÖE: We had flatware, hollowware and jewelry.

MS. LAURIA: And it was organized by a curator, Patrick —

LISA STROMSÖE: Dragon.

MR. STROMSÖE: Dragon — Patrick Dragon?

MS. LAURIA: Patrick Dragon.

MR. STROMSÖE: Are you sure that's his name? That's the other Patrick's name.

Yeah, and we haven't done — well —

MS. LAURIA: What was it, 2011?

MR. STROMSÖE: 2011, and it was December 2011.

MS. LAURIA: So it ran through to 2012?

MR. STROMSÖE: Overlapped a little bit.

MS. LAURIA: So you were approached by Patrick to do this show. And you hadn't — have you ever had a one-person show in a museum before?

MR. STROMSÖE: No. No. We've had a lot of work in museums and traveling shows but this is the first time I was approached by a museum for a show. And we have never applied or asked a museum for a show in our lives. We're still working to that, but it will be something we'll do in the coming years here.

I get excited by work I'm doing and then I end up selling it. Instead of holding onto it for a group show, or for a show, I let it go for the cash flow. And a lot of times I let my best pieces go the quickest. And I regret that because I need to hang onto them for shows. And a lot of times I don't even document my pieces, and it's just a rush to make the finances to pay the bills.

MS. LAURIA: Well, do you keep a ledger or an archive of to whom you sell them so you can contact these people in case you need to borrow the pieces for an exhibition or for a retrospective or a mid-career survey?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, the funny thing in my life is I'm always looking towards the future. I'm always excited by the few pieces that are going to come, and I never really worry about the pieces I'm letting go. And I do let

pieces go without getting all the information, especially if I'm at the Philadelphia Museum or a craft show or the Smithsonian, and I'm working by myself and I have a few people that want to buy pieces. I very seldom get all the proper information because I'm concerned about wrapping and packing and not taking too long to make the sales so I don't make other people walk away.

It's a tricky balance, and I'm always thinking in my head, boy, the next group of work I make is going to be so much better than this group of work. [They laugh.] And I always have this confident thing about me that I'm always just thinking about the future.

MS. LAURIA: We did talk about this but possibly not on tape. How do you think — what do you think defines success in the art world?

MR. STROMSÖE: At one time — well, it keeps progressing and changing as the years go on. I felt a success when I was in my 20s when I was doing work for Cartier and Gump's, and they were buying everything we made and loving things and complimenting me all the time. I felt that it couldn't get any better than that. And then when I started doing shows and starting getting acceptance and getting asked to be in shows at the American Craft Museum and National Museum of American Art, I felt like that was my big success.

And all the time I knew how many craftsmen there were in the United States, I knew how many made a living from it, and I knew how many made a certain amount of dollars per year, and I knew that I was at the top of the ranks. I knew I was making more money than most craftsmen and I knew that I was doing something I loved, and I felt like a success.

But as the years go on, I'm looking for more of a success. I'm looking to go even further. And I think when you have — when you can get into the good shows and you get followers and you get people that accumulate your work, then you feel that's success. And then there's also you want to get in the right magazines and the right books and like that, and that always — also helps. But I guess it would be now to have museums start collecting my work and to save it, you know. So I notice that I can donate work to museums and get them to take it easily, but I would like to see somebody else purchase it and donate it for them.

And I know in time all this will happen. But I've felt like I've been a success since I've been in my 20s and I've been able to support myself and live on art money. But I keep raising the bar and I would like to — being included in the White House Craft Collection made me feel like a success, and having the pope come to America and having made all the pieces for the LA Diocese and the Orange County Diocese and to have the San Francisco Diocese and everybody contact me made me feel like a success. So it keeps — like expectations keep growing.

MS. LAURIA: Would you like to see sometime in the future a publication, Randy Stromsöe and his work? I mean is that a bar that you'd like to jump over?

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. Yes. I would. I have seen my work, international work — I've seen one of my images in a Finnish magazine blown up full size and — or a book, I guess it was. And I don't have a copy of that, but to me, to go to a different country and have success like that is a big thing. And I would like to have success in Spain and Italy and different locations. But I would like to — you know, the hurdles have been raised, and there's other areas I'd like to see success happen. And I think now that I have time, my new work, hopefully, will be better than anything I've ever done in the past.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you've said that a couple of times, Randy. Could you maybe give us an idea of what you think that new work might be? Is it going to change in terms — thematically, in process, in scale? What do you — do you think you're going to go work more figuratively, like your mask pieces, or illusionistically? It is one of the questions that the Archives does ask on the last page. How do you envision your work as changing in the future?

MR. STROMSÖE: Sadly, what I always took great pride in was silver coffee sets and silver teapots, and that was always the direction that I wanted to put all my eggs in that basket. Now I want to be able to work a little quicker, because when I make a teapot or a coffee pot, it's a one- or two-month process for me, or I make large silver trays or something, it's also another month or two. And I don't want to make — do work that takes that much time right now. I'd like to be able to turn things out, a finished piece in a week that I felt good about. So I'm going more towards bowl forms and doing variations on bowls and on vases and vessels. I'm simplifying my styles and doing looks that to me represent our time and place. So I guess I'm getting into things I can do a little bit quicker. I don't want to spend too much time on one particular piece and then have it sell and have it gone forever.

MS. LAURIA: Have you thought about doing anything for the home accessory market; for instance, sinks or, you know, the faucets, the — I don't know what they're called.

MR. STROMSÖE: Kohler, yeah. We were contacted by Kohler years ago, in the '90s. In the '90s we had such success and so many people coming to us that we couldn't take advantage of it. But we were contacted about

doing some design work with them and going back to their plant and actually designing with them. So that would have been really exciting. But at that point I had young children, and the idea of leaving the state and going away wasn't too feasible, whereas now almost anything's possible. As long as my health stays together, I think the universe is going to be really exciting, all the potential.

MS. LAURIA: And what about possibly residencies? There must be silver — places that you — I mean, not silver places, but places that — long-established places, like in Italy or Spain, where you might want to go and look through the archives or, you know, do some research and see how they made their silver; you know, just as an educational —

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah, I would love to go back to that part of the world and really research and to really work with some designers there and silver manufacturers there. For the longest time, I've been wanting to work with the Alessi, and I'm really disappointed that I can't locate any way of getting in touch with them and sending them my portfolio. I think I would blend in so well, so effortlessly. I'd like to do what Prip did when he was younger, the fact that he could have a design studio in his own studio and do work for corporations and be his own — be the product designer and the prototype maker and send things out and let them manufacture it.

That's my dream. My dream is to be a prototype maker and designer, then make the prototypes, make the toolings, send them the drawings and sketches and the diagrams, but let somebody else reproduce my work in mass quantities or on a limited production. If that came fulfilled, I'd be feeling — then I'd reached the level I've really been after, because most of my life I've been thinking of myself as a product designer and somebody who's making useful household items that are pushing what people expect to see out of hollowware and flatware. But —

MS. LAURIA: You know, the Danish do that all the time. There are many Danish artists who have two sides of their business. They do a studio production and then they do industrial design. They'll design for another company. So — and we just don't seem to have much of that here in the United States.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah. We should. And I guess in the past when I was younger, making up work, and some of the companies were copying what we were doing, it would have been much easier for them just to hire me to do that same work for them. And we haven't really approached too many American companies. With the economy like it is lately, we've been kind of realizing that everybody's holding back in their expenses and a lot of the big companies are, but maybe I should be.

MS. LAURIA: But that's interesting that you — your whole philosophy about hands on, the — a master craftsman, talked about having to touch every part of the process from beginning of the concept all the way through the execution, but now you're voicing that you wouldn't mind actually turning over your design to someone else and having them produce it. But I wonder if you could actually do that. You might have to be there on site to go over quality control.

MR. STROMSÖE: But maybe — I know. You know, the Chinese and Singapore and areas like that are very good for that sort of approach, now to be an American designer overseas and working with their companies there. These are avenues that I hope to pursue in the near future. I'd like to make contacts. I would like to go over there and see what I could do.

MS. LAURIA: With your hollowware designs?

MR. STROMSÖE: And flatware.

MS. LAURIA: And flatware, okay.

MR. STROMSÖE: What I do with flatware is that — so much of flatware that is being done today commercially I find very awkward to use. It may be attractive, but when you hold it in your hand it doesn't feel right. And after working for 30 years with flatware and stuff, I feel I like the proportions and the weights and the feel that it has to accomplish, as well as designs it has to accomplish. And I think I've a lot to offer the world in that direction.

MS. LAURIA: Do you think that the average person is alert enough to notice those things — like ergonomics, weight, scale, palpability, aesthetics? It's just a question.

MR. STROMSÖE: The flatware work I've done recently in the last few years for my customers, I've made several sets of flatware in the last few years. And the response I get from the purchasers is they just love the pieces. They love the way they feel. And they're my biggest advocates. And they don't mind a paying a few hundred dollars apiece for a teaspoon or fork. Its — they believe it's well worth it and it's going to be heirlooms that they'll pass down and they'll be around for hundreds of years.

And they are — my customers are appreciating it. And I think when people sit at a table and they hold the right

piece in their hand, and they feel that balance — and that's part of what we do too. We create a balance and the handle, and then the tines and spoon bowl all have to balance under your fingertip right behind the spoon bowl. And in doing so, it creates a really — and then it's the way you bevel the bottom of it too, and the way you contour the bottom. And it's much like, you know, surfboard making or something.

There's — there's a way of doing it. And I don't think many of these designers have really put the time in to really understand. And they're making shapes that are clumsy and awkward and ill-balanced. And once I find the right company, we'll see what happens. I think there's —

MS. LAURIA: And they don't have to be made out of silver in order to have that balance.

MR. STROMSÖE: No.

MS. LAURIA: It can be stainless.

MR. STROMSÖE: They can be stamped out in stainless steel with the same proportions and the same thicknesses and the same bevels. And I think they would have that same sort of covered level.

MS. LAURIA: You know, Randy, there is a true need for people who have disabilities — such as Parkinson's, who shake — for them to have flatware that is made in way that they can actually use it. A friend of mine, Nancy Worden, who is a jeweler, you may know her. She's been afflicted with Lou Gehrig's disease. And she knew that she was getting it so she started to make these harnesses for her hands to — with utensils so that she stabilizes her hands so she can cut her food.

And I mean, I'm thinking that this is something that people who have, you know, sort of your skills and your direction and know how things are balanced and, you know, they know the correct ergonomics, that if somebody could put their mind to these things — you know, especially with patients who have Parkinson's disease — because they have a very difficult time using utensils of any sort. You know, a whole set could be made for these people.

It's like when someone came up with the scissors for the left-handed person. You know, these people never could use the scissors because scissors were all for right-handed people.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yeah. And we get the aging of America too, things are changing.

MS. LAURIA: Right, people with arthritis that have a very tough time. But we don't think about, you know, those kind of adaptations. You know, we're always thinking about, you know, the kind of flatware for, you know, the perfect person. We're not all going to be that perfect person our whole lives. So you know, it would be a — it would be a service to mankind —

MR. STROMSÖE: It would be a challenge. It would be interesting. And I should research that more. What we do is we do work with a lot of terminal people or people that may have AIDS —

MS. LAURIA: Chronic diseases?

MR. STROMSÖE: People that are maybe in the last year or two in their lives, they want something special to drink out of. We make cups for a lot of people that want a silver cup and that's their cup they use all day long and they take a lot — and they just love that cup, because that's what they're dealing with all day long, is they're taking fluids and drinking their water. And to have this perfect, wonderful silver cup to pick up and hold and drink out of brings a joy. They appreciate the craftsmanship and appreciate the beauty. And a lot of people nowadays are using silver as cups and as utensils because silver's healthy for them. They've been finding, you know, that —

MS. LAURIA: Hygenic?

MR. STROMSÖE: Well, a little bit of silver residue is healthy for the body. We're — so many things are unhealthy for the body —

MS. LAURIA: Such as plastic.

MR. STROMSÖE: Yes. Yes. And silver's — actually adds to the health benefits. And a lot of people who are coming to us to make silver, like, quite often it's somebody with AIDS that has a couple of years to go and he wants something for his bedside. And to us, it couldn't be any greater or better job than to help some — comfort somebody at that time in their life and to bring some sort of joy to people. So we spent — we go out of our way to make quality pieces for people and their needs like that.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I know that gold at one point was used as a serum for patients with rheumatoid arthritis.

MR. STROMSÖE: Oh.

MS. LAURIA: Yeah. I don't know the health benefits to it, but it was. But that's interesting about silver. And also, that silver can be passed on to a loved one. That cup, it then becomes —

MR. STROMSÖE: An important heirloom.

MS. LAURIA: Right, heirloom, because it was used by them — by the person who passed it down.

I did want to ask you something — I'm sorry to make this odd jump — but I forgot to ask you about your use of stones in your jewelry. I'm just picking up because I notice we have, like, 20 more minutes left. Well, let me get to that in just a minute.

[Break.]

So I was going to ask you about your stones. Do you — do you pick out your own stones from a lapidary man? Do you cut your own stones? Do you have a preference for certain kinds of stones? Tell me about your stone selection and cutting?

MR. STROMSÖE: I love stones. And usually our pieces with stones sell fastest and usually my special orders are with stones. We do have our own lapidary equipment and I do cut a lot of usual stones for myself in high dome and unusual shapes, things that you just can't find — things that you need to do on the premise to fit the design. I do love using faceted stones that I do buy from stone distributors. And I do use the regular, you know, common-looking faceted stones. But I'm always — have an eye out for unusual stones. I do have a collection of stones.

[End of disc.]