

## **Voices of American Fashion Industry Decision-makers: The Oral History Program at the Fashion Institute of Technology-State University of New York**

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Thirty-three years after the founding of the Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY (hereafter, FIT) in 1944, John Touhey initiated the Oral History Project of the Fashion Industries (OHPFI). This project was created to document, preserve, and make accessible primary source recollections of decision-makers in American fashion and related creative industries. Today, the program includes over four hundred-fifty interviews with such subjects as fashion designers Ralph Lauren and Geoffrey Beene; former Chairman of Bergdorf Goodman department store, Andrew Goodman; and Fred Pomerantz, founder of the Leslie Fay Company, Inc.<sup>1</sup> The oral history program's original purpose was to document voices of those who were and are decision-makers who greatly influenced not only the lives of those laboring in the various creative industries, including fashion, but also the development of FIT as an institution of higher education. Now known as *FIT Talks*, the program is most meaningful for researchers in the fields of American fashion, beauty, and retail history. Additionally, the program seeks to record the recollections of those who have administered, taught, or studied at FIT. It has also been a tool used to expose current art and design students to the histories of people who have held or hold careers, primarily in the business of fashion, that might influence their own career considerations for the future.

The program forms a unique record of facts, points of view, practices, and, perhaps most importantly, voices that could be gathered and preserved in no other way. This article tells the story of the program's development over the decades, explains its uses in research and teaching, and offers a glimpse into plans for its future.

The entirety of the program consists of thirteen distinct series of interviews. These series notably include recollections of leaders from American department stores such as Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Bloomingdale's. This is but one of the many lenses through which researchers can learn more about the art and business of American fashion and

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Fay Company, Inc. was a very successful, New York-based women's wear company offering career, evening, and social occasion dresses. It also offered sportswear through leading department and specialty stores nationwide. <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/the-leslie-fay-company-inc-history/>

related industries. Another lens allows researchers to focus on the allied modeling industry; the FORD Inc. modeling firm series tells the stories of models, fashion magazine editors, stylists, and FORD executives as they discuss the industry which in some measure shapes our own perception of ourselves.

### **The Oral History Project of the Fashion Industries, 1977-1993**

At the time of the founding of the OHPFI, John Touhey was the FIT Library Director and his background was in the area of Media Services. Traditionally, “Media Services” was a unit of the larger Library operations and focused on contemporary media forms and the provision of content via such forms. For the OHPFI, Touhey hired personnel to interview selected subjects and to transcribe information from reel-to-reel or audiocassette tapes. Over time, some of the interviews were also videotaped. The master audio and video tapes were kept in Touhey’s possession in Library administration offices while the transcripts were sent to what was the beginning of the unit of the FIT Library’s Special Collections for preservation and researcher access. One of the earliest audio recordings is that of American fashion designer Vera Maxwell<sup>2</sup> interviewing Princess Grace of Monaco on 19 December 1978, in which they discuss the Princess’s profound interest in fashion and her desire to share this passion with others.

Touhey followed the guidelines of the Oral History Association<sup>3</sup> to establish the OHPFI including such measures as requiring interviewees to read and review transcripts and, once satisfied, sign permission documents, which would allow library patrons to view and make use of the content. He also established an Advisory Committee specifically for the project. Austine Hearst, a former reporter for the *Washington Times-Herald* and better known as the wife of the American media magnate William Randolph Hearst, Jr., was the Advisory Committee’s chairperson. Others representing various sectors included Richard Martin, representing FIT’s institutional interests; Ralph Lauren, representing the American fashion design sector; and Geraldine Stutz, president of New York City department store Henri Bendel, representing the fashion retail sector. Incidentally, Stutz’s was the first oral history recorded within the formal OHPFI program. The Stutz interview was originally stored on an ancient media format of Umatic tape; a request by a researcher to listen to this tape initiated the FIT Library Special Collections’ tape conversion project in 2009, bringing recordings

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<sup>2</sup> Vera Maxwell was a very successful, 20th-century fashion designer known for her sporty and comfortable yet sophisticated creations. She was also renowned for her designs as they related to women’s efforts during WWII.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oralhistory.org/>

from various outdated media to accessible and legible media. The Stutz recording and all others are now digitally re-mastered, or originally digitally captured, and preserved for access by generations of researchers to come and from all over the world.

The inaugural meeting of the Advisory Committee took place on 4 December 1980. The project had strong support from then-President of FIT, Marvin Feldman, who provided \$10,000 for the program (in today's terms, equal to roughly \$40,000).

Bob Young was the first FIT Library staff member that Touhey hired specifically for the program; he was charged with transcribing the tapes. These transcriptions were the only means by which the content was made accessible to researchers for decades. Touhey later engaged Robert L. Green to conduct interviews from circa 1978-1981. Touhey selected interviewers of high reputation and respected experience in the fashion world. Green, for example, was a men's fashion editor, consultant, lecturer, and was the fashion director of *Playboy Magazine* for more than twenty years.

In 1982, Touhey hired Mildred Finger as an interviewer. Finger helped to shape fashion tastes for four decades as a top buyer for department stores and as a consultant to clothes makers and retailers. She worked as vice president of the cosmetics company Charles of the Ritz, and was head of fashion merchandising for Yves Saint Laurent before becoming an independent fashion consultant. Finger conducted oral history interviews for FIT until 1990. Thanks to her efforts, the 1980s saw a flurry of interview activity; more than seventy notable fashion designers and other fashion and beauty industry leaders discussed their lives, business practices, and creative work. Subjects included Bonnie Cashin of Phillip Sills and Coach leather goods design; American fashion designer, Geoffrey Beene; Eleanor Lambert, fashion publicist for American fashion designers for more than seventy years; and various members of the Goodman family of the Bergdorf Goodman department store.

When Touhey left FIT, Richard Martin took over the supervision of the OHPFI, again mainly to serve as an archive of industry leaders and decision-makers. Martin was quite versatile in his service to, and wore many hats while at, FIT. Martin was a member of the teaching faculty; Head of the Educational Foundation for the Fashion Industries (the non-profit, charitable arm of FIT); Director of the Museum at FIT; and served as Acting Library Director. Also in the 1980s, and within his leadership role for the Museum at FIT, Martin became very involved with curating ground-breaking fashion-focused exhibitions at FIT where he worked with Harold Koda and Laura Sinderbrand, the one-time director of FIT's Design Laboratory (the precursor to the Museum at FIT). Ultimately, in 1991, Martin

was appointed Executive Director of the Shirley Goodman Resource Center, and as such, he became responsible for FIT's prized collections held by both the Museum and the Library.

After Martin left FIT for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1993, the OHPFI project technically ended. At this time, there were circa 150 interviews in the collection and only the transcriptions were available for researcher consultation.

### **Dormancy of the Program, 1994-2009**

The College marked its fiftieth anniversary in 1994 in part by conducting oral history interviews; however, these captures were outside the auspices of the Library. Most likely, these interviews were administered by what is now the division of Communications and External Relations (CER). Similar to Touhey's approach, CER selected interviewers for their subject expertise. Interviewers included Carol Poll, FIT faculty in the Social Sciences; Lynn Felsher of the Museum at FIT; Valerie Steele, current Director and Chief Curator of the Museum at FIT; and Estelle Ellis. Ellis was selected as an interviewer for her work for Business Image, Inc., an advertising agency and creative marketing firm. She also worked for notable fashion magazines including *Seventeen* and *Charm*, which was later incorporated into *Glamour*.

Then, for fifteen years, the program was relatively dormant; the exact reasons for this hiatus are unknown. That said, maintaining an oral history program is not a trivial endeavor and it can be very difficult to coordinate the many moving parts and players, especially as technology and researcher expectations change and advance.

In 2009, Dr. Joyce F. Brown, then and current President of FIT, formed an internal council and associated grant program with a focus on diversity. The mission of Dr. Brown's Diversity Council is,

to help FIT students, faculty, and staff fulfill their personal and professional potential by creating a climate of inclusion and equality within the FIT community. The Diversity Council fosters diverse relationships and gives a voice to diversity by cultivating an inclusive learning environment.<sup>4</sup>

Members of several different FIT departments, including and not limited to the Library, Foreign Languages, and History, seized the opportunity to reinvigorate the oral history program and applied for a Diversity Council grant in its inaugural grants cycle. The proposed project was to interview two of the longest serving faculty members at FIT –

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fitnyc.edu/diversity-council/about/index.php>

professors who could speak most knowledgeably and authoritatively about all of the vast changes they had witnessed over their decades of service to FIT. Those long-standing professors were Elaine Stone, professor in the Fashion Merchandising Management department, and Barry Ginsberg, professor of Science. The Diversity Council granted these applicants the maximum award of \$5000 which was expended to record the interviews, edit them, and have them transcribed. This initiative, while independent from the dormant oral history program, clearly revealed an undercurrent of strong interest to revive the program.

In 2010, fresh off the heels of the successful Diversity Council grant project and two years after my tenure at FIT began, FORD Models, Inc. approached me to collaborate on an oral history venture to capture the stories of the FORD modeling firm. FORD personnel would be the conduit to the interviewees and FIT would supply the storage, preservation, and accessibility to the captured content. Over the course of the next two years, FORD and FIT gathered more than seventy interviews not only with legendary models but also with fashion shoot set designers, photographers, editors, and stylists. Patty Sicular, a long-time model booker and the archivist for the FORD agency, and Doreen Small, the agency's attorney, spearheaded the effort. Damien Neva, former media manager for FORD, was also helpful to secure subjects for and execute interviews. Subjects included Nesta David, art director for fashion shoots for over thirty years; Bill Silano, the cutting-edge fashion photographer; and many FORD models who were or have been active since the 1950s. Also interviewed as part of the FORD series were Glenda Bailey, former editor-in-chief of *Harper's Bazaar*, and Grace Mirabella, former long-time editor of *American Vogue*.

### **The Program is Re-born: *FIT Talks*, 2012-today**

Thanks to an infusion of funding from President Brown, in 2012, the OHPFI program was reborn as *FIT Talks* and continues as such to this day. It has been and is the product of a strong collaboration between the Division of Communications and External Relations (CER) and the FIT Library's unit of Special Collections and College Archives. The program's mission statement reads as follows:

*FIT Talks* of the Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY documents personal accounts and experiences of people relevant to the College and to the industries that support – and are supported by – the College's curricula. The program incorporates the most suitable technologies for the capture and provision of content and, with the guidance of an advisory board, the strategic addition of new subjects to the collection. The collection is administered by

the Special Collections and College Archives, a unit of FIT's Gladys Marcus Library.

Very much like the OHPFI, the *FIT Talks* oral history program is built upon best practices and principles to administer the initiative. It has the intention to grow and adapt and reflect the changes in the College's curricula and community. As such, members of the CER administration and I assembled a diverse Advisory Board of FIT administrators and faculty who assist in identifying and prioritizing new subjects for interviews. Key to the revamped program's initial success was our effort to convert all existing, illegible, analog content to digital and accessible formats. While these objectives were achieved, we strove, and continue to strive, to leverage information technologies to capture and make the digital content available as widely as possible.

As mentioned earlier, FIT President Brown funded the program with a yearly infusion in the amount of \$10,000 – ten thousand dollars does not go as far as it did in 1980, but it moved, and continues to move the program forward. The first year of funding was dedicated to the tremendous effort to digitize all analog content. This was achieved with the service of George Blood Audio LP in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania.

In addition to the interviewers mentioned above, I have engaged additional, well-informed and experienced interviewers such as Alexander Joseph, Chief Storyteller of FIT and former Managing Editor of the award-winning FIT campus magazine *Hue*. I have also engaged Phyllis Dillon as an interviewer; she is an independent scholar and consulting museum curator. She has worked for over thirty-five years in the fields of costume and textile studies and in museums as a textile conservator, curator, and arts administrator. She was also Associate Producer and Main Researcher on the documentary film entitled, *Dressing America: Tales from the Garment Center* (2014). Sarah Tricker, a specialist in videography and an instructor at the Rhode Island School of Design, has recorded tens of interviews as of the time of this writing. FIT staff member Alessandro Casagli has also served the project as a videographer. Audio Transcription Service in Boston, Massachusetts serves *FIT Talks* as its transcription service provider.

The totality of the oral history program, including *FIT Talks* content, numbers more than 450 interviews – they are now either born digital files or are digitally reformatted and all are transcribed. Many are available via SPARC's dedicated YouTube channel.<sup>5</sup> The catalog of

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCR0yYv9OyF6thjr1nQVfhnw/videos>

interviews published to YouTube is an ever-growing collection, with additions made every week.

Through this rich array of content, researchers, educators, and students from all over the globe can explore aspects of American fashion labor and fashion careers through a wide variety of lenses. These accounts can be naturally woven into the College's pedagogical ethos as FIT has always aimed to provide career information and opportunities to students as it maintains close and reciprocal ties with the creative industries.

An especially exciting avenue for adding content to *FIT Talks*, and for engaging students in the program, was the occasion when Christine Hopkins, a graduate student in the FIT Master of Arts in Fashion and Textile Studies department, proposed that her master thesis be the capture, transcription, and contextualization of an oral history interview of June Bové,<sup>6</sup> Assistant Professor in the Fashion and Textile Studies department and a recognized expert in mounting garments for exhibition. In the future, I aim to engage more FIT students as interviewers and transcribers, further solidifying the connection between FIT's student population and industry experts and decision-makers.

### **Concluding Remarks**

*FIT Talks* allows FIT archivists the chance not only to acquire, preserve, and make accessible these historical accounts but also to develop and distribute new, unique, and rich primary content to the public at large. There is no end to the list of subjects with relevant stories to tell – these recollections fill unique and vacant segments of the histories of American fashion, beauty, and other creative industries. While the program has focused on industry decision-makers, FIT aims to collect the voices and memories of those participants of lesser fame and notoriety as well. In the end, FIT must collect as many of these accounts as it can so that the collective memory of the fashion and adjacent industries is as complete as possible for future scholars and educators to consider.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvipdX1HxUs>



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# FIT TALKS

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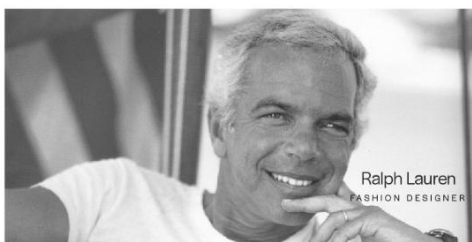
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## **Biography**

Associate Professor Karen Jamison Trivette is the Head of Special Collections and College Archives (SPARC) in the Gladys Marcus Library at the Fashion Institute of Technology, a part of the State University of New York. She holds a Master of Library Science from the University at Albany (New York) and a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from UNC-Chapel Hill (North Carolina). She has worked primarily in art libraries and art archives, including the Museum of Modern Art Archives. She has presented at many conferences, both national and international in scope and recently co-wrote a chapter for *The Fashion Forecasters* (2018). She edited the monograph, *Fashion Plates: 150 Years of Style* (2015), which was completely sourced from SPARC content. She is an active member of the International Council on Archives, Society of American Archivists, and the Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York, Inc. Karen is part of a three-year, grant funded project funded by the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities to create new curricula and to teach art and design students the business and labor history of their fields.