Oral history interview with Ellen Bartholomaus, June 3, 2013

Bartholomaus, Ellen
Fiber artist and gallerist


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Collection Summary: An interview of Ellen Bartholomaus conducted June 3, 2013 by Margaret Winslow for the Helen Farr Sloan Library and Archives of the Delaware Art Museum.

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MARGARET: This is Margaret Winslow, Associate Curator for Contemporary Art, interviewing Ellen Bartholomaus on Monday, June 3, 2013.

ELLEN: I was thinking, I don’t really have like real answers here. I don’t know what your questions are. I don’t know how much I know about the time that I was there.

MARGARET: It’s a completely informal conversation. And really for our purposes today I’d like to— most of the questions will be about Blue Streak [Gallery] specifically and then the others, I’m just asking people for their memories and recollections. As you probably know, so much of these activities and time just wasn’t documented because, of course, you were living it in the moment and not thinking about—

ELLEN: So I’m living history, right?

MARGARET: Right, right. So for our conversation today we’re going to talk about your move to Wilmington, since you’re not from here originally, your involvement with the Blue Streak and the activities that you recall before you took over the gallery, and then when you took over the gallery in ’87–’88.

ELLEN: ’88. Avery died in ‘87 so we opened in ’88.

MARGARET: ’88, and then activities with the DCCA [Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts] and any other recollections.
ELLEN: And the [Delaware] Art Museum. I did a lot of volunteering.

MARGARET: And the Art Museum and any other kind of general recollections of other non-profit spaces or commercial galleries. So that’s kind of our—

ELLEN: I was involved with the DCCA down in the waterfront. So I wasn’t a founding person but since, I don’t know, was it ’79 when that started, something like that?

MARGARET: Mm hmm.

ELLEN: Since about ’80–’81?

MARGARET: Yeah.

ELLEN: I got involved there. I curated a show for them and then I did a fashion show for them. So anyway we’ll talk.

MARGARET: Yeah. So that’s kind of the scope of the conversation today. I try to limit conversations to about an hour and a half –two hours.

ELLEN: My car, I have to have my headlight looked at at four.

MARGARET: Oh yes, and that’s good to know. Where do you, okay so it’s a little—

ELLEN: West Chester, but we have an hour and I can race up there.

MARGARET: So we have an hour.

ELLEN: Yeah. If I’m there 10–15 minutes late, they just have to replace the light and they’ll sit.

MARGARET: Okay perfect.

ELLEN: Sorry.

MARGARET: Oh no, no, no, that’s—I know.

ELLEN: I thought, “Someone’s going to walk by and help me out.”

MARGARET: Yeah guess it’s a little—

ELLEN: And I thought, I should’ve taken your phone number.

MARGARET: Oh no, no. Yeah, we actually don’t have cell phone reception in the Museum.

ELLEN: Oh really?

MARGARET: Because it’s copper clad.
ELLEN: Oh. I came to art is social. But I didn’t see you night.

MARGARET: Oh, on Friday?

ELLEN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Oh yeah. I was at a dinner. I couldn’t be there. I know I heard there were like close to 400 people—

ELLEN: Really?

MARGARET:—and New Sweden playing and apparently it was fabulous.

ELLEN: Yeah, we didn’t stay long. It was really a lot of young people and I hadn’t seen the show so I— we drove to that.

MARGARET: Oh that’s perfect.

ELLEN: We were all tired. So anyway?

MARGARET: So if we need more time we can just you know relax, take our time and we can schedule another time but I think we can do it.

ELLEN: We can wrap it up in an hour, I talk fast.

MARGARET: Okay good. So let’s begin—

ELLEN: So you’re recording it just for your memory?

MARGARET: So I’m recording it for memory but my plan is to have these transcribed so that I have access to them in planning the exhibition and writing the catalog and then so they’re available in transcript form in the museum library archives.

ELLEN: So I should try to speak slowly enough so that people can—?

MARGARET: Ah, slowly enough.

ELLEN: Not a lot of hand language.

MARGARET: That’s okay, yeah. Okay so let’s begin by discussing your move to Wilmington and what brought you here.

ELLEN: Is it on already?

MARGARET: Oh yeah it’s on.

ELLEN: Oh, I didn’t know it was on. Okay well my husband Carl is a lawyer and he took a job with the DuPont Company and we came down. At first he was looking—we wanted to leave
New York. We lived in Queens, Forest Hills Gardens. We had one child and we wanted to go somewhere else. It was too hard to live in New York and raise children. We decided we’d thought we moved to California and he got an offer from that DuPont Company. We thought, “Well let’s go see what it’s like down there. We’ve never been to Delaware.” And it was beautiful. We were so impressed with the rolling hills and the countryside and its friendly people and just the pace seemed so comfortable and inviting and yet it was close to New York City which I like to be close to, and close to Philly, and close to Baltimore and Washington.

So we told our parents and my mom said, “Where is Delaware? What state is that in?” And of course you know that was sort of a joke. But she was glad because we weren’t moving too far away. And so we moved here. We rented a little house and then we bought our first house and then we built a house with an architect from Philadelphia. My impressions were like, “Holy mackerel! Where am I? This is like the deep south.” People walk so slow. I like, bump into them when I was walking. When you went to the deli, you know they cut salami like one piece at a time you know. And everything was just a different pace and I had to get used to it.

Culturally it was, you know, quite different than New York City of course, which I kind of anticipated, but I never really understood quite how different it could be. And slowly made friends and took a class first thing at the Delaware Art Museum, a weaving class. So I was a speech pathologist full-time. I had my masters in speech. And I was a full-time mother, that was the best job ever anyone can ever have. And most creative and rewarding and I loved it.

So I took a class and I learned how to weave with Sigrid Meier, - S-I-G-R-I-D M-E-I-E-R. She’s this beautiful woman that taught weaving here for years. And at the same time I volunteered here in the sales and rental gallery with Alice Hupfel and with Reeve Draper and with [Laetitia Coolidge] Tish Ayars and with someone named Bange, Nancy Bange. Her name is Nancy Madison now. She just friended me on Facebook about a year ago and came to visit me, but I was out of town.

So I was nursing Allison and would bring her along. And Alice was a volunteer back there—that was before the sales and rental gallery had a paid position. And we would do all sorts of jobs for Alice. You know she’d tell us what to do. So I met Reeve Draper there. Then in my weaving class I met Avery Draper. I met Avery, then started the Blue Streak Gallery after. Several years, I can’t remember, let’s see Allison is 35 so that was 34 years ago, how many years ago was that?

MARGARET: 34 years ago would be 3, 4, 9, 11—

ELLEN: So wait 34—

MARGARET: So that would have been in ’89? No.

ELLEN: No, it was before ’89.

MARGARET: Before ‘89?

ELLEN: 34 minus, from 13, 13, 34 is 21 so 21 is 1969.
MARGARET: ‘69?

ELLEN: No, ’79.

MARGARET: ’79 okay, there we go.


MARGARET: 1979. Ellen, let me ask you quickly, what year did you move to Wilmington?

ELLEN: The year before the Centennial so it was 1975.

MARGARET: ’75, perfect, 1975 to Wilmington.

ELLEN: Jamie was one. Three years later we had Ally. Yep, that all makes sense.

MARGARET: Okay, so then in 1979, Avery Draper?

ELLEN: Was in my weaving class with Sigrid Meier, I met Reeve. Her twin sister was in my—

MARGARET: Hmm twin sister, I didn’t—

ELLEN:—volunteered with me. And I used to go to the Beaux Arts Ball—used to have its fabulous parties with auctions and dinners and we could barely afford to go and we went anyway and it was just so much fun. So that was how I started weaving I guess and how I met Avery.

MARGARET: Okay. And so she—and so Avery founded the Blue Streak in 1979?

ELLEN: She incorporated—no she incorporated in ’82.

MARGARET: Incorporated in ’82?

ELLEN: I met Avery. She was taking a weaving class.

MARGARET: In ’79, okay.

ELLEN: In 1982 she incorporated and I think she started it in 1983. But I became friendly with both of them. And I used to come here. I used to—sometimes I would help with the New York City bus. I joined the women’s committee I guess. And you know I was eager to make friends and meet people and I like art and interesting people.

MARGARET: So on the women’s committee in addition to—so you helped organized bus trips?

ELLEN: Well I was not organizing it as much as I was a guide, you know. I was the person who ran the little—you know handed out the cookies and told people the lay of the land. You know I didn’t really make the plans perhaps, but kind of was one of the—I wasn’t a [inaudible] but I was a guide for the trips, you know, in both directions.
MARGARET: So did you assist with any of the programming downtown, at the downtown gallery?

ELLEN: Nope.

MARGARET: None with that, okay. Because it—

ELLEN: But I used to help set up the Christmas tree here.

MARGARET: Oh really?

ELLEN: There was a fabulous Christmas tree that was filled with angels.

MARGARET: When was that? Do you remember?

ELLEN: Well in this time period. I don’t know. Several years I did it. In the ‘70s I guess, you know.

MARGARET: So mid-to-late ‘70s?

ELLEN: Late ‘70s yep.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: And Mary Martin, who is in the Martin family—there’s a lot of Martins around, a lot of girls. I can tell you who they are but I don’t know. She was in charge of the tree and she was very elderly and she made me get on the cherry picker and I had to go up to the top of this—80 feet in the air I think. The tree was fun. Anyway I was setting up this tree, I love Christmas trees and I would reach as high as I could and she’d go, “Out a little dear. Out a little dear.” Always was a little further than I could possibly reach.

MARGARET: Than you could reach. That’s terrifying.

ELLEN: I thought I was going to fall off the cherry picker. But I loved her. She was such a lovely woman. Then of course I knew Berta, [Alberta] Bert Melloy. So I’ve done so many things with the Art Museum. But the biggest thing that I did was I volunteered to do the decorations for the Beaux Arts Ball.

MARGARET: Oh okay.

ELLEN: And I asked Ron Fenstermacher, who I just ran into for lunch, I told him I was going to be interviewed. And we used to do the decorations. We did the decorations. First one we did was for the ‘60s party, I’ve forgotten what it was called. But we had happenings, we asked Ed Woolard. Somehow we had, Ed and Peggy Woolard’s daughter gave us—no, no. It was Marina Kaiser’s ex-husband gave us his Volkswagen and then we had people spray-paint it and put flowers all over it. Ed Woolard’s daughter bought that.
MARGARET: Oh wow.

ELLEN: And we had a Beach Boy area. You know the ‘60s were about the Beach Boys.

MARGARET: Right.

ELLEN: And we had this handsome guy dressed up as a lifeguard. Anyway we had monkey bars, we had cancan rooms. We did Toulouse Lautrec bars—different eras, we did all the different decorations.

MARGARET: Okay, so all those different themes.

ELLEN: Yes.

MARGARET: And were those organized both within the Museum, in the galleries and outside as well or primarily indoors?

ELLEN: They were all indoors. Well, indoors but then we went: do it as an entrance, like when people came.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: Like you know if it was an African theme and so we had people playing drums outside and dressed and dancing African music outside. And Jocelyn Stewart, you know Stuart Sutton, you know Jocelyn Sutton?

MARGARET: Yes.

ELLEN: She used to do catering and so she would come and help do the food. And all these amazing people would be chairs of it. And you know I met Pam Richards and, let’s see who else was the chair one year…Christine Giappo was the chair of the Beaux Arts Ball and Anita Bucknam and, anyway all these fun people.

MARGARET: So that sounds incredibly energetic.

ELLEN: It was so energetic. A lot of—

MARGARET: Well attended.

ELLEN: Well. And artists would come and we’d all wear costumes, fantastic costumes. This was like the good old days when we would all just dress up and have a fantastic party. You know it was wild in a way but not really. We’d have handouts for people. Because I think that even people who don’t come in a costume, if you have a mask or a feather or like one of those glow sticks—they can make fun glasses out of—it includes them in the spirit of it and they kind of can let loose in a way. Anyways we used to have great fun doing those decorations. I helped. We used to have “Art in Bloom” I think it was called. Bert Melloy did it—
MARGARET: Yes.

ELLEN:—where they would—some of the artists would help set up flower arrangements that were representative of some of the paintings. And one year they ask several of us to make hats that were representative of the paintings and I was one of those people one year. What else did I do here that was fun? So I continued taking weaving classes. And then of course then I walked into—going back to my development of what you asked me.

MARGARET: Right.

ELLEN: I went into Philadelphia into the Suzanne Roberts Gallery—S-U-Z-A-N-N-E Roberts on Sansom Street right near the commissary restaurant and she loved this jacket I was wearing that I had made. She asked if I would be in her wearable art show and I said, “What is that?”

MARGARET: Oh.

ELLEN: So she told me and I said, “sure.” So I made a piece for her—sold it right away. She said, “The lady wants pockets.” And I don’t know how to sew, I know how to weave and I could knit, but I did not know how to sew so I had to find someone to make pockets for me. So I sold it. Anyway and that began my career sort of as a weaver and I had a little cottage industry weaving and knitting. I had people who sewed for me and developed blocking and underlining, interlining, interfacing. Oh I had to have show-and-tell at my home.

MARGARET: I didn’t know that. Where else did you show your work? I had no idea.

ELLEN: Galleries all over.

MARGARET: Really?

ELLEN: Yeah. Oh yeah.

MARGARET: I didn’t know this.

ELLEN: So, I would have shows-and-tells at my home. I would have shows in Philadelphia. I had shows at the Swan Gallery which was the Snyderman Gallery. So the Swan Gallery was in Chestnut Hill and then Jane Korman—you know Korman Suites and all—she owned it with another woman. I can’t remember her name, but then they owned Sign of the Swan down in Philadelphia.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: Oh and Ruth Snyderman or Rick advised me about some of my gallery interactions. So I used to show at the Snyderman Gallery, that’s what it was.

MARGARET: Okay at Snyderman.
ELLEN: So I had a one-person show at Jackie Chopley in Washington. But I had, you know I was in shows in San Diego, San Francisco, all over. People asked me to do yarders. I went to Henri Bendel’s on the artist day and they said they would take my coat but on consignment, because they had spent all their budget. And I was on the same float with Mary McFadden and it sold like the next day. And the lady who I met, who interviewed me, she was fired. And then I said, “Well when do I get paid?” Because when I would sell it to people here they would call me up and say “I wore it to some gala” or “I wore it to New York” and they would get, you know, all these compliments and it would make me feel good. So I called Bendel’s and asked them. I checked. They were like, “They’re in that computer.” And this was back in the day when I didn’t even barely know what a computer was, you know, meaning you’ll get paid when we’re ready to pay you in 90 days or something.

MARGARET: Right.

ELLEN: Like totally impersonal and I thought that wasn’t really what I wanted to do. I loved the feedback and the interaction. I’m really good at reading people and kind of seeing their eyes and their coloring and see what they wear. So I’m good at like listening and hearing, I’m a communicator, I guess, you know speech pathology. And weaving and selling at the gallery is all about communication.

MARGARET: Right.

ELLEN: I think a lot of life is about that. Anyway, so I would make these amazing garments. [Pierre S.] Pete DuPont ran for president and I made about 13–15–20 garments for Elise DuPont when he was running for his campaign. And I thought I was going to have all his clothes in the White House, but that was a short-lived campaign, unfortunately. But I have lots of funny stories about all of that. I made sweaters for Jamie Wyeth—somebody introduced me to him. So he had me make these jackets, these navy blue jackets with these special Indian buttons. And how much of this do you want me to tell you?

MARGARET: All of this. I didn’t even know about this. This is incredible.

ELLEN: There’s a lot of stories about Jamie Wyeth that are funny.

MARGARET: I didn’t know any of this. Were you showing it all at the Delaware Art Museum in any of the annual exhibitions?

ELLEN: I think I did. I don’t remember. I ran a fiber show for the DCCA and then I had a fashion show of my clothes. I think I probably must have. We had things with the weaving class, but I don’t know whether they were actual show-shows that I can remember.

MARGARET: I could go back and look at that history.

ELLEN: Look it up, but I don’t remember anything that’s coming in my head.

MARGARET: Okay.
ELLEN: So Jamie would have all these special handmade Indian buttons so I went out west, I started collecting buttons. And then he had these other buttons that he loved. So I would have someone who worked on a knitting loom who would make them because they were like a thick, heavy net, double-breasted jacket.

MARGARET: Okay.


MARGARET: Oh incredible.

ELLEN: So he told me that he went to have dinner with Prince Charles and Princess Diana. And I was like, “Whoa, how is that? What was she like?” He said, “Well”—I don’t know if this is all right to say but this is what he said. He said, “Well Prince Charles had on those buttons that we have that we are sewing on this sweater.” He said, “I could barely take my eyes off the buttons all night.” And he said, “I don’t even know about Princess Diana.” But they had conversations with him. Prince Charles was going to send him the buttons. So he sent the buttons then we sewed them on the next one. And we made—he likes things in multiples. So we made lots of the same garments and then we made it in cut fabrics and you know I had people who helped me sew and all. And we fitted him.

MARGARET: That’s incredible. So when did you, are you still doing this?

ELLEN: I have my loom and all my yarn.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: And I think I have moths cause we’re getting moths at the house.

MARGARET: So when—

ELLEN: No. So when Avery died I built my house with an architect from Philadelphia for three years. Otto Sperr was his name. His wife was the first director of the Please Touch Museum.

MARGARET: Oh interesting.

ELLEN: And Otto helped, we designed it to make it into that museum. And so I was friendly with Avery. Avery started the gallery and I would sit home and weave and she would sit at the gallery waiting for customers. I would go with her to shows and then in 1987, in June, she was killed. A police van with prisoners in it was coming down 202 and ran into her. She died, she was 39. So Reevee tried to sell the gallery but no one wanted to buy it.

So she asked me if I’d like to do it with her. And Carl, my husband, thought, well that would be fine. Why don’t I do it you know if I would like to? So I did and I said yes, I would do it and we kind of shared the responsibility of running the Blue Streak Gallery. Neither of us had any
experience in running a gallery or running a business or any business classes or economics you know education.

MARGARET: Right.

ELLEN: But it was sort of an ongoing business which shows upcoming—and we learned on the job.

MARGARET: So tell me—I’m going to backtrack a little bit and I am watching our time—prior to her passing in ’87, what was the focus of the Blue Streak? Was it solely focused on contemporary crafts?

ELLEN: Contemporary crafts, pure gallery.

MARGARET: Okay. Pure gallery, was it in the current configuration it is now with two side-by-side spaces?

ELLEN: No. It was only in 1723 [Delaware Avenue].

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: So if you’re facing the gallery on the left-hand side, not where you entered.

MARGARET: Only on the left, got it, okay.

ELLEN: And she had beautiful shows of exquisite work. But you know it was hard to start a gallery and to pay the rent and all that.

MARGARET: Was she showing local and regional artists?

ELLEN: Local, regional and some national.

MARGARET: Some national, okay.

ELLEN: It was a pure gallery. No other framing, no other objects or anything.

MARGARET: Okay, got it. And when you took over the partnership with Reeve, tell me about the transition into the two spaces and the transition into incorporating other merchandise.

ELLEN: Well we incorporated. Reevee and I together incorporated the other merchandise to help us be able to pay our bills. You know neither of us knew framing. A lot of galleries frame and that’s a good part of how they pay their rent and keep their gallery going. We don’t have those skills or interests so we thought if we picked beautifully made, handmade objects…Our good friend Vickie DuPont was a jeweler, Vickie’s died also. She made exquisite jewelry out of gold and silver and diamonds and all. So we would have shows for her and then we would have lower-end jewelry, also handmade but not quite as expensive as this jewelry.
MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: And then we would have a few other lower-end objects that weren’t necessarily one-of-a-kind anymore, but they weren’t mass-produced but still made mostly by artisans. And then we kind of expanded from there together, and then different life things came up with Reeve and she decided that this wasn’t her passion. You know she was doing it because it happened, and so she decided to go on her own path.

And then I thought, well the three businesses next to mine failed. I thought, well that was a lucky number, maybe I’ll expand. Because it was fun to go to the shows and I wasn’t weaving anymore. You know, I had my garden that I could weave around in, and I liked to weave people together, get them. But for me it’s creative to create all the melange of things that I have at the gallery. So I don’t do my own art, but to me I feel like I’m weaving and creating by—

MARGARET: Yeah it’s still part of your practice in a way.

ELLEN: Right. So I think that’s why. Plus, I love to collect and I like people to be able to come in and, you know, afford to buy something no matter what price range. And that’s been accommodated to the current time and all.

MARGARET: Right. And so when did you take over full responsibility of the gallery and when did you expand the space?

ELLEN: I keep trying to remember that. I can’t remember.

MARGARET: Was it still in the ‘80s? Or would it have been into the—

ELLEN: Probably early ‘90s.

MARGARET: Early ‘90s.

ELLEN: Very late ‘80s.

MARGARET: Right there at the—

ELLEN: Right.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: I aske—my architect had died, but the project manager, Neil Sandvold, who actually has designed all the Foothill Brewers—not Foothill—all the Iron Hill breweries—helped me design it, and my yoga teacher Michael Fahey did the construction. So we knocked down a wall and we asked my landlord if we could enclose a little cement area and make it a little garden space. So we had a lot of outside furniture and antique things there too.

MARGARET: Okay.
ELLEN: So I think it was like ’89 maybe, something like that. It’s been a long time.

MARGARET: Yes. And—

ELLEN: I know back to the questions.

MARGARET: When you took over those full responsibilities, and maybe even when you were operating the gallery with Reeve, had you made that transition into incorporating sculpture, drawing, photography, painting in addition to contemporary craft or when did that kind of transition happen?

ELLEN: I think it was after Reevee that we included—well we always did some sculpture because I thought that was part of craft, you know, in a way. I know they always want to debate that. But the paintings and the photography and the drawings, it just seemed like a natural outreach that people are more familiar, or can spend more money, on a painting than they would necessarily on a piece of ceramic, unless they’re major collectors.

MARGARET: Right.

ELLEN: And we needed to sell some—tried to sell—some higher end things to make things somewhat feasible.

MARGARET: So that would’ve been right. So right at that same time—late ‘80’s—early ‘90’s.

ELLEN: Right.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: But before I did the gallery. So then I used to volunteer at the Delaware Art Museum. We never really ever talked about that.

MARGARET: Yes.

ELLEN: I don’t know if you want to talk about that now or if that’s sort of a later question. Do you want to continue the Blue Steak development?

MARGARET: Let’s continue Blue Streak for a little bit because then I want to get overall impressions about other kind of artistic activities and happenings in the city.

ELLEN: Right.

MARGARET: So let’s continue Blue Streak. Okay, when you took over the space, took over the responsibilities, was there kind of an established stable of artists? Has there ever been kind of a loose, maybe stable of artists that you supported?
ELLEN: I feel very strongly that artists are incredibly gifted people and that they try very hard to support themselves with the arts, so although some galleries sort of have a stable, you know, and like contracts and limit them, I never felt that was something that I was interested in.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: I thought if they want to sell on their own—and I wouldn’t want someone having a show at the same time I was having a show for them, or maybe a month after or before you know in that timeframe. But I just think it’s important for them to do whatever works best for them, you know? I don’t understand why artists really do that unless their gallery is really producing catalogs and manuscripts and really promoting them which doesn’t ever really seem to be the case for the most part.

But you know artists have allegiance to galleries. They want to be in the art gallery and that gives them, you know, some credibility that appeals to them. But you know it’s complicated and I try never to feel badly if I’ve worked for years to get someone to want to buy something, and then all of a sudden I introduce them, and then they buy it directly from the artist. It’s a little tender but it’s okay because I’m glad the artist is selling their work. And you know that’s really what I try to do, is support artists even though I’m a commercial gallery, I’m more of a non-profit—

MARGARET: You are more of an advocate.

ELLEN:—kind of person.

MARGARET: So how about, who are some artists who have shown at the gallery for a long time, local artists?

ELLEN: Well Mitch Lyons of course. He showed forever and ever. And Ken Mabrey, Carson Zullinger. You know, and so it’s changed like over the years as we’ve gotten along, so you know like now I show Carol Woolworth and over and over again, And then I have the same—Lucas died, so now I have different jewelry artists that I show. You want me to tell you who they are or—

MARGARET: Well I’m thinking more some of the artists that you can remember showing early—

ELLEN: Back in the day?

MARGARET: Back in the day, who maybe you don’t show now but—

ELLEN: I’ve had shows from Steve Tanis, Larry Holmes, Bob Straight, Vera Kaminski, I’ve shown Jamie Wyeth’s work, Mary Page Evans, although she mostly shows at Carspecken [Carspecken-Scott Gallery]. I love to do thematic shows. I love themes and I love to push people out of those comfort zones a little. And so I’ve asked lots of artists who are affiliated with other artists, like Lisa Bartolozzi, because you know, she showed early too and she always gives me
something to put in it. So I come up with some wacky theme and I ask them to do something to, you know, in that theme and almost everyone says yes. I’m a good salesperson. I know. But I just make it exciting and they go, “I never thought about doing that.”

And it just catches their interest because it’s like they can incorporate their artistic style but in a different medium or a different way than they’ve ever thought. Like Mitch Lyons made a sculpture, like a duck-like thing out of a sponge one time. I’ve forgotten what. I think it was a Christmas kind of a theme. Or I’ve done a [inaudible] theme. Everyone had to make a little boxes, you know sort of private little memory boxes. I’ve had lots of those.

MARGARET: So it’s really about that, well that kind of thematic curating, curatorial edge to it as well. So Ellen, to you. I’ll also be asking you questions that I’m just thinking about the exhibition specifically. Do you have archival records about all of the exhibitions, on all of the exhibitions that have been at the Blue Streak?

ELLEN: Well I have invitations in the gallery from way back.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: All over the gallery.

MARGARET: Have you documented that history in some sort of exhibition history, something like that ever?

ELLEN: No.

MARGARET: Would you ever be willing to let me look at this material so I could document something?

ELLEN: Sure, definitely, yeah.

MARGARET: Because I think just in regards to local history that would be incredibly important to have.

ELLEN: Sure. I’m sure we have every invitation somewhere in the back office.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: Probably too many of them. You know I try to go through them and cull them out so we don’t have hundreds of them and I bring them down to a smaller amount. I have, somewhere there— there’s articles about the gallery I’m sure in the files, not in an organized form.

MARGARET: Okay that’s good to know though as well.

ELLEN: And that would give you some history, you know, about when it was. And most of the invitations would have the date on it.
MARGARET: Okay, right. Which would be good.

ELLEN: So that would give you some chronological order.

MARGARET: Yeah because if I could create like an exhibition history for the gallery that would be incredible. Okay. Oh and it’s great, I found this article. So this was in Delaware Today and this is November 1988.

ELLEN: Sadie and—yeah.

MARGARET: Yes, so it must of been not long after you took over the responsibilities.

ELLEN: I just saw him at, I just saw David at the bank.

MARGARET: And actually—

ELLEN: Tell me who is this?

MARGARET: Okay, so this is, that’s interesting. No one can remember the Tatnall Street Gallery.

ELLEN: No.

MARGARET: No, you don’t either. Darn, I was hoping. You were kind of like my like last hope.

ELLEN: No. Rue Lam was in it?

MARGARET: Rue Lam, and I can, I need to go back and ask John Gatti because he did a show there apparently.

ELLEN: Oh. Tatnall Street?

MARGARET: Not a lot of other artists whose names I recognize or remember. But that’s interesting. So you’re not familiar with that gallery either.

ELLEN: No.

MARGARET: Were you familiar with the Wilmington Circulating Gallery of Paintings that was run by Grace McFarren?

ELLEN: Now that name sounds familiar.

MARGARET: She was an artist and she operated the space in the old Wanamaker building on Augustine cut off.

ELLEN: Oh okay.
MARGARET: Do you have—

ELLEN: I don’t know much about it, no.

MARGARET: Okay, no recollection.

ELLEN: Well yes, I just know that there was something like that.

MARGARET: There was something there, okay.

ELLEN: But I don’t know a lot about it.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: So fun.

MARGARET: Yes. Any memorable exhibitions in the late ‘80s, early ‘90s?

ELLEN: Of mine?

MARGARET: Of yours—particularly important.

ELLEN: Well let’s see here’s the advertisement. [inaudible], I still see her sometimes. Well Vickie DuPont’s jewelry is always memorable because they were so exciting. People would come and you know buy. You know a lot of her family would come and buy amazing jewels. You know I would go with her to shows and I went with her to the gem show. I went with her to jewelry camp. So it was really fun to have her show.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: And then I loved having the thematic shows with Larry Holmes and you know all the guys who used to teach down in the university—Gus Sermas. And any time Lisa’s in my show I’m like honored because Lisa’s like the Vermeer of our times, such an incredibly beautiful amazing person.

MARGARET: Now talk to me a little bit about the relationship with the University of Delaware faculty because there’s always been this kind of disconnect between Newark and Wilmington and it seems out of most of the galleries that I’ve researched, Blue Streak was the one that has really kind of supported them in Wilmington by showing their work. I know that they participated in annual exhibitions and biannual shows here at the Museum but—

ELLEN: Now they also had a gallery for a while that I used to go down to and visit in the university.

MARGARET: In the university. But here in Wilmington it seems like Blue Streak was the primary supporter of that faculty.
ELLEN: Well I just like all their work. You know I used to weave. I was friendly with Vera Kaminski who was at the fiber department.

MARGARET: Okay, Vera too.

ELLEN: I used to go to her class and speak sometimes, which I was always anxious about.

MARGARET: Have you shown her work since then?

ELLEN: Oh many times, yeah. Through our many—you know she’s a glass artist, a jewelry artist, a fiber artist. But I would talk to her fiber class. So, just such a wonderful resource. I have no agendas. I’m not very political on anything so there was never any reason not to have a natural affinity for—

MARGARET: Right, right.

ELLEN: I mean I used to be part of a little weavers group that a lot of the artists were down in Newark.

MARGARET: And that was based in Newark?

ELLEN: Yes.

MARGARET: Where you gathered in Newark?

ELLEN: Yep.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: It was Laura Spencer and Scott Bernie, who’s in the Sin City Band, first wife Paisley whose mother wrote for Metropolitan Home and I rented her house in Nantucket and stuff, and all these connections and all. So I just had a natural, you know, I’m just—I like to travel and I like to go to Philadelphia and New York. You know it just seems like not a far place.

MARGARET: Right, right.

ELLEN: Other people are isolated and like protective. I’m a little bit more, I don’t know, open or interested in exchange.

MARGARET: Right.

ELLEN: Before Twitter we used to call people.

MARGARET: Okay, so I’m going to switch our focus and know that we’ll talk more about Blue Streak and documentation, things like that. So you came to Wilmington in 1975. Before we go back to talking about Delaware Art Museum and the DCCA, I’d like to ask if you have any
recollections about a few other somewhat commercial enterprises, though they’re probably into that commercial/non-profit exhibition space category as well?

ELLEN: Well of course Susan Isaacs Gallery always had even more progressive art than Blue Streak showed.

MARGARET: And unfortunately her gallery was pretty short-lived, unfortunately. So that would’ve been—

ELLEN: Are you going to interview her? Cause she’s so articulate and knowledgeable.

MARGARET: I am. She’s on the list as well.

ELLEN: She can—she knows things and she can [inaudible], these great statements, Yeah she’s just so interesting to talk to. But I mean you just—you have to—you can’t count on income past the ‘90s. It was difficult to do this if you needed to have an income.

MARGARET: Right. And I want to, I want to end by asking you about that, past the ‘90s.

ELLEN: And of course Carspecken Gallery. You know I would go to openings there and Station Gallery, and Somerville-Manning Manning Gallery, they’re all friends of mine. Vickie [Manning] used to weave and we’ve all sort of grown up together.

MARGARET: Well and so many of those spaces were founded. I mean 1979 you have the DCCA, the Delaware Theatre Company, the Humanities Forum and so many of the commercial galleries as well. Now do you have any recollections of Fifth Street Gallery?

ELLEN: Unfortunately I don’t, no.

MARGARET: No, okay.

ELLEN: I wasn’t as focused on art. I was a speech therapist. I used to do diagnostic testing and raising my kids until Avery, you know and then I started weaving by chance not, I just liked to weave because I was interested in art. I mean I was interested in art, when I lived in New York I would take ceramics classes or different classes but it wasn’t like I wanted to have a career in art. It was because I wanted to meet people and I thought, “Go to an art museum. That’s where you meet cultured people.” You know, meet people who are like-minded with you.

MARGARET: Right.

ELLEN: And then I just by chance I ran into the Suzanne Roberts Gallery and started making—having a little cottage industry. I never imagined that. It just sort of, a lot of my life has been like that where things have opened up. Not that I just did it, I had a choice. I chose those things you know. Sort of like how lucky I am that these things have come in front of me, but I think I was an active person too, not just luck. It’s making those decisions to go forth in that way.

MARGARET: Things you did in place, right.
ELLEN: So I wasn’t involved in the Fifth Street. I know about, what was his name?

MARGARET: Rob Jones.

ELLEN: Rob Jones.

MARGARET: Right. So some of these, I think then some of those activities would have just been winding down right when you were really getting into this community.

ELLEN: Exactly, right. I remember when he closed and everybody was so disappointed. There were great parties there. He had great, like oh my God, crazy kind of happening things that were kind of wild.

MARGARET: Right. And it seems like some of the—because he was from the University of Delaware—some of the faculty did participate in exhibitions that he hosted but really still not too many. Any recollections of Tom Watkins and Xanadu Comics?

ELLEN: Yeah. He used to sell advertising for—

MARGARET: Oh, that I didn’t know.

ELLEN: I’m pretty sure he sold some kind of advertising or something. He would call me up and I would advertise or something.

MARGARET: Oh was it for *Fine Times*?

ELLEN: Yes, yes.

MARGARET: Okay. So you, I don’t know if I’ve seen that yet but I have the *Fine Times* so I’ll go back and look fo— I haven’t really gone through them.

ELLEN: Yeah he’d call me and we’d talk on the phone. You know I met him a few times but mostly it was on the phone kind of. He was a character, I know. Yeah *Fine Times*.

MARGARET: Yeah that’s what I’ve heard. And I know he did show a little bit at Susan Isaacs, kind of right at the end.

ELLEN: Yeah. I might have shown him once or twice. He mostly did like T-shirt art right?

MARGARET: He did T-shirt art and Xerography along with Ann Eder as well.

ELLEN: Oh, I remember her name, yeah.

MARGARET: So this kind of new, well new-media then, yeah using Xerox machines. Okay so now I want to switch back to the Delaware Art Museum activities and the DCCA. And when talking first about the Delaware Art Museum, I would love it if you could expand a bit on your
activities with the Sales and Rental Gallery, because I think a lot of those memories are lost now with Alice.

ELLEN: We did a lot of filing I think of papers and receipts. We didn’t do a lot of hanging or anything like that. We never had much contact with the artists. And Alice would just be getting—this was before she was really hired you know. And we would do sort of all the work.

MARGARET: All the administrative tasks.

ELLEN: Yeah, all the administrative filing, cleaning, dusting you know. We would one-by-one usually do it, one at a time. We might have sat there you know and all. but we had very little input in anything significant.

MARGARET: Oh okay, in terms of the exhibitions or artists, okay, okay. And so tell me, I know—well you tell me a fair amount about some of your volunteering activities at the Delaware Art Museum. Were you on the board at any point?

ELLEN: Nope.

MARGARET: Not on the board, okay. Okay and I think we talked a lot, okay so decorations for the Beaux Arts Ball Women’s Committee.

ELLEN: Some bus trips. I did some of the *Art in Bloom* things.

MARGARET: Some bus trips and *Art in Bloom*, and involvement while taking classes in the education department.

ELLEN: Our son took classes with Bonnie Levinson. Bonnie was assistant curator to—assistant education person to Johnson.

MARGARET: Marion Johnson, okay.

ELLEN: Marion Johnson. And so this was fun because Jamie was like three or four or five maybe and he would come and she would have a class on Saturdays and most of the parents—the kids were probably five to seven—would drop the kids off and hightail it out of there. Carl and I enjoyed Bonnie and the interaction with the kids so much we both stayed. She couldn’t believe that we were such interested parents and all, so we developed a friendship back then and we’re still friends. I’ve been to both of her weddings. She got married on my birthday the second time in Aspen. She has a home in Aspen and she just bought an apartment in New York. She’d be fun to call.

MARGARET: Yes. Is she still, she’s not local anymore though?

ELLEN: She lives in San Francisco full-time but she just took an apartment in New York. I’ve been trying to get her to come down here. She will have a lot of information. She is a character. She used to be the head fundraiser—she used to work at the New York Public Library and did, was their major fundraiser.
MARGARET: Oh okay.

ELLEN: And then she worked in development I think up in Purchase [College].

MARGARET: At the Neuberger [Museum of Art]?

ELLEN: I’m pretty sure. And then she was assisting acting director of MOMA in San Francisco for a very short time.

MARGARET: Oh, okay.

ELLEN: She was the interim person and where she met her husband who is on the board, her current husband.

MARGARET: Okay. So these were post-Delaware Art Museum?

ELLEN: Right, post.

MARGARET: Got it, okay.

ELLEN: But I could, if you wanted to contact her let me know.

MARGARET: Gosh, that might, yeah she would be wonderful.

ELLEN: She’s funny.

MARGARET: Oh really? Oh I love that.

ELLEN: Yeah. I mean oh my God she was so great with the kids. She’s such a character.

MARGARET: Of that’s wonderful. So let’s switch because I know that you’ve done a lot of work with the DCCA. So DCCA was founded in 1979, so just at the point where you’re starting to get involved with the art community here in Wilmington. So tell me about your early recollections.

ELLEN: I used to also help, we used to have a big party out here, a big craft show. I used to help do something with the craft show and all.

MARGARET: Oh okay.

ELLEN: But anyway so DCCA.

MARGARET: So DCCA.

ELLEN: I used to volunteer down on French Street.

MARGARET: Oh when you were still there.
ELLEN: And we had no heat, barely any electricity and you know we’d have openings and neighborhood winos I guess would come up, come up for the openings and hang out with us. And I never hung any of the real shows except one that I curated, but I would be a volunteer and whatever they needed, mostly at the openings, help pour the wine and do all those kinds of things.

MARGARET: Right. And when did you curate the show at the DCCA, that first—?

ELLEN: It was before we moved to the waterworks and it was a fiber shown, ‘82—’83.’84, something like that.

MARGARET: Okay. And tell me about that show, how you organized it and if you can recall some of the artists who were in it.

ELLEN: Don’t remember. I think it was mostly regional.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: I think Sigrid Meier was in it and then she has a friend in Philadelphia, she’s a really famous weaver, Yvonne Obanovich, she’s shown here at the art museum.

MARGARET: Okay I’ll look that up.

ELLEN: Obanovich or something. She was also friends with my architect so I met her again later on. I would call the Snyderman Gallery for information and you know just network and all but I don’t really remember who was in it.

MARGARET: Okay. How did that exhibition come about? Was there a committee? Did you propose to curate something? Or was it just like pretty organic?

ELLEN: That’s probably somebody asked me if I would because I was starting with the weaving and I was doing my own business, It seemed like a natural kind of thing that I might be able to help them with. Then I also organized a fashion show. This was fun. So Al Russell and Charlotte who owns Fit [Studio] right now, used to own Carucci’s which was an Italian restaurant right on Green Hill and Fifth right where Annie Golden was with all these little restaurants in there and they used to have opera singers all the time.

MARGARET: Oh Jim has told me about this. And it’s—?

ELLEN: C-A-R-U-C-C-I

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: So I had a fashion show and a lunch. It was a fundraiser. I’ve always sort of been involved with fundraising with the DCCA. And so I invited, not models, but the women who I made the coats for to wear their own coats, which was really fun because it wasn’t like perfect
gorgeous little skinny women, it was whoever really fit into the coats so it looked really interesting on them.

MARGARET: Right.

ELLEN: Their accessories would work anyway. So we had a fashion show of like 15 women with one or two or three garments, whatever Ann made for them. So I had a little narration. We had lunch and it was a very successful little fundraiser.

MARGARET: And was the fashion show at—?

ELLEN: Carucci’s.

MARGARET: Carucci’s, okay.

ELLEN: Yep, he provided lunch.

MARGARET: But to, fundraiser for the DCCA?

ELLEN: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay. I wonder should I interview them? How long have they been—?

ELLEN: Carucci’s?

MARGARET: Al Russell and—

ELLEN: Sure.

MARGARET: Have they been in the area for a long time?

ELLEN: Very long time.

MARGARET: This is good to know.

ELLEN: And they are always, they hung art in there, in Fit.

MARGARET: Yes. I have noticed that.

ELLEN: Had a sculpture outside. So they’re interested in the arts. Just the fact that they had opera singers I think.

MARGARET: I know that’s wonderful.

ELLEN: Yeah. They’re lovely.

MARGARET: That’s interesting.
ELLEN: So you know I don’t know just where exactly you’re going, it might be interesting.

MARGARET: Yeah.

ELLEN: So I’ve done a lot of fundraising for the DCCA. I’ve helped them do workshops. Dan Mack was a famous furniture maker. I had him come down. We did a workshop. You know I’ve helped with every auction from the first one, and I was head of personal giving for the capital campaign. So I helped do the fundraising for them.

MARGARET: To move into the space at the Riverfront?

ELLEN: Yeah. So yeah, I was good friends with Steve Lanier who was the first director and you know, known all the—everybody that was in that.

MARGARET: Ellen, sorry quickly, spell the name of the furniture artist.

ELLEN: Dan D-A-N.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: M-A-C-K.

MARGARET: M-A-C-K, okay perfect.

ELLEN: He makes amazing, I have some of the chairs in the gallery. They have like tools and a hood.

MARGARET: Oh yes.

ELLEN: Yeah and he’s in Architectural Record and all. I think he still alive, I’m pretty sure.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: And so he came down. I did an amazing workshop. We all made miniature chairs.

MARGARET: Oh wow.

ELLEN: Everyone just loved that. What other workshops have we done there? I don’t remember but we’ve done fundraising. On the board they have a description of different people who are part of the DCCA and under my name though they have a fundraiser. You know I am a fundraiser.

MARGARET: I would like that.

ELLEN: I’ve helped with all their parties you know.

MARGARET: With all of them.
ELLEN: I like costumes. I like decorations. I like parties. So I’m always happy to work on their auction. Sometimes I have to give it a twist.

MARGARET: So you’ve really, I mean you’ve really been there at the DCCA since—

ELLEN: 1980 probably.

MARGARET: Yeah since the start of the organization. So you’ve seen those shifts—

ELLEN: Development.

MARGARET:—and the development of exhibition programming and the staff and the development of the space.

ELLEN: It’s amazing.

MARGARET: And the artist studio spaces as well.

ELLEN: Fabulous idea. In fact I was instrumental in the architecture selection because Steve and Elizabeth were just going to just have somebody to do the drawings for it.

MARGARET: Steve?

ELLEN: Lanier.

MARGARET: Lanier, yes.

ELLEN: And Elizabeth were going to hire an architect and I said, “Well aren’t you going to have some kind of bidding project. you know where people will make proposals?” And they said, “Oh okay I guess we could do that.” And so they did and we chose Carbonell, to do that.

MARGARET: I should know that.

ELLEN: Joe Carbonell, C-A-R-B-O-N-E-L-L.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: So you know I just thought it should be done with proposals and opportunities for—

MARGARET: Right, right, having that process in place.

ELLEN: Because I was just building my house so I knew how important that was to interview a variety of people.

MARGARET: Right. Okay, so one last quick question, Wait. Where my notes? Okay. You said something, “Past the 1990s it was difficult to support oneself just by selling work in a commercial space.” And what we see in the 1990s, and I’ve been telling everyone this, is I haven’t gone back and done my social history homework yet, but that’s when you start seeing
gallery spaces closing, Susan Isaacs, and a shift in the kind of art support in the city, the kind of support the city was getting from a mayor like Mayor McLaughlin.

ELLEN: Right.

MARGARET: So you see that shifting. Can you tell me what your recollections are at that time too?

ELLEN: Well, I never did a lot of corporate art you know. Suzi Isaacs I think had some interaction with some of the banks, like Wilmington Trust used to buy a lot of—what was his name—Luke Hyman used to buy a lot of art for Wilmington Trust. And law firms and banks would buy art.

MARGARET: In those corporate—

ELLEN: You know I don’t have that much time or that much knowledge or interest in doing that so I didn’t have that sort of opportunity, but I know a lot of people lost a lot of that funding because people were tightening up and, trying to make themselves profitable and want their stock to go up, or whatever it was that turned the whole world around then, the whole art world.

MARGARET: Right. So that and I mean it was just really interesting to see this shift in the city support as well and I think that’s what we’re—I know it’s all cyclical but that’s—I feel like we’re just repeating so many of the things that we saw from the ‘70s to the ‘90s in a kind of shorter window right now.

ELLEN: Right, right. And then Vickie died and we used to sell a lot of her work so that was you know a big hit for us.

MARGARET: Okay.

ELLEN: Yes.

MARGARET: And so you, so many of the other galleries, and certainly sales and rental as well I think, really thrived on that kind of corporate support in the cities. So you know Hercules Corporation, just hearing Steve Bruni talk about the kind of corporate support the sales and rental gallery got.

ELLEN: Right.

MARGARET: Interesting to know though. that that’s not a kind of market that you dealt with, corporate and big, okay.

ELLEN: No, because there were so many people doing it professionally.

MARGARET: Right.
ELLEN: You know it was just, it was complicated. I don’t have a big staff and I was a full-time mom you know.

MARGARET: Right okay.

ELLEN: And I like to travel.

MARGARET: Okay. So I’m going to stop this so that we, so that you have plenty of time and we’re actually almost to an hour.

[End of Audio]
Duration: 58 minutes