

**Interview with Fred Fenster**  
**Conducted by Jan Yager**  
**At the Artist's home in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin**  
**August 9 and 10, 2004**

**Preface**

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Fred Fenster on August 9 and 10, 2004. The interview took place in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, and was conducted by Jan Yager 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.

Fred Fenster and Jan Yager have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

**Interview**

JAN YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Fred Fenster in his home and studio in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, on August 9, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number one, session number one.

Fred, could you tell me when and where you were born?

FRED FENSTER: I was born on December 9, 1934 in New York City, in the Bronx, and to be specific, in Dr. Leff's Maternity Home.

MS. YAGER: Very good. We like specific. And can you tell me your father's name and where and when he was born, and the same for your mother.

MR. FENSTER: My father was named Charles Fenster and he was born in Austria, in a small town near the Czechoslovakian border, which he would never name for me, and he met my mother in this country. And she was born in Warsaw, Poland, and they had come out of Europe a few years before Hitler took power, so they were lucky to be out of there.

MS. YAGER: And what was your mother's name?

MR. FENSTER: Sylvia [Sylvia Reisner].

MS. YAGER: And do you have any idea what year they might have been born?

MR. FENSTER: Actually I do. I think my father was born around 1900 because he died in – I think he died in 1985, and I think he was 85 when he died. And my mother was a few years younger.

MS. YAGER: And what kind of occupation or interest did your father and mother have?

MR. FENSTER: My mother was a homemaker. My father was a floor coverer. He was known as "Charley the linoleum man," and I grew up putting down flooring because I was his helper when I was a kid. I was his helper even after I was married. I would go home – even after I was a professor at Wisconsin [University of Wisconsin, Madison], I would go home to New York and we would end up putting down flooring in peoples' homes. He was a one-man contractor, so we worked all over Westchester County north of New York City.

MS. YAGER: And your mother, what were some of her interests?

MR. FENSTER: Well, she liked classical music, but basically she was a homemaker. She was very interested in cleaning. She was a very clean person. She cleaned. In those days that was a high priority thing.

MS. YAGER: And how about siblings?

MR. FENSTER: I had a brother, Robert, five years older. He worked for the post office after he got

out of the service. He died about 10 years ago.

MS. YAGER: Can you talk about your childhood and where you grew up?

MR. FENSTER: I grew up in the Bronx, and I went to public school and basically had a really simple life. I was a conscientious student. I came home, did my homework. Went down to a local playground and practiced three hours of handball every day. I was a very, very avid – you know, I wasn't good but I was an avid handball player. And I was – we actually had a handball team in our high school and I was on the handball team for a year.

MS. YAGER: Forgive me. What – describe handball.

MR. FENSTER: Handball is played with a small, hard, black ball and when it's played outdoors you have one wall against which you play. If it's played indoors, you have four walls, you know. You're playing inside a box, basically, and everything is available for being hit – the wall, the ceiling, the floor, everything. But when you play single wall then you play against just the one front wall.

MS. YAGER: And is there a bat or anything?

MR. FENSTER: No. You just play with your hands. And the ball is very hard and very – it's a fast game and it's a simple game to play because you can play, you know, you can practice by yourself. So I used to just practice, as I said, for three hours a day, every day. In the rain, in the snow. I'd practice every day. But I, you know, there were people who were better at it who put in much less time, so it was a little discouraging. It's a big city thing. You don't find that out here. You play handball in big cities.

MS. YAGER: What was it like growing up in a big city?

MR. FENSTER: Oddly enough, I was never comfortable in New York. I didn't like the aggressiveness of it. I was always a very quiet, studious kid and I didn't like – I didn't like contending with all these aggressive people all the time. I was never comfortable in New York until I moved away and I'd go back to visit. And now I have fun when I go back, but I didn't – I didn't – I never knew anything else, but once I moved to the Midwest I – to go to school I felt much more comfortable there. The pace of life was slower; I didn't spend all my waking hours traveling the subways, buses. I mean, I lived in New York until I was 21. I married there, had a child there, and I was very relieved to get out. Never wanted to go back.

MS. YAGER: Tell me what – when did you get married?

MR. FENSTER: I got married in April of 1956. I married a woman from Belgium [Josette Lemaire], and about a year and a half later we had my first child, David. And he was a year old when I left New York to go to graduate school at Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan]. And I didn't even drive a car at that time. I had to learn to drive. My first trip was to drive out to Cranbrook. Really pretty funny.

MS. YAGER: Where did you get a car?

MR. FENSTER: My father helped me buy a car for, I think, \$400. It was an old Dodge, and I just – I tried practicing in the city. My father would sit with me, and we'd take these short rides, and then I just got in the car and drove to Michigan and that was –

MS. YAGER: Directly into Motor City [laughs].

MR. FENSTER: It was a little scary in the beginning but it was fine. Then I found a place to live, rented a trailer, put everything in a little trailer and I moved out there. And I never came back except to visit.

MS. YAGER: Do you have – what were some of your favorite pastimes as a child?

MR. FENSTER: I used to read a lot. I loved reading. And the rest of the time, as I say, I played

handball. Handball was a – I tend to be very obsessive about things and handball was something I did every day. I wasn't a natural at it, but I loved the game and I played until I was in my 20's, and then I have never played since.

MS. YAGER: You said you read a lot. What – do you remember a favorite book?

MR. FENSTER: All kinds of books. Adventure books. I liked history in school. I had – I was very lucky. I went to Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx and we had exceptional teachers there who really should have been college professors. And I had a history teacher who was really professorial named Mr. Isaacs. He – he just made history very interesting. European history, you know. It was really great. And I for some reason in my schooling, either because the teacher was ill or – I didn't get much in the way of American history, especially on the Civil War so I ended up doing a lot of reading about the Civil War on my own.

MS. YAGER: What's been your most rewarding educational experience? Do you remember something in high school or grade school that just sort of was a turning point?

MR. FENSTER: That's a good question. High school or grade school? Well, I came to love English also in high school. I had a – several good English teachers who really made reading plays and reading literature very interesting. So I did come out with an appreciation of, you know, of English, well-spoken English, well-written English. It doesn't sound like that because of the way I speak, but I love reading well-written things. And I also – that – I guess the other, the other habit that I acquired early in life was my mother liked to go to the movies so I picked that habit up when I was very young and I've been a movie nut all of my life, so it's something I do all the time.

MS. YAGER: Were you raised with other languages as a child?

MR. FENSTER: They spoke Yiddish at home. My parents spoke Yiddish, especially when they didn't want me to understand them. They sent me to Hebrew school, and I didn't learn to understand Hebrew but I learned to read it to pray, and so – my household wasn't devout or anything but they were nominally observant, so that I went to Hebrew school twice a week, you know. We got release time for religious instructions, Thursday afternoon, and then the environment was very Jewish. The neighborhood was a mixed neighborhood. All immigrants. You didn't hear English that much spoken. I mean, in school I spoke English, but on the street it was everything – mostly Yiddish, Italian. It was basically – when I was a child, it was an Italian-Jewish neighborhood.

MS. YAGER: In 1956 you –

MR. FENSTER: Married.

MS. YAGER: Is that when you entered City College of New York, or is that –

MR. FENSTER: I was already in City College, and I was about to graduate. And I think I got married when I graduated and against my parents' wishes because the girl wasn't Jewish. And we had a break-up at that point. I mean, with my parents. Then we got back together again later, so it was a difficult time. And then I decided to go to graduate school, which my parents also opposed because they didn't want to – they didn't want me to leave the city. And I just decided I would go, and I went. And I never came back. So that was like my – getting married was like emancipating myself from my parents' control, and – and then going away was the second part of the emancipation.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about your education at the City College. What sort of courses were you taking?

MR. FENSTER: I started off just thinking I was going to take science classes because I was very good in that in high school. Again, because I had a really fine teacher. But City College, the science instruction was really uneven and classes were crowded, the instructors were not very interested, so

I was unhappy. And I had a friend there named Al [Alvin] Pine, who is also a metalsmith, and he said, “Why don’t you talk to a guidance counselor and get tested to see what your aptitudes are.” So I did, and eventually she suggested that I go into industrial arts, which I did.

So Al Pine and I and Bernie [Bernard] Bernstein, we were all in the industrial arts program. We all got degrees in industrial arts, and it’s still my feeling that for anybody going into art, that’s the best instructional base that you could possibly have. You know, it gave me such a sense of understanding about materials, concepts, and how things worked and how – how to problem-solve basically, really problem-solve on a high level. So I thought the program there was very, very good.

MS. YAGER: Was there an emphasis in metal? Because three of you were – became very, you know, prominent metal –

MR. FENSTER: Well, originally all the teachers were good. All the teachers were very conscientious. They worked really hard, and I was interested in woodworking. And I wasn’t that good at woodworking, so when I hit the metal class, all of a sudden it was like magic. So I became fascinated with it. We used to break into the studio after hours so we could do our work. And the teacher was very supportive. He was very understanding about our interest. He loved students like us because we were – we just couldn’t get enough of it.

MS. YAGER: Now what kind of projects were you working on?

MR. FENSTER: Well, the metals class was broken up into 18 weeks, and so there were six different areas. A large part of it was machine shop. We learned how to use the shaper, the milling machine. There was three weeks of forging, three weeks of casting, three weeks of lathe work – can’t remember what the other weeks were now. We – you know, every – every three weeks we would change into a different area and we rotated through the whole studio learning how to do everything.

MS. YAGER: Now what do you mean by shaping? What was that?

MR. FENSTER: The shaper is a machine that goes back and forth. It’s a – it just goes back and forth with a cutting blade on it so that if you want to create flat, parallel surfaces, you can machine – the milling machine does the same thing except it does it in a different way.

MS. YAGER: Like a surface grinder sort of?

MR. FENSTER: It’s not a surface grinder. It’s got a cutter and an arm that just goes straight back and forth. And so you set that and you just pare the metal very exactly. So the lathe takes metal off in a round – off of round things. The milling machine takes metal off in flat surfaces.

MS. YAGER: And what metals would you have been using?

MR. FENSTER: Steel mostly. We machined steel. We’d cast aluminum. And – and then – the most exciting three weeks for me were something called “Art Metal” where the teacher had somebody come in and demonstrate silver soldering and working with silver. And the person who came in wasn’t very good, and the first thing they did was they tried to solder a back on a pair of cuff links and they melted the cuff link. This guy melted the cuff link and he chased it all over the soldering board with a flame. I was really enthralled.

So at that time we had these basement gyms in the Bronx, weight-lifting gyms, and –

MS. YAGER: In your home, you mean?

MR. FENSTER: No, we had these little basement areas that we would rent. A bunch of us would get together, and so we had one of these basement gyms that were – actually Roosevelt set – a lot were – he set a lot of these things up. He was involved in subsidizing these so that the youth of America would have good wholesome things to do. So I was involved with a bunch of guys who were much older than I was who had been in these gyms for a long time, and we had separate rooms. There was a room for general weight-lifting. And it wasn’t body-building. It wasn’t to build up your body. It was just to gain strength, so it wasn’t to get pretty or anything. It was just to get

strong.

MS. YAGER: Was this for men?

MR. FENSTER: For men. Only guys. And everything we built ourselves. All the equipment we basically built ourselves, so we did – we had squat racks that we built out of pipe and then we had – this was the Bronx so it was a little rough at times so we had to armor all the windows with bars so people wouldn't break in and steal our weights. So for me it was a really good experience. I – we had a separate room where you could read and relax, and I turned that room into a studio.

I just – after I got the basic demonstrations in jewelry-making, soldering, I set the room up so I could make jewelry there and taught myself how to do it, you know. There were only a few books around. I can't remember the basic book. I'm just trying to – one of the earliest American books on jewelry-making, I had the book. That was my bible and I just read it. I spent a lot of time experimenting. I had Fridays off at the university and I would spend the whole day just teaching myself to silver solder in every conceivable situation, and being compulsive and patient.

MS. YAGER: And were you using silver?

MR. FENSTER: Yes, I started using silver, and then I started peddling it in the City College cafeteria, earrings and pins and belt buckles, and my father thought it was a lot of nonsense. This was just before Christmas, and I – one day I made – I came home with about \$200 or \$300 in my pocket from selling small things. And my father said, "What are you wasting your time for Fred," you know. And I pulled out my wallet, which was about three inches thick with small bills, and I said, "I make money, Pop," you know. "People seem to like what I do and they buy it. They pay me for having fun." And he said, "Come on." And I held up this big wad of money, and for my father, his jaw dropped and he got very quiet and he didn't say anything after that. So. But I built up a clientele among the students and people I met.

MS. YAGER: Would this have been with wire or sheet –

MR. FENSTER: No, this was sheet, sheet with 18-gauge flat stock on the edge to make things look thick. So I would always, even from my early beginnings, I was always interested in not having things look flimsy. Things always had good edges, and I'm still like that now. My things all have good rims on them.

MS. YAGER: And were they forged?

MR. FENSTER: No, they were cut out with a saw. In the beginning I remember I had trouble thinking three-dimensionally and my designs were all flat and two-dimensional. And I was coming down from the third floor of the industrial arts building and as I said, I'm very compulsive. When I'm interested in something I think about it all the time, I dream about it, I'm totally immersed in it. I got the first three-dimensional image. It just flashed in my mind as I came down – as I came across this landing, and I went, "Ah!" like that. It was just like a bolt from heaven, and from then on my work became more dimensional.

MS. YAGER: Was it something you saw in the landing?

MR. FENSTER: I saw it in my mind, you know. I saw a three dimensional image in my mind. Everything else had been flat, you know, before that. I was shocked.

MS. YAGER: And that moment remains crisp.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. It was like an epiphany for me. I was really excited. I didn't know if I had the capability of envisioning things three dimensionally. And as time progressed I imagined things in a three dimensional setting, almost the way a computer projects things and turns them so that you can see them. That's the way my mind went. But that first time, that was really something. I got very excited about that.

MS. YAGER: Can you – do you remember the first three dimensional piece that you made and what it looked like?

MR. FENSTER: Not really. I was making a lot of earrings, and cuff links were in vogue in those days. I was – I made cuff links constantly. A lot of them were hollow, you know, where you make the outline in 18-gauge stock and then I slapped a top and a bottom on it, and most of the time I got away without putting bleed holes in them. They just looked very thick and heavy.

MS. YAGER: That sounds pretty wonderful. Now I read somewhere that when you graduated from City College that there were over 100 shop positions in the city to teach industrial design.

MR. FENSTER: Right. I think there were 125 positions in the city. Industrial art teachers were leaving for various reasons, mostly because the discipline problems were so severe. And I had just gotten married, and I went up to the Bronx to the Herman Ridder Junior High School on the corner of 174th Street and Boston Post Road and I looked like a teenager. You know, I looked like a child. In fact, I have a picture from those days. I looked like a young kid. And in fact, when I started teaching there, older teachers would pull me out and say, “You, take a charge.” They’d pull me out of the hallway, and I said, “I’m a teacher.” They said, “Come on, you’re not a teacher, you’re a student,” because I really looked young.

In any event, I – there was an opening at that school because the previous teacher was teaching sheet metal work and he had been scared out of the school by an incident in which the next door teacher had been hit over the head in the typesetting shop and stabbed in the back. They cut a big X in his back with a knife. So I went in and I was interviewed by this very gentle, elderly principal with the wonderful name of Saul Sigelschiffer, and he looked at me, you know, very quizzically, and he said, “Do you really think that you can do this?” And I said, “Well, we won’t know until I try.”

And I had a horrible first year. I had – the kids were just – they just ran me ragged. I used to be sick, close to vomiting every day before I went to school. It was very violent all the time. There were constant confrontations, they would – you know, I mean, I was interested in learning and they weren’t interested in learning. Most of the kids were – I got the worst kids, and so I was very tenacious in organizing the studio. I – I worked, you know, I mean, the job I guess was from 8:30 to 3:00 o’clock, whatever it was. And then after that I worked in the studio organizing racks and duplicating projects. I – I got two shoulder-high piles of *Popular Mechanics* magazines from a friend of mine and I went through them, picked out every metal project I could pick out, and made drawings and duplicated the projects and built models of them.

And after the first year I was really well organized, and the kids were new. I wasn’t new. So the first year I was new and I got hazed terribly by the students. The second year I was very savvy. I had a very organized studio in place, and the second year was much better. By the same token it was a little boring because I didn’t have all the confrontations I had in the first year. So I decided to go to grad school after that.

The first year was terrible. I mean, it was terrible. I just – we didn’t have any control over the kids, and many of the parents were on welfare. And the only control you would have is you could threaten a kid and tell him you’d throw him out of school, and if he was thrown out of school then he was in the work market. His parents would lose welfare, and that was the only way you could say, “I’m going to kick you out of here and your parents will lose welfare.” And all of a sudden that kid would quiet down. And I felt awful to do that, just awful.

The kids were mostly Hispanic, and they – they came with a very good work ethic and a very good sense of family obligation, but they had the disadvantage of not speaking English well. And I had the advantage of having had four years of Spanish, so my relationship with them was really good.

MS. YAGER: So they were recent immigrants?

MR. FENSTER: Yes.

MS. YAGER: From where do you think?

MR. FENSTER: Most of them were Cuban, Puerto Rico. At that time we had an influx of Cubans and Puerto Ricans due to one of our congressmen, who brought people in for support. They were his people and so he had their support. I can't remember who it was now. But I got along really well with the Hispanic kids, you know. And they taught me how to speak Spanish a lot better than I did, you know. I knew the names of the tools in Spanish, I knew the names of the materials in Spanish, and they became my allies in organizing the studio. So it was fun for me. And I got to understand the kids. I got to understand the pressures they were under. And I lived there. I lived across the street. I got an apartment across the street from the school in this very mixed, very volatile neighborhood, and so the kids would see me all the time, you know. I was not coming in from the outside. I was one of them. I was in the neighborhood.

MS. YAGER: Did – how did they respond to these projects from *Popular Mechanics*?

MR. FENSTER: In the beginning my projects were stupid. You know, I was doing the same kind of thing I learned at school in industrial arts, and I remember I was showing them how to make, you know, a tin can with a handle on it, a mug. And one of the kids said, "What I gotta make this for? It's-a stupid." And I said, "What do you want to make?" He said, "I want to make a train." I said, "You think you can make a train?" He said, "Yeah, I can make a train. I'm going to use a beer can. I'm going to use the solder spools for wheels," and I said, "I tell you what. You make a train, one for you, one for me." And from then on the kids chose the projects, and they would make a model, they'd paint it really nicely, and I'd ring the room with the models the kids made. And by the end of that year, I had a model shop. The industrial art group came and visited my studio, did a whole write-up on it, and the kids taught me how to do this stuff, you know. You had to listen. And I had a really great studio and they loved it.

And I started teaching them how to make jewelry. We used nickel silver. I brought my torch in from home, and they would fight to get into the class, you know. They just loved making jewelry.

MS. YAGER: What sort of torch were you using?

MR. FENSTER: Same torch I use today. The Prestolite. Now I use a Smith tip, but I used the Prestolite. And I just would bring it in and take it home on weekends.

MS. YAGER: Which is acetylene fuel?

MR. FENSTER: Acetylene and air and – and in the studio we did mostly common soldering, soft soldering, using furnaces and soldering coppers because it was a sheet metal studio.

MS. YAGER: You mean lead solder?

MR. FENSTER: Lead solder. So we – so the original projects were done, but then through the *Popular Mechanics* books they had – they had things like making model boats in tin plate, in metal, and so we made submarines and model boats with wind-up propeller – rubber band propeller-driven things, and we'd flood the sink and we'd have boat fights in the sink and they loved it. And then for some crazy reason one of the projects I picked out was making a bilge pump. So who would need a bilge pump in the tenements of New York City? It was the most popular thing we made. It was made out of a piece of television antenna. The kids would get extra credit for bringing in television antenna, which littered the roofs of New York, and sometimes the kids didn't just take used antennas. They took an antenna that was alive, and they'd drag these things in. We cut them up; we made lamps out of them with three legs coming out. We'd pour – we'd pour white metal, which was lead, tin and antimony, in to lock the legs, into this three-inch section of TV antenna. And the thing had three legs and we cast the – the lead around a threaded section that you could screw a socket into. And they made these really nice lamps.

We also made art deco lampshades that were really beautiful out of tin plate and painted them. We

made – in those days it was very popular to do these fish made out of coat hanger wires, and we made – the whole shop had really nice fish all over it. They just lead soldered that together, did a nice job. And for them they would take something like that home that was very professional looking. I taught them to solder really well. They were very – they were very good. I mean, the kids were great.

MS. YAGER: Do you think any of them had metal experience in Cuba or their home country?

MR. FENSTER: Some of them did. The kids who were educated in Cuba were way ahead of the American kids. The ones who actually were taught to count and measure and – they came with some math education and some reading ability. They were fantastic. When they first came to school they were dressed in a white shirt, dressed very neatly. And then they took on the American way of becoming slobs and – and got very rude and so on. But for the most part those kids were wonderful. They were really great students. And for me it was a lot of fun teaching them because once I turned the corner on the discipline stuff by offering better problems, you know –

MS. YAGER: Yes, engaging their minds.

MR. FENSTER: Well, what I did was, I gave them a set problem for the first problem. Then the second problem they had to learn how to measure. And most of them supposedly knew how to measure but they didn't know. And so I – I taught them to measure from a center line and they had to lay out the problem themselves. And I had duplicate sheets on each thing. So the first one I assigned, the second one they had a choice of three, the third one they had a choice of maybe 12 to 15, and then they could make anything they wanted. And they would pick out – and as I say, the – the toy boats and the bilge pump were the best problem.

MS. YAGER: I wanted to ask you, I don't know what a bilge pump is.

MR. FENSTER: It's for pumping water out of a confined space. Let's say you wanted to empty your bathtub into a bucket. So this is an up-and-down pump where you just pump it like that.

MS. YAGER: And why was this so popular?

MR. FENSTER: I don't know. It was intriguing to them and they loved it. They would just fill the sink with water and they'd pump the water out. And what it was was the TV antenna, a plunger that went inside, and leather – little piece of leather valve, so when you pull the thing up, the valve opened up, the water came in. When you pushed it down, the valve closed and the water would come out a little spigot. And it was a *Popular Mechanics* thing, and I – I would never have guessed that it would be popular. But they did a lot of creative stuff after that, you know. They would come and they'd say, "Could I do this? Could I do this? Could I do this?" And I'd say, "Sure. You figure it out. You show it to me."

MS. YAGER: Now these classes, were these just for boys?

MR. FENSTER: Yes.

MS. YAGER: And what – why were these so – a common program in the schools –

MR. FENSTER: Well, they would put all the trouble-makers in shop classes. They'd dump them, you know. And many of the kids were tagged with – with being a trouble-maker and being stupid, and they were neither. They just didn't have an outlet for their energy in the other classes. And I remember I had this one kid, and one of the other teachers found out and she said, "Oh my God, you've got this kid, he's such a terror." And I said, "He isn't." She said, "Oh, but he's so stupid." And I said, "He isn't. He's the leader in the shop. He reads fluently and he measures fluently. He's good with numbers." And she said, "No, it's ridiculous." And then I talked to the kid after, and he said, "Why should I work for her, you know. She thinks I'm stupid." I mean, it's the old story. They are what people believe they are.

And very few of them were stupid. They were uneducated, and sometimes they were educated. I don't know if you ever read this series of books by that guy up in Boston [Jonathan Kozol]. I can't

think of his name now but he dealt with minority students and basically – well, actually in Harlem. He dealt with minority students in Harlem. He became a teacher down there and he found that the kids were actually very bright but they wouldn't let the white teachers see that, you know, because they met the expectations of the teacher. The teacher thought they were stupid, so they were stupid, and it turned out they weren't. They were hiding their intelligence. Just like in the slums, often the leaders, the drug dealers and the people who are heads of gangs are very, very bright.

We had a gang problem in the Bronx, and I got so friendly with the kids, they would come to me and they'd say, "You got a problem with so and so? You want us to take care of him?" And I said, "It's tempting, but no."

[Phone rings. Break in conversation.]

MS. YAGER: All right. Go ahead.

MR. FENSTER: Well, I taught for two and a half years in the New York Public School system in the Bronx, and it was a very interesting and difficult two and a half years, the first year especially. The second year I had things organized, and I had a system in place and the kids responded really well. And it wasn't as interesting to me, so I decided to go to graduate school. By that time I had a small child, and my wife said she was willing to move out to the Midwest.

This came about because Al – Al Pine had preceeded me in going to Cranbrook, and every time he came back to visit, he would talk to me about how wonderful it was and how I should go. And I finally thought, why not, you know? So I did.

MS. YAGER: Now that was in what year?

MR. FENSTER: Cranbrook? I moved out there in 1958. Yes, 1958. I got married in '56, I taught for two years, two and a half years, and then I moved out there in 1958.

MS. YAGER: So talk about the first thing you did when you got there.

MR. FENSTER: To Cranbrook?

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MR. FENSTER: I was petrified. I didn't have an art background. I was absolutely terrified. I thought, what have I done? I gave up a job that I was pretty good at and I became – I became so upset. I became so upset. I thought, I shouldn't be here. I don't have the background that all these art people have. I don't belong here. I don't know what people are going to be talking about. And there were eight of us, I think, in that original class. And they were an odd mixed group of people. Michael Jerry was in there, fortunately for me, because he – he made it – he made it really good for me to be there. He was patient, he explained things to me, he talked to me. And I also didn't realize how much metalwork background I had until I saw my teacher, Richard Thomas, who was writing a book on metalsmithing [*Metalsmithing for the Artist-Craftsman*; Philadelphia: Chilton Co., Book Division, 1960], and he was dealing with stuff that my junior high school – my junior high school kids knew because I taught it to them. He was dealing with the names of sheet metal stakes, and my kids knew that like the back of their hands. And I thought, I came out here to learn, and this man doesn't know what my beginning metal students do. That was very discouraging to me.

But there were people in there like Michael, who had at least a year of experience at the School for American Craftsmen [Rochester Institute of Technology, New York], and Don Haskins, who had a lot of metal experience and casting experience. He later worked for Peter Voulkos doing bronze casting, and he became a very close friend of mine. A guy named Les Motz, who came out of Ft. Wayne, Indiana. So they had all kinds of different backgrounds, and they had all sorts of different experiences, and they had varied art talent. Most of them were not all that talented.

Michael was the best of us. Michael Jerry was by far the best of us. And he was really helpful to me. He was encouraging. I read like crazy. I spent a lot of time in the library, which I always do, and I spent a lot of time in the studio. I spent every waking hour, seven days a week, in the studio. There

was no real teaching that went on. You basically learned by working.

MS. YAGER: What were the hours of the studio?

MR. FENSTER: Well, unfortunately it closed down around midnight or 1:00 o'clock, so I got kicked out at 1:00 o'clock. And I'm a night owl. At least I was at that time. So I had to leave. And my wife worked. I went home and took her to work, dropped her off, went to the studio, worked until she got out of work, which was like 5:30. Picked her up, we went home, had dinner, I came back to the studio. I did that every day of the week, Sundays included.

And there was no real instruction, you know. There was a minimal amount of instruction, so luckily Michael Jerry was really good at raising, which is what I was interested in, hammering metal, and I learned how to raise from him. And I loved it. I just – I couldn't believe you could take a flat piece of metal and make anything you wanted out of it. And I've been fascinated doing that ever since.

MS. YAGER: Before we get into all that part about the metal, can you describe a little bit of the differences? I'm still sort of picturing up in the Bronx and all these, you know, Hispanic kids doing these things. And then you go to Bloomfield Hills, to Cranbrook. What did that seem like? I mean –

MR. FENSTER: Felt totally out of place. This little Jewish kid from the Bronx, you know, goes into a lily white area that had restrictions. There were restrictions on Jews and blacks and anybody who wasn't like them. There were signs up. You couldn't rent property; you couldn't live in certain areas at that time. They had signs that said, "Restricted," you know, and that meant me.

MS. YAGER: Now that was not a – that was not imposed in the schools?

MR. FENSTER: No, not in schools. But Bloomfield Hills was one of the wealthiest areas in the United States. And we lived in Pontiac, Michigan, which is a blue collar town, and then on the other side of Cranbrook there was Birmingham, Michigan, which was an executive town, a white collar town. And after I graduated I managed to find a little place to live in there that was being rented just to pay the taxes on this house, and you know, it was a total – total mistake, you know, on their part to rent to somebody like me. There was just a whole row of decrepit houses that went to students and people who wanted studios.

But I felt completely out of place. I was out of my depth. I didn't know how to relate to people socially. I was very ill at ease mixing – which I never did much of. I still don't. But it was a very strange experience, you know, being there. I'd never been out on my own before, you know. I didn't have any family, anybody to talk to. There was – I'm trying to think of this physicist. Surely – there's a line in there, surely you're joking, Mr. – I can't think of it right now. But it describes his going to Yale or Harvard or some place and he was a kid from the Bronx. And he got a scholarship because he was brilliant and he ends up being in a place where he – he went for tea, you know. Cranbrook had the same thing. I couldn't – we went for tea. I never drank tea in my life, you know.

MS. YAGER: Really?

MR. FENSTER: My mother used to drink tea through a sugar cube, you know, from a glass because that's a European custom. My wife, too. She put a cube of sugar between her teeth. Terrible manners for Americans, you know, but I thought, tea, I don't want tea. I don't want to drink tea. I didn't drink coffee, I didn't know how to socialize – I felt –

MS. YAGER: Did they have tea breaks?

MR. FENSTER: Just on the opening, you know, the opening day where we met the faculty, and we met the director of Cranbrook who was Zoltan Sepeshy, the Hungarian painter, the very well known painter.

MS. YAGER: How do you spell his last name?

MR. FENSTER: S-e-p-e-s-h-y. First name Zoltan. Hungarian.

MS. YAGER: I read that Cranbrook was started in the '20s as sort of a training grounds for the

craftsmen that would be needed for the very special church there, which I'm not going to remember the name of.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I think it was called Christ Church.

MS. YAGER: Christ Church, yes. And so was that – did you feel that sort of European –

MR. FENSTER: No, but they had their own village of craftsmen. The people who took care of Cranbrook had their own village, and they made everything. So there were plaster workers who did this exquisite plaster work, you know. Cranbrook was very unique and quirky, you know. And so you had European craftsmen who were brought over. They lived in a village of their own. The electricians, the carpenters, the plumbers, the craftsmen who took care of Cranbrook and did the improvements, built it, you know, lived on their own in a self-contained village.

So at the time I went, they were training young artists who – in metal, in ceramics, in textiles, in architecture, in design. What else. We had a – we had a general shop from which all the studios kind of radiated out where you could – anybody could go there and use the facilities. And we had a large sculpture program there at the time. So it was an exciting place to be. I – although I really stayed mostly in metal, I used to wander around the sculpture studios all the time and go to the lectures. I loved being there. It was a magical place, physically beautiful.

I rarely left, you know. I mean, once I got to school, I – I hated going outside the confines of Cranbrook. It was a world of its own in a very posh area of Bloomfield Hills. It's still like that.

MS. YAGER: Yes. Beautiful.

MR. FENSTER: When I graduated, I didn't want to leave, you know. I got a job as a metal worker for a local guy doing custom metal work, and I found myself driving wistfully by, gazing at the school, or turning in in the truck and just kind of driving through the grounds just to keep contact with it. It was hard breaking away.

MS. YAGER: What was the tuition there? Do you remember, or were you on scholarship?

MR. FENSTER: I was on scholarship after the first year. I got a student scholarship, so that was nice. The students voted it. I worked really hard, you know. As usual with me, I just went in and I shut everything else out of my life and I just did the metal work.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember what the tuition was?

MR. FENSTER: It wasn't that much. What I remember is like \$600 a semester.

MS. YAGER: So it wasn't a huge hardship in that way, but it was just this big life change.

MR. FENSTER: It was a life change, and I had – amazingly enough, my wife and I saved up one year's salary in two years, that's with a child, and my mother-in-law living with us. So my salary at that time was \$4,400 a year, teaching in the Bronx, you know, public school. Saved up \$4,400. We used that to go to Cranbrook. Basically used up the whole – all our savings. My wife worked as a dressmaker in Birmingham, which was this very plushy town. She was a very good dressmaker, Josette, my first wife. And I went to school, and when I graduated we had gone through all the money. And then she said, "Okay, it's your turn now. I supported you. It's your turn to support us." And I said, "Right."

So we went through some hard times because the job I took on was not the kind of metal work I was doing. I was working making anything out of metal that anybody needed, and this was out of aluminum and stainless steel using machines.

MS. YAGER: This was at Roger Berlin?

MR. FENSTER: Roger Berlin, yeah. He was a good guy. Very fine man. He had been a SeaBee in the wartime and he was a guy – these are the can-do guys. This guy could do anything. He had a degree in architecture, and he had a degree in something else, and he was a good boss, and I was a

very good worker. I mean, you know, I was – I worked seven days a week for that guy. I set my own salary. He said, “What do you want to make?” And I said, “Well, I’m not going to be worth very much because I don’t know how to do the kinds of things you want, so we’ll just set the thing at the minimum that I can get along on.” And then I said, “When I get better, we’ll change it.”

So I didn’t think I was very good. I was just a really hard worker. I mean, I was absolutely reliable, seven days a week. Saturday, Sunday. It was a two-person business, you know.

MS. YAGER: You and he?

MR. FENSTER: He bid the jobs, and then we both did them. And we hired a welder part-time to do the welding for us. So we did everything. We did tachometer boxes for General Motors, we did bank railings, we did display boards, we did display objects for the automobile show in Cobo Hall in Detroit. We built a car one time. We built a model car to show off all the chrome industry’s – how much chrome they used in a car. Built a full-sized 16-foot car out of one-inch steel and then attached chrome to it. It was like a phantom car outlined in chrome.

MS. YAGER: What kind of car was it?

MR. FENSTER: It was an everything car. It represented all kinds of makes that –

MS. YAGER: This was in 1960?

MR. FENSTER: 19 – let’s see. I got out of there in 1962, so it was around that time, 1962. That was the job I got out – when I got out of school, that’s the job I took. I had designed some railings, bronze railing mounts for the galleries at Cranbrook and Roger Berlin installed them. I designed them, I made the wooden models, I had them cast, I finished them, and then he installed them. So when I got out he said, “Would you want to work for us?” I said, “Okay.” Didn’t know what else to do.

MS. YAGER: The metal moldings, did you make the actual moldings, the chrome moldings for the car?

MR. FENSTER: No. These were moldings that came off all kinds of cars, and what we did was we made a frame out of one-inch steel, painted it black, and then attached the molding to the frame, so you had the car outlined in chrome – the tail fins, the – you know, the radiator stuff, the trim around the windshield. You wouldn’t believe how much chrome is in a car, you know. It was sponsored by the chrome something association of America, who knows what, but you know. The car weighed 400 pounds when we got done, and they sent a truck to pick it up, and it took four of us to lift it into the truck.

It didn’t roll or anything. We had chrome hubcaps that were attached it. It was a lot of fun. It was a – I did a lot of stuff for that – for that automobile show. I made a map of America outlined in three-inch or four-inch high, half inch thick aluminum, and I had a terrible time going around the Great Lakes with that aluminum. And then the welder welded the sections together. So this was a four-foot by eight-foot map mounted on plywood and it was all outlined in aluminum.

We did all kinds of stuff. I mean, we did – I think we probably worked on displays for about four months for them. Every day was something different, so whatever I learned one day, I came in dumb the next day because we were doing something else. But we had a really great studio, and I learned a lot about problem-solving from Roger. Everything was on wheels. We could reconfigure the whole studio in a matter of minutes. Everything was mounted on heavy duty casters, just push it around. The lathe and milling machines, the – we had ceiling hoists, you know, where we could just take things that weighed hundreds, thousands of pounds and shift them around. It was brilliant. The guy was brilliant, and I enjoyed working there but I –

MS. YAGER: Now would he have been considered a tool and die sort of person?

MR. FENSTER: No, it wasn’t tool and die work. It was any – we got work from designers. They would say, “Okay, we need – we need display tables,” and the display tables were going to be made

out of inch and a quarter square aluminum. And we make them, you know.

MS. YAGER: Where do you think he got his training?

MR. FENSTER: Roger? As I say, he had a degree in architecture and a degree in engineering.

MS. YAGER: From?

MR. FENSTER: Colleges in the United States, but then he was in the SeaBees, and these guys were problem solvers, you know. They fly in and they have some horrendous situation in the war.

MS. YAGER: This was in the Navy?

MR. FENSTER: This was a branch – it wasn't a branch, it was a separate unit. These – these guys were incredible. These guys were all about American ingenuity and in the best sense, and Roger must have been the best of them. He was absolutely wonderful. So he wanted to move me up in the business. Scared the hell out of me. He wanted me to start bidding on jobs that were like a quarter of a million dollars, do all the metal work on a building and we would make it, you know. And I said, "I'm not going to bid. What if I make a mistake? We'll be out of business in one job." And he said, "No." He said, "I'll check it over," and I go, "I don't want to do that. I don't want to bid on jobs." I like making the stuff. I don't want to have to pore over blueprints and figure out all the measurements and everything. So I quit, you know.

MS. YAGER: How long had you worked there?

MR. FENSTER: About six to eight months. Very intense time. As I say, it was seven days a week.

MS. YAGER: Before we get too much further, I want to go back to Cranbrook. Richard Thomas, am I correct in that his training was as a painter?

MR. FENSTER: Um hmm.

MS. YAGER: So how did that come about that he was head of the metals department?

MR. FENSTER: The guy who did metals was a blacksmith who made the gates for Cranbrook [Oscar Bach], those beautiful gates. And he died, and Richard took over the program.

[Phone rings. Break in conversation.]

MS. YAGER: You were talking about Richard Thomas.

MR. FENSTER: Right. Richard Thomas was a painter and he took over the metal program after – my understanding was that the man who – who ran the metals program was the blacksmith and he died, and Richard took it over. And I think that his main contribution was in organizing the structure that the students would follow in terms of doing a thesis, in terms of research, and focusing on a theme and documenting their work. And he was very good at helping people document their work. He took good photographs so they could build a portfolio. He had a big copy camera. And that was very helpful to us. Without him I wouldn't have documented anything because I didn't have a camera. I was poor at that time, really poor. I didn't have much of anything.

MS. YAGER: What kind of research did you do?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I – somewhere along the line there was this Norwegian kid named Gudmund [Gudmund Jon Elvestad], who started working in pewter. He'd never done it before, and he was an experienced goldsmith from Oslo, older than me and very skilled. And I watched him constantly, and I watched how he worked with pewter, so I started working with it, and got interested in it, and decided I would do my thesis on pewter work. And I did and it was a good thesis. When I read it over today I think, gosh, I'd forgotten so much of this stuff. I'm learning from myself.

But it was a very good experience. I had reasonably good writing skills. Even if I didn't speak well I could write reasonably well. So I wrote this thing in five days nonstop, night and day. Just sat down and wrote the whole thesis out. And all the other kids in the class – there were I think five of

us graduating – couldn't get their writing approved. And I was sure I wouldn't get mine approved either. And he read it over and said, "Fine." And it was approved without having to be re-written.

MS. YAGER: Now when you talk about the thesis, would this have been historical research, or would this have been technique and process?

MR. FENSTER: Part of it was historical. It begins with a history of pewter, a brief history of pewter, and then it was all about process after that, and the experiments I did with casting and forming. And then I did a whole succession of pieces in pewter. That's how I got started working with it.

MS. YAGER: What is some of the history of pewter? Colonial?

MR. FENSTER: Well, it goes back. I think the oldest piece in existence that's documented goes back to about 1,500 B.C. and it's found in Asia. It's – it's a small bottle about that big. I can't think what the name of it is now. It was found in this particular place in Egypt, and of course Asian pewter is also – goes way, way back in time. I mean, tin is mentioned in the Bible, so they knew the properties of the metal. And oddly enough, this unguent container from Egypt, Abydos – it's called the *Abydos Flask* –

MS. YAGER: How do you spell that?

MR. FENSTER: A-b-y-d-o-s. Abydos. I'll give you – I'll give you a handout. It's in there. There are some pictures of it, too. And it's very much like a modern alloy. It's got over 90 percent tin in it, and that's what – what we use today is 92 percent tin. It's got some copper in it, and I don't know what the rest of it, but it's very similar in content. And that's like 1,400, 1,500 B.C., something like that. Goes way back there.

And then, you know, in Medieval times, London alone had over 400 pewter shops, individual pewter businesses, and the last one closed about two years ago. Crown and Rose was the last one in London that closed. I mean, there are still some in England, but you know, obviously it doesn't have the kind of audience it once had.

I belong to the Pewter Collectors Club of America, basically for the kind of historical knowledge I wanted to learn. And we – at the meetings they call it the "Tupperware of the Middle Ages." Everybody used pewter, and it was cheap, renewable, easily formed, easily used material that didn't have much intrinsic value, but it was useful. It was a good – it was a good tool for the home.

MS. YAGER: How was it – was it usually cast?

MR. FENSTER: Usually cast, yes.

MS. YAGER: So it could be re-melted and – because it's very –

MR. FENSTER: That's the way it was used in this country. We were captive of the English. We were not allowed to manufacture our own pewter. We were not allowed to use raw materials, so Americans started melting down pewter that came in from England and re-shaping it the way they wanted it. But you know, we were – like I say, a captive audience for English pewter production. And we had a joint meeting with the English Pewter Guild people, and it was amazing. They were so superior and so condescending to us. We met in Williamsburg –

MS. YAGER: It's only been 300 years, you know.

MR. FENSTER: What's that?

MS. YAGER: It's only been 300 years.

MR. FENSTER: It was a riot. They were very nice individually, but as a group, whenever the head of the guild had something to say, he was very pompous when he had something to say officially. He was wearing his medal as the head, the president of the guild, and he'd stand up and harrumph, and then give his little spiel and sit down, rearrange his medal.

MS. YAGER: Was this in England or –

MR. FENSTER: No, in Williamsburg down in Virginia.

MS. YAGER: Oh, okay, Colonial Williamsburg, yes.

MR. FENSTER: Yeah, and they opened up – this is a very good group of people. They opened up all the museums to us. When I can get to the meetings, they let us handle 14th century pewter work, they let us handle ancient English stuff. And the English component, the group came over, so we had this joint meeting, and it was amazing. And nobody knows how to work with pewter. They're all collectors. They're antique dealers, they're historians. Most of the pewter books that I have on my shelves were written by these people. I met them, and I was too shy to talk to them. But I met them, you know. It was – they were very nice individually, but as a group, God, what a – they were arrogant about their knowledge. They would – you know, at the meeting they would refer to us as their younger cousins. So rude.

Anyway, as I say I joined this group because it's very active and I get to learn a lot about the historical side of pewter. And I – they collect stuff that's unbelievable. Everything was made out of pewter, from nursing bottles, you know, baby nursing bottles. In fact, I had a student make one last semester out of pewter, a nursing bottle. To wine-making equipment, you know, special funnels. There is a – the group is absolutely obsessed with pewter, so if you go to breakfast at one of their meetings, you start eating breakfast, somebody stands up and says, "I have some pewter here I want to talk about." He drags out his pewter. You go to lunch, the same thing happens. You go to dinner, the same thing happens. Part of every meal is a learning session about pewter, where they bring in very unusual items. And they're not interested in contemporary pewter at all. I tried. So I just kept my mouth shut and I learned a lot.

Three of us. Three of us out of maybe 50 or 60 people knew how to work with the material.

MS. YAGER: The – I belong to the American Society of Jewelry Historians, and it's not quite so extreme, but it's a wonderful – it's wonderful to learn all the historical background of our field, and many of them are not aware of contemporary makers. They don't even know that they exist.

MR. FENSTER: Yeah. I mean, you learn all kinds of esoteric, strange facts that you would never get out of a book, but these people are – they're like detectives. And part of that is interesting to me, you know, because of the obsessive quality of gathering information. And part of it is so over the top that you have to enjoy the fact that somebody would go to the lengths that they go to in tracing down work. I mean, you know, they're dredging the shores of the Thames to dredge up Roman artifacts, you know, which are many, many pewter artifacts.

And I have a friend who is like this, Jerry Jackson, and he's in State College, Pennsylvania, you know, the home of Penn State. So he started collecting these little miniature amphora pieces – amphora pieces. And today, like when you go to the Olympics you come back with these Olympic medals, you know, or these Olympic keepsakes, you know, in enamel, in expensive enamel to show that you were there. Years ago people would go to religious sites and they would come back with pewter castings that were slush-cast into a stone mold, pour the pewter in, dump it out. They'd have a thing that was like tissue paper and then they'd pour in some sand from the site, fold the neck of the amphora over, and then they would wear this. And my friend Jerry collects those things.

MS. YAGER: What time period are these from?

MR. FENSTER: The Middle Ages, you know. I don't know, the 1400's. I don't know. But you know, they were – this was proof that they had journeyed to this site and it gave them prestige in the eyes of God, presumably.

MS. YAGER: Well, it's a connectedness with that place.

MR. FENSTER: Absolutely. So they would come back with either sand or soil or something like that. And the neck of this amphora shape, which was only about that big, like two inches long, and

he has some. He has some of those. And I didn't get excited because in the beginning he was showing me little torn fragments that he had bought from antique dealers in England. And I said, "What's this thing? It doesn't look like anything. It's so little, it looks like something that fell on the floor when you were trying to cast, you know. This is a splash." And he said, "Wait." And he kept unwrapping these cellophane envelopes, and then he took out a whole amphora, you know, and there it was. So that got me. I was dead tired after the workshop. My eyes snapped open and I thought, this is really interesting.

MS. YAGER: I'm always struck that something 500 years old that, you know, that people continue to talk about it. That's the potential we have as makers.

MR. FENSTER: It's quite wonderful when you think about it. Somebody spends years traveling to a pilgrimage site. I mean, there's no question of taking a plane or anything like that. You trudge. You trudge for a couple of years to get there. And then you get there, there's this, you know, hole in the ground or something, where some religious transformation occurred, and there are souvenir sellers, just the way there are today, and you come back with a keepsake, and it gives you prestige among your friends and the experience of a lifetime, presumably. You know, because the experience is not the result. It's the trip itself. Like we always talk about process and end result. The process for me is what's important in metal work. Like I – the experience of the process is the key thing for me.

The end result I try to make as good as possible, but what stays in my head is what I learned when I was doing it. So I love this stuff, you know. Really interesting for me.

So anyway, you were talking about Richard Thomas. He set up a good structure, and he had a collection of metal work that was part of Cranbrook's that was in the studio that we could examine, and I became familiar with several really wonderful hollowware people, one of whom was named Stone [Arthur J. Stone], who was a fabulous craftsman. Did very sort of neoclassical, beautiful hollowware in very thin metal. And I – I came to realize that the way we were being taught was wrong. Richard Thomas had us use like 16-gauge silver to raise things, and that was a lot of work, a lot of money, and it wasn't the way our predecessors did it very often. Like this guy Stone used 20-gauge metal. He did it fast, he did it well, and he did it much more easily. So I changed my thinking about all of that.

When I got out, somebody actually from – Birmingham, Michigan was a very ritzy town – somebody actually had dropped a piece of Mr. Stone's work, including the tray, and they brought five pieces to me to get them bumped out and straightened out, so I had a chance to keep the pieces for a week and examine them very carefully. So I saw how they were made. They were magnificent pieces.

MS. YAGER: He had gone to Cranbrook?

MR. FENSTER: No, he hadn't gone to Cranbrook. I believe he was English originally, but he lived in America a long time. I have a biography of him somewhere.

MS. YAGER: How about Harry Bertoia, with –

MR. FENSTER: Harry Bertoia did go to Cranbrook.

MS. YAGER: Were there pieces there of his?

MR. FENSTER: No. The only thing was one of those big dandelions, you know, where the tines kind of move in the wind and vibrate and make noise. But that was a real plus for us, you know, knowing that [Charles] Eames and [Harry] Bertoia and a lot of these people had been there. It gave Cranbrook, you know, a kind of prestige that we all had enormous respect for.

When I went there we actually made models for – I just forgot his name – Saarinen, the younger [Eero] Saarinen, the architect who had his offices right next to Cranbrook, and the first year I was there we made 430 two-inch high, 400 chairs and 30 other pieces, including banquet tables, that were models for a presentation that he was going to make. We made them out of a 14-gauge square

wire, copper wire that we got from the dump. And each chair had 13 solder joints in it and Don Haskins and I did the whole thing in something like two weeks.

MS. YAGER: These were the little model wire chairs?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. This big. Thirteen solder joints in each chair because it had the stringers, you know. So there were four leg joints and then the two, the cross pieces, that was six, and then there were the rest of the joints. So we pulled the wire down – I'd never done anything like this before. This guy Don Haskins was a real wild man. And I was good at soldering. I was very good at silver soldering, so I did almost all the soldering. We put the thing together, spray painted it, delivered it on time.

And then I did another one on my own where I made captain's chairs out of wood. Same thing, a couple of inches high. There were only about 30 of them, I think, and delivered it to Saarinen. So we had that contact where we could see the models, you know. He was right behind Cranbrook. And then after I got out they moved and he died en route. When everybody was in transit, Saarinen died, and they were moving to Massachusetts or something. It was a question of whether the business would continue, which it did. It did continue.

Those were really wonderful experiences.

MS. YAGER: Now would those have been jobs that you were paid for?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Yes. We got paid for those. They were – what would happen – well, it was interesting. That was a source of conflict in the studio, which is one of the bad things about what happened with Thomas. He doled out the jobs, and so somebody would come in the studio, they would go to him and he would say, "Fred or Don, would you like to do this?" I always said yes, because I needed the money and because I wanted the experience. So I did all these jobs, and I prepared things all the time. I made it – I made insulators for this beautiful 17th century French – like a drinking cup or a mug out of silver, and it had ivory insulators in it that had dried up and cracked with age. I replaced those. So I did two pieces like that. And I – it was like – it was like working on museum – they were museum pieces and they were done actually for the librarian, Mrs. Barnes. I loved working for her.

So a lot of this stuff came in. One of the Saarinen's was an interior decorator, and so she would come in all the time with commissions to have somebody in the studio make something for one of her interiors. I did some – Aline Saarinen. I did some of those things at the time.

MS. YAGER: Well, what was the contention?

MR. FENSTER: Well, yes, I didn't explain that. The first time Dick doled out the job to fix this 17th century French mug. The second time Mrs. Barnes called and she said, "Oh, Fred, I have another one of those, could you fix it for me?" And I said, "Sure," without thinking. Well, anyway, Dick Thomas flipped because I bypassed him. And I didn't mean to do that, you know. I just thought it was reasonable that she talked to me, and she asked me to do it and I said yes. He got really angry at me, and he accused me of hovering near the phone, picking off the commissions. I said, "I'm not hovering, and I'm the only one here who's willing to take those on. None of the other students want to do that stuff. They don't know how to do it."

Michael Jerry got this really nice commission, a church commission to do a – I don't know, two chalices, or a chalice and the intinction cup, and a whole bunch of stuff for a church. And Dick said to Michael, he said, "Well, you have to give it to the other students." And Michael said, "They don't know how to do work of that caliber." And he said, "You have to give it out." And so Michael said, "Well, what if I don't give it up?" And he said, "Then you can't do it in the studio."

So Michael, we rented a little real estate building, just a little bungalow, and he did it in that bungalow. And I was able to watch him do the pieces, and I learned a lot. And the quality, Michael is a superb craftsman. The quality was beautiful.

MS. YAGER: So in some ways the students lost out by not even witnessing that process.

MR. FENSTER: Well, that was Dick's thing. He wanted to control everything, and I thought that his attitude was unreasonable. If we were a skilled group of people, that was one thing. Then Michael would have been willing. But he wasn't willing to compromise his designs by people who were beginners, you know, which is what we were.

MS. YAGER: You mean, Michael would have designed it, and someone else would have executed one of the pieces?

MR. FENSTER: That's the way Dick worked. Dick didn't do his own work. Dick designed things. Like I used to do his work. The big Cranbrook punch bowl, I made that. It's not my design, you know, and it's a nice bowl, but basically he had it spun commercially. It's big. It's like this.

MS. YAGER: About two, two-and-a-half feet across.

MR. FENSTER: And I planished it and I stoned it and I did all the grunt work on it, nothing creative there. Took me a week to clean the thing up and take the spinning rings out of it and planish it and get it all set up. Then he assembled it.

But you know, I benefited from doing that work, although I hated doing this particular one because it was really hard and it was hot as hell there. But I did chalices for him. There was a Lutheran seminary attached to Cranbrook and we would get commissions off – from that seminary. And I did I don't know how many chalices for them, where I would make the cups. He had the cups spun, and I would planish the cups and then build the rest of the piece. So it was good experience for me. It's one of the ways I started making cups, which I still make to this day. So there were, you know, that was a good thing.

But there was tension in the studio about the commissions and who got them and why they got them and so on. And I felt like throwing up my hands and saying, "I don't want to do this any more, you know. Give them to somebody else. I don't give a damn."

MS. YAGER: How many – you were there for two years?

MR. FENSTER: Yes.

MS. YAGER: And name some of your other fellow students.

MR. FENSTER: Well, Gudmund Jon Elvestad was a Norwegian that did the pewter.

MS. YAGER: How do you spell his last name?

MR. FENSTER: Elvestad, e-l-v-e-s-t-a-d. Gudmund, Jon, J-o-n Elvestad.

MS. YAGER: And who else?

MR. FENSTER: Don Haskins. Les Motz. Michael Jerry. Myself. Brent Kington was there the second year. Leilani Kam, k-a-m, was a Chinese girl from Hawaii. Richard Mazur, M-a-z-u-r, who became – he got the job here. Richard got the job. We all – five of us applied for the job. Richard got the job because the –

MS. YAGER: Here at University of Wisconsin?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. He got the job. Because characteristically the art department couldn't get off its behind to make a decision so they let the thing slide, and Richard showed up. Richard was very aggressive. He showed – he moved. He lived in a trailer camp in Stoughton. He showed up and they said, "Oh, we need somebody. Okay, you're hired." So they never even contacted me or any of the others. So then after three years he got – he was let go because he was not – he ran – he got into a head-to-head conflict with [Arthur] Vierthaler, the senior teacher, so he wasn't re-hired.

And then Harvey Littleton came to see me in Birmingham and asked me to come up for an interview, and that's when I came.

MS. YAGER: The woman, the Chinese student, was she the only female in the class?

MR. FENSTER: No. Betty Helen Longhi was there also. Stanley Lechtzin was there the second year. Stanley and I became really good friends. He was wonderful. He was just great. People have negative things to say about Stanley, but I think the world of him. He's a wonderful – I learned more about jewelry in a short time from Stanley because he had been working. He had a full studio set up at home. He was – he shared everything, you know. We became good friends.

MS. YAGER: Now why did he have so much training?

MR. FENSTER: He worked in the trade for a year. He went to, what was it, Cass Tech [Lewis Cass Technical High School] in Detroit, and then he worked in the trade for a year before he decided to go to grad school. So he knew how to buff. None of us knew how to polish, you know.

MS. YAGER: I think I read somewhere that Cass Technical High School, I'm pretty sure if I remember right they had five metals teachers at one point. This was a high school, but –

MR. FENSTER: Well, that's where Gene Pijanowski went also, and his background was really good.

MS. YAGER: I didn't realize that.

MR. FENSTER: He's in Hawaii now. Yes, he had a really good background because of that. Very technical, very good problem solving. And he – Stanley and Gene share some common traits, you know, about –

[Audio break. Tape change.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Fred Fenster in the artist's home and studio in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, on August 9, 2004 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disk number two, session number one.

Fred, we were talking about Cranbrook and fellow students. Can you talk about the second year, some of the people that were there?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Well, I think, you know, the best thing that happened at Cranbrook was the mix of students, both in the metal studio and outside. The second year Brent Kington came in and Stanley Lechtzin came in, which Stanley's presence was a real boon for me because I got to ask a million questions about jewelry and he answered them. I could ask anything I wanted, and he would give me a really good, comprehensive answer.

That year Stanley made Betty Longhi's engagement ring, and that was really fun to see that develop. Had a marquis diamond in it – or not a marquis diamond. It had a – yes, a marquis. A marquis diamond. Really a nice ring.

MS. YAGER: Now you mentioned Gene Pijanowski. Did they study together at [Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan]–

MR. FENSTER: They studied together, but they came – I don't know if they – I think they met at Cranbrook, from what I remember. But I didn't know Gene at that time. I didn't know Gene until well afterward.

MS. YAGER: They were both students of Phillip Fike, I believe.

MR. FENSTER: Were they? I didn't know that. I didn't know that. I know that they really, you know, spent time together at Cranbrook. I didn't realize they were students of Fike's. Fike was a very influential teacher.

MS. YAGER: I know that Fike really emphasized research, and I think Vierthaler emphasized –

MR. FENSTER: Emphasized research as well, and that was one of the really good things that he did. The other thing that he emphasized was drawing. He had everybody do a lot of drawing, and he

was quite good at drawing himself. So that was a – there were several people who came out of the program in Madison who were really wonderful. Fike was one, and Von Neumann was another.

MS. YAGER: Robert Von Neumann.

MR. FENSTER: Robert Von Neumann, who was Eleanor Moty's teacher, and of course she was my colleague for 25 years here. So you know, it's interesting how that turns on itself.

MS. YAGER: Phillip Fike talked about, in studying at University of Wisconsin at Madison, that there was a historical jewelry, or historical practices course. Do you remember this?

MR. FENSTER: I think that course was in the art history department, and it was probably taught by James Watrous, who – who basically taught about painting and he had the students experience these things by mixing up tempera paints and going through the processes that were used.

MS. YAGER: The actual minerals and – yeah.

MR. FENSTER: Doing the actual mixing and preparation of canvases.

MS. YAGER: So the hands-on appeal of learning –

MR. FENSTER: Right. And Watrous also did murals around campus that are ceramic tile murals, you know, with small tesserae. So as you go around campus, you can see these things. They're placed in various areas. That was a course, everybody loved that class. They talk about it all the time still, about how valuable it was for them in terms of understanding how a painter made his preparations. I don't know if that included print-making or not, but the paintings, the tempera painting is what I remember them talking about.

MS. YAGER: What were some of the things that Stanley was working on, and that Brent Kington was working on?

MR. FENSTER: Brent was working on a series of masks, copper masks that were basically formed on a stump and then he put the details in. And he also did very detailed castings. That's when he started those gold castings that were just sort of small figures, caricature figures. And he continued that as he got older. He made them for his son, I remember. They were cast in gold. And Stanley was doing really spectacular jewelry pieces. Did some hollowware in school and did the jewelry at home because he had much more control there. He had a really beautiful shop at home, very well organized studio.

We became – both our wives were French-speaking. My wife was from Belgium and she spoke French as a main language, and Stanley's wife of those years was also French, and so the women became friends. Stanley and I would see each other once or twice a week and share a lot of enthusiasm and information. Mostly I learned from him. I don't think he was learning that much from me, but I got a lot out of it. And he seemed to enjoy the contact. And then when he went to Tyler [Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania], you know, that kind of broke up the – didn't break the relationship up, it just meant we didn't see each other as often. But he was really helpful for me. He just – he was so open about sharing things and he was also very committed, hard worker, and so was I. And I was doing hollowware.

When I had my graduate show, I think I probably had the biggest show of hollowware that they ever had there. I had 22 pieces of hollowware and 40 pieces of jewelry, almost all of which had stone settings. So it was a lot of work. Some of the hollowware was pretty good.

MS. YAGER: Tell me what the – this was with pewter?

MR. FENSTER: It was everything. I wanted as much experience as I could get. The first major piece that I did was a Kiddush cup, which I thought I was making for my father, but the St. Paul Art Center bought the thing, so that was the end of that. And then I made a sugar and creamer in silver, which I actually saw at an antique store in New York City, one of these Russian antique places on 26th Street. But it was closed. I would have bought them – I would have bought them back but I

couldn't get to them. When I went back, they were not there any more.

MS. YAGER: When was that? How long ago?

MR. FENSTER: Probably about 10 years ago. I think those pieces were sold to somebody local. There was a woman, Mrs. Harmon, and her husband was a big electrical contractor near Cranbrook, and she bought a lot of the production that came out of the school metal shop. A very wonderful woman. And she bought a lot of my stuff. She bought the jewelry; she bought some of the hollowware. So I guess when she died they probably – the pieces probably went into the general population.

Yes, I worked in silver; I worked in brass, copper, bronze, pewter. I had some stuff plated. I tried to make my best piece in silver and I over-annealed it and it broke while I was trying to close it in. And I turned around and I made it in bronze. It's a really nice piece of work. But it was – I cut the silver up and I made jewelry out of it that was in the grad show, so everything got used, but it cost me about two weeks of time and the piece broke.

MS. YAGER: What was the central piece? You said your best –

MR. FENSTER: It was a teapot on a stand. It was a very Scandinavian-type teapot. It was on a swivel stand with an alabaster base. Handle was forged, had a really nice spout line. You could take it off the stand to pour or it could sit on the stand, you know, as a kind of permanent – what I was trying to do, I was trying to mimic what the program was at RIT. Michael had described – Mike Jerry had described the program very carefully, and that there was a hierarchy of pieces that were progressively more difficult. So I was trying – Cranbrook didn't have that kind of a structure. I was trying to make a piece that would fall into the masters range of pieces, you know, and at RIT it would have been a piece with a burner on the bottom to heat the liquid. It would have been a teapot with a heater on the bottom, either Sterno or alcohol or something like that. I didn't have a heater on mine, but the piece had an inside hinge where the hinge was inside the teapot so it was invisible. It had all kinds of complications that I put into it to learn a lot.

When I was there, I was very frustrated in not knowing how to structure my time, being there was no one telling me, or asking me to do a series of pieces. I thought, well, if I'm going to get something out of this, I have to figure out my own structures. So I wrote it out. I said, you're gonna do a bowl on a stand, then you're going to do this, then you're going to do this, then you're going to do this. And I set up seven teapots, one in silver, one in copper, one in bronze. There were several in bronze. And I just – all of them had different problems involved. One had hinges involved and a very elegant spout, so I had to learn how to make a spout, which I didn't know how to do, and Michael helped me with that.

So they were all graded. Each was a step up from the previous one. And that's what I did. I had a notebook, I wrote it out, I did my design. I spent a lot of time late at night designing and re-designing and re-designing and re-designing, and then I just sat down and made the pieces, all in pursuit of learning to control the process because if I was in Scandinavia I would have to submit a drawing, and then the piece would have to be made exactly to the dimensions of the drawing. They would check that. The guild would check it. They would stamp a piece of silver, they would give it to me, I would do the work in front of them, and at the end they would check to see that it was just like the drawings. So that's what I tried to do. And I pretty much did it except there was no guild checking, and so it was easier for me.

MS. YAGER: Self-guild.

MR. FENSTER: Right.

MS. YAGER: Tell me what Betty Helen Longhi, what kind of work she was doing.

MR. FENSTER: I don't remember too well. I mean, I don't remember what she was working on. I think that she was working on jewelry but the nature of it escapes me. We didn't have too much contact. She was a very nice presence in the studio. We all liked her, and we're still friends to this

day, and I just talked to her last week, as a matter of fact.

MS. YAGER: How about Leila –

MR. FENSTER: Leilani?

MS. YAGER: Leilani.

MR. FENSTER: Leilani Kam.

MS. YAGER: Kan?

MR. FENSTER: K-a-m. Leilani was – [laughs] – a study in uncertainty, I guess. She had won a design competition in I guess it was Hawaii, a silversmith's competition. I guess it wasn't in Hawaii. She won a – won a silversmith's competition. She got an award and none of us really knew anything about it. She just showed up one semester and she was really insecure. So we'd be sitting there working. There were eight of us in the room. We all had these really bad work benches and big square like woodworking tables that didn't have anything to do with a jewelry bench. And all of a sudden Leilani burst out, "You all think I don't deserve to be here, don't you?" None of us had thought about her because she was quiet up until that time.

And then somehow she got on the wrong side of several members of the class, like Richard Mazur, and they started really making fun of her in an ugly way. Like Richard called her a "Dragon Lady." Really awful. And the atmosphere in the studio went downhill. I actually came to the point where I did not like working there when the other people were around, which was one of the reasons I worked late at night.

But Leilani was not very confident, and she assumed that we were all against her, which we weren't. Until she opened her mouth, I don't think anybody was paying any attention to her at all. And I never knew what happened to her. I always wondered about what happened to her.

MS. YAGER: And how about Michael Jerry? What was he working on?

MR. FENSTER: Michael Jerry did jewelry. He did – when he came in he did the first casting I ever saw anybody do. I had never seen a lost wax casting before. And I watched him build a pin, and I still have slides of that pin with a citrine stone and it was very nicely designed. And the thing about Michael Jerry was that he had notebooks full of the most wonderful designs. Michael Jerry is one of those people, he draws like a savant. He can – I've never seen anybody like this before or since. He could start anywhere on the object and draw it, starting at any point and draw it in perspective. And he doesn't sketch. He draws the line as if it was on the page already, you know. To me that's miraculous.

He could start at the back of the object, you know, the front of the object, the top, the sides, and there's no – they're not tool lines anywhere. He draws it just as it is, and my mouth would hang open, you know. I was so envious of that kind of design ability. And he's got great hands. He had worked for Toza Radakovich for a year, Svetozar Radakovich, who was a, you know, really good jeweler.

MS. YAGER: Where were they located?

MR. FENSTER: They were at that time, he and his wife Ruth were located in Rochester, New York, and then they moved down to California.

MS. YAGER: Because he had spent a year at RIT with Hans Christensen.

MR. FENSTER: And he worked also for Ron Pearson, and so he had Radakovich with the casting, Ron with the forging. He came with such a wealth of background, and then a year at school with Hans Christensen, so he had more than all of us put together. And he's a very quiet, you know, self-effacing person, Michael. After a while we all realized how much he knew so we would go to him with questions, which caused Richard Thomas to get very upset because he was the teacher and we were going to Michael with questions.

The other thing was that the studio was not well equipped. We didn't have stakes. We didn't have a variety of stakes. We had – when I first went there, I saw a whole wall full of stakes, and I thought in my naiveté that this is incredible. There are seven rows and seven down, there are 49 stakes on that wall. Turned out there were seven stakes, seven copies of each stake, so there were seven stakes in the shop, not 49 stakes.

Michael had the benefit at RIT of what they did at RIT was that they cast – they made copies of the stakes in the studio and you bought what you wanted. So everybody turned to Michael because he had his stake set with him, and they're borrowing stakes and borrowing stakes and borrowing stakes. And somebody made the mistake of bringing that up at one of our weekly meetings and because Michael had been – got fed up with this thing over the church stuff, you know, and he was leaving, going back to RIT. And somebody said, "What are we going to do without Michael? We won't have any stakes." And Dick hit the ceiling and he gave us all a problem of designing stakes and having them cast. And so today you can buy raising stakes at Cranbrook, you know. I still have mine. And then we also, I don't know if you know about the C.F. Struck Corporation. They make stakes outside of Milwaukee in Cedarburg, Wisconsin, and in those days a whole stake set, nine mushroom stakes, eight – nine hammers, I guess, eight mushroom stakes and eight T stakes, it was \$42. So I still have my original set.

MS. YAGER: Are those the ones you had to finish yourself?

MR. FENSTER: Yes, you had to finish them yourself. The guy's not doing it any more. For years I bought them for school, you know. They were great. They were cheap, ten bucks for a hammer. In the early days it was \$12 for like a mushroom stake. Now at the end they were like \$24, which is still cheap. I still have the entire set downstairs, my original set. Never broke any of them.

So yeah, after a while we had plenty of stakes in the studio, but it took a while to get there.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about – oh, I wanted to know about the jewelry in your graduate show. Can you describe some of the pieces?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. People said it looked – they look like fishing lures. They all had movable parts. They all featured tumbled stones, so I was making the settings out of wax, out of that 20-gauge green wax and –

MS. YAGER: This is sheet or wire wax?

MR. FENSTER: Sheet wax, yeah. And somewhere I have the slides here. I use the slides now to show my students how bad my work was in those days, and I tell them, "You can do better. This is what I was doing way back. You can do way better than that." And at the time I obviously thought they were interesting, and I think at the time they were. But yeah, there were all kinds of stuff. They were combinations of casting and forging. I had learned a little bit of forging by watching Michael work. He – he worked for Ron Pearson who was, you know, did these wonderful forged chokers.

Interesting enough, I have a student working for Ron's wife now. A great kid who really understands how to forge.

MS. YAGER: Describe the show. Was it a solo show or a group show?

MR. FENSTER: No, no, no. It was a group show. The whole graduating class was in that show and we had this wonderful gallery, the Cranbrook gallery. When you see automobiles photographed, they had these big columns in the back. That's the Cranbrook gallery. They do the photography right there. They whip the coverings off the cars, they take their shots fast and they cover them up again and spirit them away.

Yes, this was a group show and the whole class was graduating and it was chaos. And it was one of the few times in my life where I got so angry. Everybody tried to grab off the best spots in the gallery, and so what they were doing was they were selfishly staking out their own space, and I couldn't believe that people who had been friends all year long were cutting each other to pieces

and insulting each other, screaming at each other. And I watched this and finally I said, I raised my voice because I was very quiet, and I said, “You know what? You people are destroying any chance you have to make this a good cohesive show by being selfish. So I tell you what – I’m going to walk out. You pick all your spaces and you fight it out and I’ll take whatever’s left.” And I walked out.

When I came back, they had calmed down, they gave me a really nice space, and they had apportioned the spaces in a way to make a really nice show. I came back late in the afternoon. I came back around 2:30, 3:00 o’clock. We put together a nice show, where everybody had a fair amount of space. I mean, people were doing things like channeling. When you came in, you had to walk down this aisle and then right at the end of the aisle there was Richard Mazur or somebody like that. So you could not – he would be the first person whose work you looked at. I thought it was ridiculous.

MS. YAGER: And now would this have been a public opening? Can you describe that?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. A movie star opening. Cranbrook was poor at that time. Now it’s plush, but at that time it was poor. And that one night they turned on the fountains in the, you know, the sculpture, the middle of the sculpture gardens there and the fish were spouting water and the underwater lights were on and it was magical. One guy in the design department had built a car, the whole car, and that was his graduate show, was that sports car, red, wonderful looking sports car with a beautiful fire engine red fiberglass body and he built the thing from zip, you know. Everything. He did it all. That was actually outside. They didn’t put that in the gallery. They had it at the entrance in the –

MS. YAGER: Where they photographed the cars?

MR. FENSTER: Right outside the door to the gallery. Anyway, that was a magical night. We’d never seen the place lit up like that before because they didn’t do it, you know, and they only did it for special occasions and that night was our graduation.

MS. YAGER: And did the public come?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. It was open to the public, and I remember getting this inquiry from the people at Cranbrook saying, “Would you like us to notify your hometown newspaper?” And I said, “Yeah, write to the *Times*, tell them I’m graduating.” [Laughs.] “Yeah, notify the *New York Times*, tell them I’m getting out. Sure to be headline news to them.”

It was a lot of fun. It was a wonderful opening.

MS. YAGER: And how long would the work have been up for?

MR. FENSTER: Well, you know, I’m not sure, but I remember when I came to Cranbrook the summer show was up, and I think it was the work of the people who had previously graduated. So I got a chance to go through the show at length and look at people’s work. And one of the interesting and memorable things that happened that summer when I arrived, because I came early – I came in the summertime, not in the fall – there was a ceramic guy named Donald Wright, W-r-i-g-h-t, who did pewter. Not a ceramic guy, I’m sorry. There was a pewter guy named Donald Wright who did pewter that looked like ceramics, and that was the first time I’d ever seen pewter used using the kind of ceramic sense or sensitivity or sensibility that I saw in the clay being made. I never saw anybody work pewter like that.

He textured it, he had offbeat forms, he didn’t have – his forms looked more like clay than metal but they were made of pewter and I thought, this is really interesting, you know. I had no idea how he worked with the metal until Gudmund started playing with the pewter. Gudmund played with it like it was silver. He treated it like silver but I didn’t. I treated it like it was clay when I began. I cut it, I slashed it, I slashed it with acid, you know, nitric acid. I was brush painting like, you know, a Japanese brush painter. I was very excited by it. I remember my hands were all yellow from acid burns, but it was so – everything was so immediate with this stuff. You didn’t have to wait for it to

etch, you know. You just, “Pow!” and it etched right there. It smoked while it was etching. It was like God. You felt like you were writing the Ten Commandments on it. It would smoke. It would spiral smoke. No wonder I got – I was so burnt up. I was so excited I didn’t pay attention to it. And I wasn’t hurt or anything. My skin just turned yellow.

MS. YAGER: What sort of acid?

MR. FENSTER: Nitric. I was trying it in different concentrations and I was using like 50 percent nitric, 50 percent water. That’s really strong. Now when I do the pewter today –

MS. YAGER: Not recommended.

MR. FENSTER: No. It’s not good. You’re inhaling that stuff also. When I do the pewter today I use 14 parts of water to which I add one part of nitric, just to color it, you know, so it’s much – it’s really watered down.

MS. YAGER: Now the show, were people encouraged to buy things? Was that considered?

MR. FENSTER: They could, yeah.

MS. YAGER: Did people?

MR. FENSTER: I don’t remember, actually. I don’t know that I sold anything myself, but I do know that, you know, this woman I mentioned, Mrs. Harmon, she bought a lot of the jewelry that I made. She encouraged me to do that jewelry.

MS. YAGER: So that was not at the show –

MR. FENSTER: It wasn’t at the show, but the work was promised to her, so the work was in the show but she was getting it. I assume people sold.

MS. YAGER: And what happened to people – well –

MR. FENSTER: Gudmund went back to Norway and it’s interesting what happened, you know. Brent went down to found the iron program at Southern Illinois [Southern Illinois University-Carbondale].

MS. YAGER: Did this happen right away, like within –

MR. FENSTER: No. Within a couple of – well, he was still, you know, it was his first year and it was my last so he had another year to go. And then he got the job at Carbondale and he built – I mean, the strongest iron program in a university in the country.

MS. YAGER: Had there been a program there before?

MR. FENSTER: I don’t believe so. The other thing that Brent – Brent was a very, very – he knew how to talk to people. He was very, very good at, you know, he talked slowly, logically, very convincing, very nice personality, and he was really a slick guy. Was very, very slick when he was in Cranbrook, but after he got out he changed, you know, and he really got interested in teaching and he built a program that was extremely beneficial to the students. He got them scholarships. Every student – every grad student has a scholarship, you know. They were all two years. No other program that I know of has that. So he really worked with the students.

He just turned 70 a few weeks ago when I came back, I think the day I got back from Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina], Jan Craft called me up, and she said, “You know, Fred, Brent turned 70 today.” And I said, “I didn’t know that.” She said, “You might want to call him up.” And I said, “Nah, I don’t want to call him up.” But yeah, I have to admire what he accomplished, you know. He was really great.

And Stanley went on to – to do the Tyler program, you know. And it’s a program that, you know, set many standards on electroforming and computer generated jewelry, all the things that I’m not personally interested in, but I love the fact that Stanley was doing all of that, you know.

Photography. He's great. He's just born to do research and incorporate the results. And I came here and, you know, did the pewter thing here and that's worked out well for me.

Les Motz went down to Fort Wayne, Indiana [Indiana University-Perdue University, Fort Wayne] and taught down there for years. Betty Helen, I guess, you know, worked on her own. She still does that. She does workshops and she's working a lot on pewter now. She took a pewter session with me in Penland and was good from the beginning and she does a lot of pewter work now that I run into occasionally.

Let's see, who else was in that group. Michael went on to run a really successful program at Syracuse University, he ran a very good program there. John Marshall had originally set the studio up at Syracuse. He did a great job. Michael enhanced it. They had blacksmithing, they had a room – a separate room for everything, you know, for patinas, for raising, for – for hammering, for – a big jewelry room. I've done several workshops there. And yeah, that was a very successful class.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. One of the things I wanted to ask you about, I read reference to in 1961 you were an Army crafts instructor.

MR. FENSTER: Oh, yeah. Right after I got out of Cranbrook. I – I applied for I think it was 240 and – you get this big book with all the art departments listed, you know. So I just looked at the book and I sent away letters to every art department. And I got about 40 letters back that showed an interest, and I did – Dick said, "Hey, there's a job open in Louisville, Kentucky." So I went down and I – I found that I was finishing everybody's sentences because they spoke so slowly. I'm a New Yorker, you know. I can't do that. And I thought, I can't come down here. My wife would hate it, and I'm going to get really edgy here so I didn't take the job.

But then this Army job came up where I was the assistant craft director of the 28th Missile Battalion that protects the Detroit area. Which meant that I was sort of a jack of all trades. I taught a little jewelry making, I taught – it was a great shop and I had a great boss, this guy Bruce Smyser. He's an absolutely fabulous guy. He's a graduate of Indiana University with Alma Eickerman. Not a metal guy. Sculpture guy. And Bruce was a wonderful boss and we hit it off well and I worked there for, I don't know, must have been, I don't know, the better part of a year, and it was an interesting job. I worked as a civilian for the Army, supervising the craft shops in these Nike bases. There were like 28 different Nike bases ringing Detroit.

MS. YAGER: I was interested in that because I read that they had these crafts shops in every single base.

MR. FENSTER: In every base. The more successful the crafts shop was, the less trouble you had with drinking and bad behavior on the base. So that the people who ran the best crafts shops were instrumental in terms of high Army morale. And it really – there was a very strong correlation.

MS. YAGER: So it was not about developing skills among the people. It was about keeping them busy and keeping them satisfied?

MR. FENSTER: Well, a lot of the people who attended the crafts shops were the dependents of the soldiers.

MS. YAGER: Children and –

MR. FENSTER: Not the children. The wives mostly. We had a lot of women doing the ceramics, slip cast – slip cast ceramics. And they loved decorating them and we had lots of molds. The guys came in mostly to do model airplanes that were motor driven, you know, with these little "nnneeehhh," you know, motors in them, and there were several very dedicated guys working on those. But the biggest – there were a lot of woodworking guys, too. A lot of guys came in to do woodworking. So basically it was a supervisory thing with Bruce on the home base and then I would go out and visit the shops one by one all week. I just drove an Army car around from base to base.

MS. YAGER: It interests me because, you know, the National Endowment for the Arts, they're now doing this link-up with the military, a writing program, Shakespeare on military bases.

MR. FENSTER: I think that's great. I mean, these – I never was in the service and I had a misconception. I – I came to respect the people I met a great deal. I thought that the discipline and the seriousness and the caliber of the people I met was extremely high. Most of the civilian personnel that I met was extremely dedicated to serving the GI personnel. There was a woman – I was – it was in Detroit on the – on the river between Canada and that was the base, Ft. Wayne. Yeah, I think that was the name of the base. Between Winnipeg and Detroit.

MS. YAGER: Windsor, between Windsor –

MR. FENSTER: I mean Windsor and Detroit. Anyway, the woman who was in charge of the, you know, recreation facilities, she had lost a boyfriend or her husband in the war and this woman had dedicated her life to serving soldiers, and I never met anybody who was a finer example of giving your life up to make other people happy. And my boss Bruce was like that also. He just did everything he could to build that program. And it would have been a steppingstone for me to go to Europe, you know. If I worked there for a couple of years I could have gone to Europe in that program and had a nice, you know, posting in Europe. But the University of Wisconsin thing came up, and I took it when it came up.

MS. YAGER: That was in 1962?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I came here in 1962.

MS. YAGER: And how did – how did that come about?

MR. FENSTER: A fluke, you know. The way most things in life are. Harvey Littleton was looking to replace himself in ceramics and he got Donald Reitz to do that, and then he was looking for a metal guy because the guy before me, Dick Mazur, they let him go for conduct inappropriate to somebody working there. So I had applied. My application was still there from before. They had never contacted me in any meaningful way, so when they did contact me, it was way too late and I just didn't even bother answering.

So Harvey came to Birmingham, Michigan, pulled up early in the morning, like 7:00 o'clock or something, and he said, "Are you still interested in a job?" I said, yeah. He said, "Can I come over? I'm here in town." I said, "Sure." So I put my pants on and the doorbell rang. He was right outside. So he – I don't think he was too impressed with me, but Harvey's one of these people who is over-awed by Europeans, and my wife was from Belgium and he started trying to speak French to her. Didn't pay any attention to me. They rattled on together and really enjoyed each other. The next thing I know he says, "Would you come up for an interview?" Just because of Josette, you know. And I said, "Yeah, okay." Not thinking I'd get the job because Michael Jerry had applied for the job and I thought – I was still naïve enough to think that the best person got the job.

So I came up and Michael, actually he had stopped off to see me on his way up, I figured I didn't have a chance in hell because I didn't stand up against him. So I had a very difficult interview. They were rude. Two of the people were absolutely rude. I had this old guy, Leo Steppat, who was from Austria. He came out of the concentration camps in Europe. He taught sculpture here, and his voice box was damaged in the concentration camp, and he said to me, "Mr. Fenster, did anyone ever tell you your work looks like shit?" And I said, "Not until today." He said, "What do you think of that?" I said, "You know, all of these pieces – all of these pieces were done as a learning experience," and actually – I told the truth. Actually I don't know how I feel about them myself. So I said, "I did them to learn a series – they were like a series of exercises. So I have mixed feelings about them which are not settled yet. And if you think they look terrible then that's what you think."

So it didn't rattle me. I mean, I figured I, you know, I wasn't investing a lot in this. And then he took me around and he asked me a lot of dumb questions about the stuff he did in sculpture, and I knew all the answers because I had spent a lot of time at Cranbrook looking at the sculpture studio

and all the stuff they did there. And then it turned out at the meeting he was a big supporter of mine, you know because I didn't blow up, I didn't call him names.

What I learned in the end is that it had nothing to do with merit. What they wanted was somebody who could get along with Vierthaler, somebody who was quiet, who wouldn't rock the boat, which is what Mazur did, who wouldn't – and Michael Jerry never had a chance. Michael Jerry's father was the curator of the Wustum Museum [Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, Wisconsin] in Racine. And members of the art department had had run-in's with Sylvester Jerry and he was off the map as far as anything positive happening. Because I tried to – I tried to get Michael a job there teaching design after, and they wouldn't even consider it. I said, "Why don't you bring him in for an interview and form your own opinion instead of saying no?" "No, we're not going to do that." He didn't even have a chance. I didn't know that.

So when I got the job offer, I was so embarrassed, you know. I felt that somehow I had taken a job away from Michael and I was – I felt so badly about it. I actually went to Syracuse to tell him personally, you know. I actually made a trip there, stopped off. I was making a trip with one of my students then. I told him face to face because I didn't think this was something you do on the phone. And I said, "I don't know how it happened, you know. I don't stack up against you. We both know that." He was angry. I didn't – I figured he should be angry.

So anyway, he took a job up at Stout and I took the job here.

MS. YAGER: Stout?

MR. FENSTER: Stout Institute, which is in Menominee, Wisconsin. It's about two hours, two and a half hours from here. So he taught there and I taught here, and it should have been the other way around.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about your first year of teaching here.

MR. FENSTER: First year of teaching was – I told you I looked very young. I was 25. Many of the students were older. Nobody believed I was the teacher. And I taught two metal classes and a class in what they call crafts, which was woodworking, metalworking, and I actually had a textile component, though I didn't know much about textiles. And I had – in that class I had mostly occupational therapy students who were wonderful. They were fabulous. And then I also taught a design class. I had four sections. And it was very hectic and I worked really hard.

And Vierthaler took me under his wing. I was over at his house every weekend. He treated me like his own son. Better, actually. Wouldn't act nice to his own sons. Treated me better. And as long as I didn't do anything to change things – he told me, he said, "Don't change anything. This is my shop. I don't want to see you do anything to change what's here. It's my – it runs the way I want it to run." So of course I tried to change things, you know. I built racks for the stakes; I tried to organize the place. Vierthaler had a – he had a big shop coat with a lot of pockets and everything was in the pockets, which meant that the dapping block was in the pockets, the draw plates were in the pockets. So when I needed something, I couldn't get stuff.

So I started ordering things for myself. And which he allowed, and I set up a tool cabinet that we both could use, with racks, the way an industrial art guy would do it. Everything had a name and a place and the students were required to clean up and put everything back, and he said, "I don't want that in here," you know. I said, "This way we both get to use everything. The other way I have nothing. It's all in your pockets and you lock your coat up and I'm dead." And he said, "You can't do that." And I said, "You have a key and I have a key. We both have." He wouldn't do it. I don't know why. He just wouldn't do it because it meant sharing and he was the senior guy and he didn't have to do it.

So anyway, things deteriorated. We got along well for two years and then we had another two years that weren't very good, and then we moved from the old education building to this new building where we are now, and it was very chaotic. And when we moved, Vierthaler took the whole year

off. Never showed up. He was in town. Never showed up to check on anything. So I thought, you know what? He's not here. I'm going to do the thing the way I want it. Because he wouldn't let me change anything, so I couldn't change his designs that he fought with the architects over. It was a really stupid design. You had to go out in the hall to get from one room to another. You had to physically go out in the hall, go around. So what I did when nobody was looking on a weekend was I cut through the walls and I framed in doorways. I put two doorways and three windows in.

And when he came back after that year – he hadn't shown up one single time – he hit the roof. He said, "You change my" – he was a tough guy.

MS. YAGER: I heard he had a booming voice.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. He was a phys ed instructor. He wasn't big but he was very – he had fighting medals from the Army, boxing medals. Scary guy. Little shorter than me but physically very rugged. And he said, "You had no right to do that." I said, "You weren't here. I had to make decisions." He said, "You had no right. You should never have done that." I said, "It's done, and it's better. It's better. If you look at it, you have to admit that it's better."

He didn't plan for a buffing room, for instance. He gave himself two offices, one in that room and then one in the grad room. Two separate big offices. So I took one of the offices, the one that was supposed to be for me, and I made it into a buffing room, a really good buffing room. And I made it so we shared the other office, and he said, "I'm not sharing an office with you, Freddy." And I said, "That's the choice that you make, you know. I'm happy to share an office with you."

And he said, "I'm not teaching with you." He said, "I don't want you in the end room. Don't – don't put your nose in there. That's my room. I'm not coming into these rooms any more because you changed them." And then he stopped talking to me, except to yell. So for seven crappy years, or probably more like four crappy years, there were two years that were okay, the first two, and then a medium year, and then the rest of it was bad. And then he moved out of metal and hired Eleanor [Moty]. Without telling me. Didn't say a word to me. Didn't put me on the committee to work with Eleanor. Nothing. He just – he and Harvey hired her. And he didn't know that I knew Eleanor, we were friends from Tyler because I went to do workshops there and visit Stanley. So I was very happy about it.

And then he left metal entirely and taught only drawing. And then Eleanor and I had a chance to build a good program. But he basically sat on the program before that and he didn't work in metal for many, many years. He wasn't that interested. He didn't pay any attention.

MS. YAGER: Was he an enamellist?

MR. FENSTER: No, he did – what he was was – when I came he was a really good teacher because he had a very strong personality and he – the drawing thing I thought was great and his style of teaching was really good. He was emphatic. He would do things like – he would get a lot of GI's from the war who had the GI Bill so they had money to buy materials so they worked in silver. He'd have a fistful of change, you know, and he had this big rough voice and this big personality and he'd take the change and he's fling it all over the room, this big room that we had in the old building. And he'd say, "You see that? If you cut your piece out of the middle of that silver, you're throwing your money away. Cut it at the edge." You would think you wouldn't have to tell people, but all beginners do the same thing, you know. They cut the piece out of the middle. Stuff like that that nobody ever forgot. He had a fantastic personality. He was a sailor.

His thing was always to test people, get the better of people. So when we were still on reasonable terms he said, "When are you going to go sailing with me?" And I said, "Well, one of these days, Art." He said, "Do you get seasick?" I said, "Yes, probably," because it was in like mid – Lake Michigan. I knew it was a test, you know, and so I said, you know – so finally after being badgered for two years I said, "I'll go sailing with you." And I went for five days of being browbeaten, and attempted humiliations. Except that I never knuckled under, you know. In my quiet way, you know,

I stood up to Art and he was the one who actually ended up getting rattled.

So we went out, me and him and his wife, five days together on the boat without getting off the boat. And it turned out he wasn't a very good sailor because Lake Michigan is really treacherous, and I didn't – I had been sailing a couple of times in my life and I said, you know, we were going around the tip of Wisconsin is Green Bay – or it's not Green Bay, it's – there's a channel there. It's called the Door of – the Porte des Morts, Death's Door, and the winds get really wild and there are reefs all over the place and there's lots of wrecks up there.

So the boat had heeled over at an angle where the side-rail was buried in the water, and I wasn't even standing on the bottom. I was standing on these cabinets at the side of the boat. And it was cold and it was wet and very dangerous and I said – and the wind was screaming. I said, "What happens if one of us falls overboard?" And he said, "You won't last four minutes in the water. You've got about four minutes and you'll die." So I said, "Okay," you know. I looked at the nearest island and I thought, that's what I'd have to go for, you know.

Well, the more time I spent with him the more I realized he didn't know how to sail properly, you know. So we'd get around, we came around the island, and then he's – he's a drinker. Vierthaler was a drinker, which is one of the difficult things with him, and he needed to get boozed up. And we tried to get into Fish Creek, which was an area that I had taught at previously. We tried to get in and we tried to get in and we tried to get in. There was this crazy wind coming off the headlands and couldn't get in. And he's getting really frustrated, and I'm thinking, the sailboat has a motor in it. Why doesn't he start the motor? And I thought, must be a macho thing. You don't do it if you're a sailor. You don't start the motor.

So it was getting dark. It was getting too dark to see, and I said, "Art, I don't want to be impertinent or anything, but why don't you just start the motor?" And he goes, "The motor!" Started the motor and we motor in. We have a nice dinner and Art gets drunk as a skunk and he's – luckily he's a pleasant drunk, but he's a terribly sexist guy, starts insulting all the women in the place and I'm turning red as a beet, you know.

But in the meantime, you know, he's yelling at me all the time about this and about that and I'm handling the tiller and he's got to change the sails, go fast, go slow, and he's getting very frustrated. I said, "You know, what? You did a stupid thing. You took two people out, neither one of us – not your wife Ruth nor I know a thing about sailing. Then you're screaming at us for being ignorant. So who's the ignorant one here?" So he didn't like that kind of thing. I said, "You put yourself in a position and you get angry at us? We should be angry at you."

The other thing that happened was, I got seasick and he seemed really happy when I got seasick because he doesn't get seasick. He's like a rock. This guy is so tough. And then after about – you know, you start shaking with chills and everything, nauseous. So it was about 4:00 in the morning when I got seasick, and they covered me up with all these sails. I had a pile of sails on top of me. And all of a sudden the sun came out and the water – there's a very sharp chop that a lot of people who don't get seasick get seasick. And then all of a sudden I felt better. My strength came back, I stopped, you know, feeling nauseous and shaking. Pushed the sails aside, stood up, and said, "I can take the tiller now. I'm okay." And he said, "What?" I said, "I'm fine, I'll take the tiller and you can do whatever you've got to do." "Hmmpmph." He didn't like that, you know, because I didn't stay sick. And then he was angry at me the whole rest of the way back. But he took – all the faculty had to go through this.

MS. YAGER: He was interested in geology.

MR. FENSTER: Very – a lot of – yeah. In fact, he – he found the biggest greenstone in the United States that he found diving in Lake Michigan, Superior, whatever.

MS. YAGER: Yes, my – Robert Engstrom, one of the people that I studied with –

MR. FENSTER: Yeah, I know Robert.

MS. YAGER: I think they went together on those trips.

MR. FENSTER: Well, what you didn't hear about that trip was that the weekend that he went to present, he was going to be – make this, you know, presentation, the newspapers wrote it up, it was written up here in Madison. He got into a fight, you know, and he ended up in jail that weekend.

MS. YAGER: Who?

MR. FENSTER: Vierthaler.

MS. YAGER: Oh.

MR. FENSTER: His son was in a bar drinking, Eric, his oldest son – he got into a physical fight, you know, and he was arrested and he was clapped into jail and he had to get the senator from Wisconsin, Proxmire, to have this thing expunged so it looked good, you know, on the record. But that was Vierthaler. And he was a very exciting guy. I mean, his – the stories of his explorations and the stuff he did, I used to love his lectures, you know. He prospected for silver up in the place called Silver Island in Canada where it was a drowned island with mine shafts going under the lake horizontally, and he was diving in those shafts, which turned out to be dangerous. So he – what he did, they were full of silver ore, high quality silver ore, and what he did was he collected the ore, cached it on the bottom of the lake, marked it, didn't tell anybody, had the faculty invest money in this company where they were all going to make a lot of money because he's going to get a lot of silver.

Everybody lost money and Vierthaler came out with all the ore, which he very intelligently sliced into specimen samples. He was being paid by the newspaper, the *Milwaukee Journal*, to write this up. He's being paid by, I think it was *True* magazine to write it up because they were doing underwater dynamiting. He gave lectures where he sold pieces of the ore off, you know, bit by bit. He had a big diamond saw at home in Wan – he lived in Waunakee. He just made money from every direction. So that's not my mindset, you know. I thought, okay, it's fine, you know. That's what you do, that's what you do. But there was something smelly about the whole thing.

MS. YAGER: What was your teaching philosophy, as it developed, I'm sure –

MR. FENSTER: My teaching philosophy was to give the students as solid and as comprehensive a grounding in as many facets of metal work as I could. And being I had the industrial art background, you know, I had a very logical way of teaching it. If you talk to any of my students, they'll tell you that, you know, I cover things very carefully, I demonstrate everything. I never talk about things that I don't do. I do it while they're watching. If I teach soldering, I'm soldering. I'm talking about it, I'm explaining it, I'm doing it, I'm giving handouts on it, you know. So I'm showing slides. And that's what I try to do, to cover it in as many ways and as comprehensive a way as I can. And to work individually with the students so that there's no – you know, I'm not a factory turning out students who are competent, but I'm trying to get to you as an individual so you can put your own particular twist on things.

So you start out with a given kind of a generic problem, then every student puts their own twist on it as they do it and they learn the technique while they're doing it. They also – I think one of the things that's very true of students today is they don't have any self-confidence. They don't – most people today don't have any experience working with their hands and they don't know what they're capable of, and it's the hardest thing to overcome in teaching, to get them to believe that they can make professional, well-done objects that are – will stand up next to anything, you know. And once they do that, you've got them, you know. Once they do their first problem and they do a competent job with it, it's like magic, you know. They just get really enthusiastic, so that's what I try to go for.

And I think that I do really well with the beginners, probably better with the beginners than I do with the grad students, and that's why I'm glad that Eleanor was my partner, because in many ways I think that she filled in for areas that I wasn't that good at, and I think Lisa is the same way. She's really great in sparking the graduate students.

MS. YAGER: This is Lisa Gralnick.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. She's terrific. I mean, nobody can replace Eleanor. Eleanor was just amazingly good, but Lisa, she just is so experienced and so knowledgeable. She's so sharp. I mean, she reads art criticism the way people read comic books, you know. She loves it. I hate that stuff, absolutely hate it. I, you know, she loves reading it and she reads it a lot. She's a very heady, intellectual minded person, without being snooty or stuck-up or superior. She's very down to earth. She's a really fine woman.

MS. YAGER: Tell me some of the students that you had. I know you had my professor, Paul Mergen.

MR. FENSTER: Paul was a wonderful student. The first run-in I ever had with Vierthaler was due to Paul. He doesn't know it. We were sitting in a car and Vierthaler says – Vierthaler was feeling very expansive about Paul. He was graduating, his work was good. He says, "Well, Paul, you know, to what do you attribute your success?" Thinking that Paul's going to say, "To you, Professor." And Paul says, "To Fred, since Fred can" – because Paul's a natural hammer man. I mean, that's what I – he took the hammer like no one I've ever seen. And Vierthaler said – I watched Vierthaler's face. I was really sorry he said that. His face went down. I thought, oy. Anyway –

MS. YAGER: Is that when you got the – invited on the boat? [Laughs.]

MR. FENSTER: Well, that invitation was always standing out there. It was like a noose hanging over my head. I had to do it.

Then there was a guy with Paul, in that same class, Skip –

MS. YAGER: Skip Hunter.

MR. FENSTER: Hunter. Yes, Fred Hunter. Skip Hunter. Very nice guy.

MS. YAGER: From – who's in Ypsilanti now. Michigan.

MR. FENSTER: Ypsilanti, right. He's been retired now for quite a while, I think.

MS. YAGER: Really?

MR. FENSTER: What's his name, John Jaucquet, who was up in New York State.

MS. YAGER: How do you spell –

MR. FENSTER: J-a-u-q-u-e-t. I'm not sure if there's a C in there or not. And he originally was a printmaker, you know. I just saw his prints down at Penland, the woodworking teacher down there, Doug Sigler has a whole wall full of John's prints, and those prints were in the graduate show. That was the first group I was ever involved with.

Oh, God, there are so many good people that came out. Well, I had the two pewter guys, Eric Olson and Jon Michael Route. People teaching all over the high school, junior college system. Trying to think of the people – oh, the girl who teaches at the Worcester Arts Center, Sarah – I can't get her name. A little bit of a thing. We just had a girl graduate, she's teaching at the University of Idaho in Boise [Anika Smulovitz].

MS. YAGER: Oh, Carol Kumata.

MR. FENSTER: Carol Kumata's another one. Carol was good no matter where she went. I really can't take credit for that, although I think Eleanor was really good with her, better than I was, but everything she did was absolutely gorgeous. She just was superb. The only thing I can take credit for, she came to me, she – when she graduated and she said, "I have a real problem." And I said, "What's your problem, Carol?" And she said, "I got two job offers, one in California that I'd really love to teach, to take, and the other one at Carnegie Mellon [Carnegie Mellon, College of Fine Arts, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania]." And I said, "Is that a tenure-track position?" And she said, "Yes." And I said, "What's the other one in California?" She said, "One year." I said, "Take the Carnegie Mellon

and then go to California on a year's leave. It doesn't make sense for you to go for a year and be in the same position a year later looking for a job." And she's done really well with Carnegie Mellon. A wonderful woman.

MS. YAGER: I read a quote, you were saying that there – every now and then you had a student that was just too good to screw up.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Right. Carol was one of them. Nothing.

Let me see, there was the head of the program in – damn, I was just looking at her slide. Oh, I'll tell you somebody I'm really proud of is an undergraduate, Lucy Puls. She's head of the program at Davis [University of California-Davis]. Wonderful girl. Fine woman.

MS. YAGER: I went to school with her at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence].

MR. FENSTER: That was one that was – you know, it's interesting, she has a brother who looks like her twin. Same size, same black hair, color skin, you know, olive skin. Beautiful. They're both beautiful people. Lucy was straight as an arrow. I went to Lucy's wedding. She got married outside of Milwaukee here. Eleanor and I both went. She was always wonderful and always talented.

Carol Casalia. I don't know if you ever ran into her. She's from Philadelphia. These are the people we've invited to be in our retrospective show at the Elvehjem [Elvehjem Museum of Art], if it ever happens.

Bruce LePage, you know him at all? He's a great guy.

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MR. FENSTER: Another hammer guy.

MS. YAGER: He did a blacksmithing workshop in Kalamazoo.

MR. FENSTER: He's great. He's the most wonderful guy.

MS. YAGER: Yes. I own a piece of his.

MR. FENSTER: Oh, you do? He did some engraving for me. He's – he's a gun engraver now and he works – he's still in Wisconsin. He's up north. He's married to a potter, Chris, a very fine woman.

MS. YAGER: I read somewhere that you – that you never worked – you preferred to have your studio in your home rather than in school.

MR. FENSTER: Yes, I don't work at school.

MS. YAGER: What's your thought on – some – I only knew a couple of people that have kept studios. Phillip Fike did.

MR. FENSTER: Yes.

MS. YAGER: A few have, and many just haven't. What's your thought on that?

MR. FENSTER: Well, when I'm in school, I'm 100 percent there for the students, you know. I don't get distracted with my own work. And when I'm home, you know, I take phone calls all the time, people call up with questions. They know that they can feel free to do that, and they often come out here for instruction or advice or because they're upset about something, so I'm not isolated from them when I'm home. But basically when I'm home I feel a certain kind of freedom to do my own work.

But when I'm in school, I rarely attempt to do anything that requires any real decision making. There are things that I do that are therapeutic and I do these – we all laugh about it, but I do these salt and pepper shakers when I'm in school because they're a tension reliever. I do them at the end of the term. I tell students that I'm doing them and that they can interrupt me whenever they want, you know, so I don't take their time away. But that's when I do all of these. Those four and three

quarter inch salt and pepper shakers, I have about six different varieties. There's a pair sitting downstairs.

MS. YAGER: Do you have a standing order for them? Is that why?

MR. FENSTER: No, I just like doing them. They're really interesting design problems, and I tend to work that way. I tend to – I'll say, "Okay, this is your problem, Fred," you know. You have a – and I talk to myself like that. You have a certain size disk. I tried four-inch disk, three and a half inch disk, five inch disk. I finally thought, four and three-quarters is the most comfortable size for me. And how many things can you make out of a pair of disks that you dome and put together? How many different designs can you get out of that? It seems like it's endless. The more I do, the more I do that.

I have a really nice spiral pattern downstairs that I did. I did them at Penland but I haven't finished them yet. I have to just fill the holes and do the finishing on it, you know. But they're sketch pieces, you know, for other things that will eventually happen.

MS. YAGER: I wanted to talk about some of the – let's see. How about if we do workshops? I have mentioned, or I have noted that you have done workshops teaching pewtersmithing, ceremonial works, jewelry making, and the tally that I – that you had sent from 1995, which I'm sure was an under-count, counted 115.

MR. FENSTER: Oh, is that right? I have no idea. I've done forging workshops, hollow ring construction workshops. General jewelry making workshops. Stone setting workshops.

MS. YAGER: Now these are, you know, one and two and three-day, or sometimes you just return from –

MR. FENSTER: The pewter workshops can be anywhere from two days to two and a half weeks. The one I did in Taiwan was two weeks.

MS. YAGER: That was the one you just returned from?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. The one from Penland was two weeks. That's a good amount of time. Before the Penland thing I did one at the Appalachian school [Appalachian Center for Craft, Smithville, Tennessee] that was five days, and that worked really well.

MS. YAGER: Tell me how teaching at a workshop, how does this compare with, you know, what – why do you do so many of these, and what – there must be something really successful for the students –

MR. FENSTER: Well, they're intense, you know. They're intense. Teaching at the university is fragmented. You teach for two hours and 20 minutes and then you don't see the students for a weekend or day, you know, and it's just cut up in all kinds of little pieces.

Excuse me a minute. [Phone rings. Break in conversation.]

MS. YAGER: Let's see.

MR. FENSTER: Where were we?

MS. YAGER: We were talking about lectures. We were talking about workshops and the intensity that you can get –

MR. FENSTER: Right. I like the intensity, and then you have a captive audience, and then you have people that are really rubbing off on each other with a sense of immediacy, and you can just get a lot done in a short time that you can't get in a regular teaching situation. So what I get out of the workshops is I learn something from every one of them, you know, either because somebody has an odd way of looking – or a different way of looking at things, or they have insights that I haven't had, or I have insights just because it's a new situation and a new environment. I come out of there with knowledge and just a new set of ideas almost every workshop that I do.

MS. YAGER: And are the students who are taking these workshops, are they – are they first-timers, amateurs, are they very professional, you know?

MR. FENSTER: The reason I'm smiling is that I never put any stipulation on it before I did a workshop at Peters Valley, and this was like the third workshop I'd done, and I didn't mind having beginners, I thought it was all great. But I had an 81-year-old couple in that workshop, and they decided that I was the camp counselor and I was there to make projects for them. And I really bridled at that, and I got – the first time in my life I got really ratty, you know, and short-tempered with them because I hated being in a position of dealing with people who, number one, wouldn't listen to me at all, and number two, resented my trying to get them to think for themselves. They wanted me to do the work and hand them the piece, and I said, "I'm not going to do that. You're going to have to do it." "But we're old, you know, we're weak physically." And I said, "You should have taken something else then. I'm not doing your work for you." So, you know, as a kind of a compromise I got them to do what I thought they were able to do and then I would step in and help them with the finishing.

But since that time I've stipulated that I want somebody with basic jewelry experience, and it's been fine.

MS. YAGER: Now do you have regular students from, you know, Wisconsin, for instance, that might opt to come to a workshop because of the intensity?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Oddly enough, there was a woman who took a workshop with me, a pewter workshop two years ago at Penland, from Milwaukee, Leah. And then she showed up at Appalachian School, which I didn't realize, and she took another pewter workshop and then she told me she had signed up for Penland also. So in this summer she signed up for two workshops. And she's not a student at the university but she lives and works in Milwaukee and she works very hard, very intelligent, she does good work and I was very happy to have her because she's got a strong work ethic. And everybody in that – the whole summer, this whole summer everybody's been great in the workshops. Very rarely do I have people who are not willing to work or are too immature or – I mean, everybody who comes in gets kind of infected with the work ethic.

I work in the workshops, you know. I make pieces in the workshops. I do them as demonstration pieces and then I try to do some pieces that are – start out as demonstration pieces that I work on on my own. So that seems to work. They see me working all the time they're going to stay in the studio.

Mary Ann Scherr was teaching at Penland at the same time I was, and I thought I was a strong dedicated teacher, but that woman started at the same hour of the day that I did, and at 11:00 o'clock in the evening, when I left – she's going to be 84 – she was still in the studio actively teaching and demonstrating with people. I came away with just a wonderful admiration for her.

MS. YAGER: I have a quote from her on your work.

MR. FENSTER: She's really – I mean, that's the first time I ever saw the full run of her slides. It's astonishing the amount of work, and the breadth of the work was amazing. We became – we've taught twice before together at Penland, but this time we really bonded and became good friends.

MS. YAGER: I'm not coming across it. I remember her saying something about what she – oh, that you had restored the use of pewter to the American craft scene.

MR. FENSTER: Yeah, I don't – I don't think that's true. I mean, there was this woman, Frances Felton, on the East Coast, up in Massachusetts. She did that long before I got to it. And I think the guy that I look up to is Jack Prip. Jack Prip made pewter exciting, you know. Before Jack Prip people were doing basically silver knockoffs of pewter, you know. And Jack – that's what Francis Felton. Everything looked like silver, and this book *Modern Pewter* [New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1973] by Shirley Charron, who is one of Frances Felton's students, everything looks like silver, you know, and it shouldn't because it's its own material. It can if you want it to, but I don't

think it should.

So somebody asked me about Shirley Charron's book, and I said, "It's got some interesting stuff in it, but these are my objections," and the room got really quiet. Of course I told them exactly the way I felt. I said, "It's got valuable stuff in it, I can't find any fault with the book as far as it goes. It just doesn't go far enough," you know. It doesn't go into the nature of pewter itself rather than trying to make it bright and shiny. Everything in the book is bright and shiny, you know. Looks like silver if you don't pay attention too much. So that's ridiculous.

MS. YAGER: Well, maybe it's time for your book.

MR. FENSTER: Well, maybe now that I'm retiring.

MS. YAGER: All your collections.

MR. FENSTER: I'll get fed up with myself and I'll start writing. I used to write reasonably well, when I tried writing. I – I outlined a book for Tim McCreight, you know, for his press. I outlined a book and then I just kind of couldn't put two words together coherently, you know. I just – so I stopped. I found it very frustrating trying to write. The outline I thought was pretty good. And I thought I'll write it with – oh, Matthew Hollern is another one who's one of my – he graduated from Tyler but he's one of my guys through and through, you know. He's a pewter guy.

MS. YAGER: He's down at the Cleveland Institute [Cleveland Institute of Art, Ohio].

MR. FENSTER: Yes. He's a really fine – he's from Madison. Dad's a lawyer there.

MS. YAGER: I didn't know that.

MR. FENSTER: Lives on the west side of town. A wonderful guy.

When my wife died, I was very broken up and I hadn't – two weeks after she died I had arranged to do Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine], thinking I needed diversion. So I went up to Haystack and turns out Matthew signed up for my class and I said, "Why did you do that? You already took a pewter class with me." He said, "I just want to – I just want more." And that was a lie. He was coming up there to take care of me, you know. Because I didn't realize in what bad shape I was but Matthew did. And sure enough, when I got there, I've always been strong physically; I was weak as a child. I could hardly stand up. All the – all the, you know, five and a half months of taking care of Valmai and having it suddenly end, all of that all of a sudden descended on me and I became exhausted and weak child, like a child. Weak as a child. And Matthew was always there. Matthew was watching over me.

We used to have chinning contests, you know, pull-ups, and so Matthew challenged me once again as he'd done many times before. And the deal was that I would do one more than anybody else. That was the way I responded to a challenge. And he said, "Well, how many can you do?" And I said, "One more than you." So he practiced and right at the end of our session he did 20 pull-ups, and I said to him, I said, "Man, you got me. There's no way. I haven't practiced. There's no way I can do anything like that." I did 21, and my shoulder was out of place for about six months. I never said anything to him. I wrecked myself. I couldn't believe I did 21. That's the most I ever did. That was very funny. But as I said, he's a sweet – just the nicest young man.

MS. YAGER: Well, I think this tape is just about to wrap it up. So shall we close for the day?

MR. FENSTER: Okay, that's fine. Sure.

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Fred Fenster in the artist's home and studio in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Today is August 10, 2004. This is for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disk number three, session number two.

Fred, just before we started recording, you started to relay a story about *Popular Mechanics*. Would

you go on and talk about that?

MR. FENSTER: Well, when I first started teaching, I was teaching junior high school in a kind of a tough school in the Bronx, and I was trying to – I was teaching metal work to kids through – 7th through 9th grade. And I was trying to put together a series of projects that would motivate these kids to work hard and not give me the discipline problems that I was having. So I culled through two shoulder-high stacks of *Popular Mechanics* magazines that I got from a friend of mine and I dragged them back in segments for about 10 blocks, and then dragged them up to my fifth floor walk-up apartment across the street from the school in which I was teaching, and I kept making these trips. And every day after school I'd go through each volume page by page and pick out the relevant materials and re-design it, make duplicate copies, and put it out as possible projects for the kids to use. And it worked. I built a very good studio and a very good group of students came out of that, those efforts, so it was worthwhile.

MS. YAGER: How many years of *Popular Mechanics* do you think that was?

MR. FENSTER: Well, you figure like 12 issues makes a year, and it must have been – so a year would be about, let's say a year would be six inches high. Two shoulder-high stacks must have been – I don't know. A lot of years. My friend – I always had a subscription to this magazine for as long as I can remember, and my friend, who had similar interest, also had a subscription and he had saved all of his and they were in the basement of his home. And so I was able – they were tied up with string and I was able to just pull the stacks apart and set them up so I could carry one stack in each hand and then drag it for the 10 blocks to my – my walk-up.

MS. YAGER: Many people have talked about the influence of periodicals such as that. What other periodicals would you have subscribed to at that time and over the years?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I don't remember when *Craft Horizons* – it wasn't *American Craft* then. *Craft Horizons* was publishing, but that, as soon as that started, you know, I got – I got all the issues of that. I don't think at that time it was – but there was very little printed material in this country and I only had one book to kind of learn jewelry from at the time. And my friend Al Pine put me on to other publications that were mostly printed in Europe and England, English books mostly, and they were helpful.

But my early days of teaching, it was just wrestling to get some kind of a structure to deal with these kids who were really problem kids. They gave – they put all the problem kids, boys, all boys, in the shop classes and that's what I taught.

MS. YAGER: In talking about the publications, were there any particular writers that were significant to you?

MR. FENSTER: That's a long time to remember back. I really didn't – until I went to Cranbrook and I had access to a library there, I had very little contact with written material pertaining to metal work, except this stuff connected with the industrial arts program, and that was mostly machine metal, or sheet metal working and mostly mechanical ways of working with metal. My teacher at City College, Professor Keane, was really instrumental in pushing us out so that we made periodic trips to Greenwich Village and really went through these early guys like Paul Lobel and Ed Wiener and Art Smith. And these people were doing exciting work, and I came into contact with that very early.

And I would make – I would go down there every week, you know, and just kind of put my nose up against the window and look at everything they had. Sam Kramer, you know, was another guy.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember going into any of their shops, and can you describe –

MR. FENSTER: Yeah, I was shy about going in because I was a shy person, and I figured I wasn't going in to buy and it wasn't really fair to raise somebody's hopes. But they could look at me and tell I wasn't going to buy. But I did go in, and they had good windows, you know. Like Paul Lobel really did exciting work, you know. He did kind of figurative abstract musicians playing a cello or

something, and they were beautifully done.

There was another guy who did marriage of metal things, you know, inlays, who had a really strange name that I can't remember now, and I – I was amazed at how good these things were. Art Smith's work was very exciting, and Sam Kramer's work was very – had a lot of energy in it. I didn't like it because it was kind of sloppy, but it had a tremendous amount of energy and inventiveness to that.

MS. YAGER: What was his facility like, or his –

MR. FENSTER: The store was – the store was like what you would call a head shop today. The doorknob was a hand, so you had to shake hands with the door to get in, that kind of thing. And the work was very crazy. He used taxidermy eyes and it was – it was a very free-style, you know. In other words, whatever entered his mind would show up in the work. It's not like he spent a lot of time designing. He would react to the metal in the situation and just throw his stuff together. And some of it was wonderful and some of it was really too crude for my taste. I like a more refined way of working.

At that time I had never done any silversmithing and I didn't understand raising, but there were, I think, one or two people in Greenwich Village who actually were raising silver and they had it in the window and I didn't really understand what I was looking at.

MS. YAGER: Was this in their own window or in –

MR. FENSTER: No, in their – in the window of the shop that they were working in. And at that time I was just setting up a shop for myself in this basement gymnasium that I mentioned yesterday, so I was looking at everything that I could look at. In addition to going to Greenwich Village, our teacher brought in a filigree craftsman from Saudi Arabia, Mr. Najer, and he brought in all these incredibly delicate, finely wrought out of the thinnest wire, delicate bracelets and things like that. And Mr. Najer worked for very rich people and his whole workshop was packed up in a little suitcase because it was basically pliers and draw plates, and they would take him on a cruise for three months and when he was on the cruise ship he would make his stuff. And he came in I think three times and brought his work, which was breathtaking. I mean, I – it was inconceivable to me that anybody could be that skillful. But he was like a fourth generation craftsman in his family and he was a very nice, gentle man and he would answer questions.

MS. YAGER: Now was it just wire, or wire and sheets?

MR. FENSTER: It was almost all – what I remember was almost all wire. It was filigree. And it was light and airy, and had invisible – the bracelets had invisible joints so you had these filigree balls that would pivot on each other, and they were just like air. They were amazing. I actually saw his name in a book, a picture of his work in a book one time, and how my teacher met him I – I never found out.

MS. YAGER: How do you spell his name?

MR. FENSTER: N-a-j-e-r. Mr. Najer.

So Professor Keane, this guy who taught us industrial art metal work was not a creative person, but because he kind of nurtured our energies, he turned out good people like my friend Bernie Bernstein. Al Pine was one of the people that Professor Keane was very good with. And several other people, like Stan Plotner, who still lives in New York, and me, and a few others that really got caught up in the metal working thing.

MS. YAGER: Do you know what Mr. Keane's training was?

MR. FENSTER: I don't know what his original training was. I mean, he had been an industrial art teacher for a great many years. I thought that the industrial arts staff at City College was just wonderful. I thought they were all dedicated. They were totally committed to teaching and they were an inspiring group of people. They really cared about us. It was a small department, and I

became a different person once I got enrolled in that program. I loved it. I absolutely loved it. I couldn't wait to go to school. I couldn't wait to go to my classes. I mean, we took woodworking. That was my first interest. Metal work, ceramics, we learned to work with plastics, automotive shop, electrical shop, printmaking where we learned to set type, oh, all kinds of things related to print-making. As I said yesterday, I thought it was the best background anybody in art could possibly have. It was like – it was just a very comprehensive way of learning to deal with and transform materials.

MS. YAGER: But then having Greenwich Village there as well, and the energy that must have been there.

MR. FENSTER: Yes, as I said, Keane was not a creative person but he pushed us to keep notebooks, to cull magazines, and to go through everything that we could and present a notebook at the end of the term with all these designs that we were continually looking at, from furniture, wood, metal furniture. That was the heyday of Scandinavian design, so that was very much in.

MS. YAGER: Now where did you see Scandinavian design? Were there shows?

MR. FENSTER: Yes, there were shows. The furniture stores were featuring it, the museums were showing it. You know, the Museum of Modern Art – I don't know if the Craft Museum [now the Museum of Arts & Design, New York] was in existence yet when I began. I don't think so. But I don't remember when, you know, *American Craft* originally started publishing, but as soon as it did, I mean, that was something that I – I – I was – became very familiar with. And Al Pine joined the American Craft Council and there was a library connected with that so he used to bring in books from that. And he was a big influence on me. I mean, I would never have gone to graduate school without him coming back and encouraging me to think about it. Then I finally said, "Why not?" And I went, you know. That's how I got into this whole thing.

MS. YAGER: I'm interested in your recollections, you know, when you were talking about Art Smith – no, you were talking about Paul Lobel, Sam Kramer's shop. Can you tell me a little bit about Paul Lobel's or Art –

MR. FENSTER: Paul Lobel, yeah, had a shop. I don't know, it was down in the Village on 4th Street, or whatever it was. And his window was very elegant. He had stylized versions, as I mentioned, of people playing musical instruments, you know, and they were beautifully done in satin-finish oxidized silver. They had like a fine steel wool finish and the oxidation remained in the corners. And they were flawlessly well done and well designed. So he was somebody I really admired, you know, for the clean design and clean execution.

Sam Kramer wasn't clean, you know. His execution wasn't clean. It was sloppy, fast, very energetic, and very entertaining, but for me it was a mixed bag. I tended to go for the more tailored pieces.

MS. YAGER: How about Art Smith?

MR. FENSTER: Art Smith was terrific. I just saw the "Antiques Roadshow" the other night, and a woman was sporting a – an off-center Art Smith choker, which he was famous for doing, and it was appraised at \$7,000. Forged elements, you know. Just forged elements. It came around the neck kind of like a question mark, came down one side. \$7,000 for an Art Smith choker. Nice choker. So that was a treat.

Art Smith I would read about through the magazines, you know, and I was always impressed with his inventiveness, you know. His chokers were the main thing, and I like doing chokers also and I like fitting them to the body, and I think I got interested in it probably through admiring Art Smith's work. He was one of the few people doing that, and they're very – it's tricky to fit a choker, you know, that's got so many pieces, to make it drape on the body well.

MS. YAGER: Were you aware of Alexander Calder? Had you seen his work?

MR. FENSTER: Yes, a little bit. Yes, I was aware of it. I didn't follow Calder that well. I was much more limited. At that time I also had a – I guess it was an assistantship in the art department, where I was an assistant to the jewelry studio and they were teaching a jewelry class over there. We didn't do that in industrial arts.

MS. YAGER: And this was in New York?

MR. FENSTER: This was at City College. So even I was an industrial arts student, they always picked us for assistants because we knew how to take care of things. We knew how to fix the machines, we knew how to maintain the studio, and their own people didn't. So – so I was the assistant in a jewelry class, which was an interesting experience for me. But I hadn't had any art courses, you know. I never did. I never to this –

MS. YAGER: Do you recall who was teaching the jewelry course?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. A guy named Spinka, Professor Spinka, S-p-i-n-k-a. He was a very energetic, strong teacher, and Spinka we used to call him, Spinka. Yeah, he always chose one of us, you know. He would ask for somebody from the industrial art program. So I haven't thought about that name in years. I remember at that time I – because I was teaching myself everything and I had no instruction in anything, I was very unafraid, you know. Things like acid didn't faze me, and he asked me to mix up some pickle one day, and I had never mixed pickle before, and we were using sulfuric acid at that time, and so I just – it was a, you know, gallon jug of sulfuric acid and I just went, glug, glug, glug, glug, glug, glug, glug, glug. You know, I just up-ended it into this really big glass carboy, you know, Pyrex, big thing. It must have been, I don't know, ten gallons or something. And as soon as the acid went into it, the surface of it started roiling and rolling, you know, like that, and smoke started coming up. And I – I hadn't anticipated anything like that. I had no idea it was going to do that.

So I was torn between getting everybody out of the class, because I – the glass got really hot, too hot to touch. And I was – I was ready to run and clear everybody out of the room because I thought the thing would break and spread and finally I just decided to watch it and if it broke I'd get everybody out. Luckily it calmed down after a while, but that was the last time I was casual, that casual, handling acid. Although I told you the story about my hands turning yellow from nitric. But I never – I've never mixed anything casually again. I'm always very careful when I do the mixing now.

MS. YAGER: Living in New York, did you have – did you visit museums, did you go to antique shops or auction houses?

MR. FENSTER: I didn't do auction houses. I didn't start doing antique shops until much later. What I did do was I went to used shops, junk shops, pawn shops. I started building, you know, tools. I started getting tools at the pawn shops on Third Avenue in New York. And I made a trip every Friday and I went through those pawn shops, and I was so naïve that I really didn't know what I was looking at. And I had a chance to buy a very big set of chasing tools for five dollars, and I remember thinking to myself, this is an old-fashioned technique. I'll never use these, and I passed it up, and to my regret all these years. I just passed it up. It was a great set. Five dollars. But on the other hand, I did get many tools for very, very low prices. And I did go to some auctions, but I found the prices were not that good, that people would bid each other up, and there was a lot of sort of cheap junk in the auctions, so that was not good.

But I started becoming a junker at that age, when I was about 20, and that continues to this day. It's been very educational for me, and very good.

MS. YAGER: Just an informal museum.

MR. FENSTER: Exactly. That's what I call them. I call it a –

MS. YAGER: One that you can touch.

MR. FENSTER: – an outdoor museum. That’s what I always call the flea markets. Sure.

MS. YAGER: Yes, it’s a history lesson.

MR. FENSTER: That’s when I started, you know, on Third Avenue. There was a line of pawn shops on both sides of the street and stuff was really cheap. And I had started making some money from the jewelry, so I had money to spend and I kept reinvesting in tools all the time. I started buying silver from Anchor Tool in New York. Bill was very good to me and we formed a relationship –

MS. YAGER: Was that Bill Schroeder?

MR. FENSTER: Bill Schroeder, yes. We formed a relationship that never ended really. We stayed friends. The last time I taught at Peters Valley [Peters Valley Craft Education Center, Layton, New Jersey] he came up to visit to say hello, which was really nice. Bernie did also. Yeah, he was really great. Silver was 90 cents an ounce. That’s how long ago that was. And actually it hasn’t gone up to keep pace with inflation or to keep pace with the way most things have changed. Silver is still reasonable. You can still make big pieces of work at a reasonable price.

MS. YAGER: I have so many things I want to ask you. My goodness.

Let’s see. On the magazine thing, let’s see, did you get *Design Quarterly*?

MR. FENSTER: Yes, but I – I became aware of *Design Quarterly*, which was published in St. Paul and Minneapolis, once I went to Cranbrook. That’s when I came into contact with it. And they came through the studio actually, and anybody who had black and white pictures made it into the magazine. Then – that’s when I became aware of the importance of photographs, you know, and I didn’t have anything. Mike Jerry had some nice pictures and he – I think he had one or two pieces that they used. That was a really good magazine, had a very, very strong influence on us. We, all of us, just gravitated toward the maga – every issue of the magazine. It was very influential.

MS. YAGER: And some strong exhibitions were organized by them as well.

MR. FENSTER: Right.

MS. YAGER: How about – let’s see, I have *Metalsmith, American Craft*. Do you prefer things that are written by artists? Do you find that more valuable than historical criticism, or –

MR. FENSTER: That’s an interesting question. I don’t know how to answer it because I’ve heard poets read their own work and they do it very badly, and I’ve heard other people read their work and they do it better than the original. So I think it’s a little bit of both. Some people speak very well, or write very well of their own work, and other people are – you know, they barely can express themselves, so that’s a mixed bag. Yeah.

MS. YAGER: All right. Let’s go to some of the institutions devoted to craft that I know you’ve had contact with. Can you describe, a little bit about Penland, for instance?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I started going to Penland, I think it was three years after I started teaching here, so that would be around 1965, and at that time Bill Brown was the director and for me it was a life-changing experience. I – the warmth and the camaraderie and the – just the welcoming air of everybody down there was amazing to me. I never experienced a community like that before. I mean, as soon as – I was very shy as a young person and as soon as I walked into the place Jane Brown, the director’s wife, came over and embraced me and I turned red as a beet, and then Cynthia Bringle came over and gave me a big hug and her sister Edwina came over. I just had the same experience, the same thing happened this summer. But by the end of the session I wasn’t – I wasn’t getting red in the face any more. Everybody was just very open and genuine in their feelings. Penland always represented that – that kind of warmth and welcoming atmosphere for me. And Bill Brown liked me and he asked me to come back. Every summer for 25 years I went back. Every single summer.

MS. YAGER: What was the first year you went?

MR. FENSTER: I think it was probably 1965. I'm guessing that it was the third year I was here. So I went for 25 years straight and then Bill Brown would call up in the wintertime. He said, "Why don't you come down, Freddy, why don't you come down for a weekend." And I would go down for a weekend and just do a weekend workshop, and I just loved it. I – I – for me it was so peaceful, a wonderful place. It still has that quality, but it's twice the size now and it doesn't have the same kind of intimacy it had when it was smaller. And it was very funky at that time. It was full of dogs and little babies crawling all over the floor and people playing guitars and it – it was just the nicest atmosphere.

MS. YAGER: Did you bring your family with you?

MR. FENSTER: No. I never did. I never brought Josette down there because I didn't think she'd fit in well. She thought I was some kind of a kook because I worked at night, you know, and it wasn't until I got down there that everybody was the same, you know. I felt that I was in a community of like-minded people. When I got married to Valmai, we went down there on our honeymoon. I was teaching a session.

MS. YAGER: What year was that?

MR. FENSTER: In 1972. And she was teaching – no, it wasn't '72. It was – I'm sorry. 1974, and I was teaching a metal session. She took a class – an enameling class with Bill Harper and she took a weaving class with Walter Nottingham, who used to teach up here in northern Wisconsin. And she loved it. She just loved it. And I kept – I kept us on there for three extra days because I wanted Valmai to hear Sam Maloof's lecture. He was lecturing on his work. And I said, "Let's just stay until he lectures, then we'll go."

And we were exhausted and we were sick because we – it was very damp down there and we had stayed – in the beginning we stayed in a little bungalow that had a lot of mold growing in it and we both contracted this terrible cough. But it was – it was so exhausting that on the way back I had to stop the car continually and just lay down in the grass to go to sleep. It was a long, long drive in those days, longer than – it's about 15 hours now. In those days it was more like 18 hours because we didn't have the good roads that feed in there.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about Haystack in Maine.

MR. FENSTER: Haystack's fabulous. That's another place that is still small. It has the same kind of atmosphere only it's on the water, and it is a wonderful, wonderful experience. I've been there four times. The last time was last summer, and I just loved it there. People are a little more sophisticated, I think, and they tend to have an older group of people come back year after year, and they're serious and they're committed and I love going up there. I'll go to any one of these places any time that I'm asked, you know. Been to Peters Valley I think three times. And that's like a smaller – a much smaller version, not as sophisticated as these other places. The last time I was there I was upset because they wouldn't open up the studios at night. And oddly enough the new director of Peters Valley was at Penland and he introduced himself, and I said, "I'm not going to go back there because of the experience I had." And he said, "I can promise you that if you come back the studios will be open at night." And I said, "Well, okay, it's tempting."

MS. YAGER: How about –

MR. FENSTER: The Appalachian School?

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MR. FENSTER: Great facilities. It's like a well-kept secret. Great facilities, beautifully equipped studios in a beautiful area.

MS. YAGER: Is that Smithville?

MR. FENSTER: Smithville, Tennessee. Near Smithville. The thing is on Army land, on the shore of a big lake or reservoir, or near.

MS. YAGER: Is it connected with the Army?

MR. FENSTER: It's – what do they call it, when the Army has control over land that they take care of. It's like public land. So this – there's – nobody's going to build around the Appalachian School. For years they struggled because they didn't have good funding and they were under the control of Tennessee Tech University [Cookeville, Tennessee] so the director of the Appalachian School never had any real autonomy, couldn't make real decisions without having the university hanging over him. But now they've got a permanent grant and the school seems to be thriving. And they have a new, energetic director whose name I can't think of at the moment [Timothy Weber].

I did my session – the sessions are shorter. They're five-day sessions and very concentrated and the students were good. I had only five students there but they were very good and I've already signed up for next summer.

MS. YAGER: How about Ox-Bow [Ox-Box Summer School of Art, Saugatuck, Michigan]–

MR. FENSTER: Never went there. One of my students has taught there, Susie Ganch, and she loves it there. I've never taught at Ox-Bow.

MS. YAGER: You mentioned Fish Creek [Peninsula Art School, Fish Creek, Wisconsin].

MR. FENSTER: Taught at Fish Creek when I first came to Wisconsin. They had the Peninsula School of Art, and I taught there one summer, and I lived in a little – it was like a little – they had these little cabins and the school was right nearby and I just used to bike around everywhere. And it was very nice, very pleasant. Took my son up there with me, caught his first fish in the little trout stream that went by this little motel, so it was a lot of fun for me.

MS. YAGER: And how about Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee]? This was in Gatlinburg.

MR. FENSTER: Arrowmont, actually I'm doing a – a little, five-day workshop on hollow ring making on October 10, the week of October 10, I guess it is. It's extremely well run. It's also in a beautiful area. It's a very good school. It's just that they took this town of Gatlinburg and made it a circus where you can buy anything cheaply, so it's a big magnet for the whole southern area there, and the area is absolutely stunning. It's beautiful, but the town, I just – I wouldn't – I didn't even want to go into town to look at it. And I thought, well, that's not fair. Let me look at it. And the town is a strange mixture of high-end shops with very, very expensive merchandise to real trash places where they sell souvenirs. And I went into town that one day and then I never went back.

MS. YAGER: You're kind of a country guy. How about Yuma Symposium [Yuma, Arizona]?

MR. FENSTER: I only did that once. That was a lot of fun. Unfortunately I had a dental infection down there so I was – I was in a lot of trouble because my whole mouth was infected and swollen. I could hardly do my – my little workshop. But I did it and I got stuck there. I couldn't get on a plane to get out of there so I was stuck there two extra days. I got to Phoenix and I had to stay in Phoenix for another day, and when I came back my mouth was in terrible shape. They told me I could have died. I went to one of these quick care places and they gave me some antibiotics to keep this tooth infection from going to my brain.

When I got back, none of the dentists – my mouth was so swollen, none of the dentists would touch me. I went from – I went to I think four dentists and I said, "The tooth is loose. If you won't pull it out, I can do it myself. But you've got to relieve this swelling." My mouth was so swollen. I didn't have a floor in my mouth. It had swollen to the top of my teeth, the lower jaw. It was completely swollen. So the guy – finally one guy said, "Okay, I'll take care of it." Pulled the tooth out, stuck a bunch of needles to get rid of all the fluid, and I was fine.

MS. YAGER: Let's see, I have Touchstone, PA [Touchstone Center for Crafts, Farmington, Pennsylvania].

MR. FENSTER: I never did. Signed up one time, they only had two students sign up, so I wouldn't

do it. They were mad at me. I said, "I'm not going to go for two students." I have an obligation to do it if you provide the students, but they hadn't done that.

MS. YAGER: Yes, the energy level would be hard to maintain.

MR. FENSTER: Well, I bring a lot of stuff. I bring examples, I bring slides, I bring a video, I bring tons of examples with me, a whole box full of examples because I can drive. And it doesn't make sense to do it for two people because it's geared for a much bigger group.

MS. YAGER: How many students usually would be in a workshop?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I want a – like a minimum of five students so that they can rub off and teach each other.

MS. YAGER: And a maximum of –

MR. FENSTER: I've had maximum of about 20, 21. Well, 21 in Taiwan. It was fine. I didn't have any problems.

MS. YAGER: The Taiwan workshop, what was the balance of male/female?

MR. FENSTER: It was female with three guys, so there were 18 wonderful young women and three terrific guys, three terrific young guys. Everybody was really talented. There didn't seem to be the kind of – there was a lot of energy without the stuff that happens in the States. There's a lot of competition here, and there was none of that. The whole atmosphere was one of total cooperation. And before I got to Taiwan I said, "We're going to – if you're going to have that many students, we're going to need a lot of soldering gear." And Mei Ing, the teacher, Mei Ing Shu, she said, "Don't worry about it. It will be okay."

So I got there and I was really upset because there was only one soldering area and usually for that many people I want half a dozen soldering areas so people don't stack up. But everybody did things in a communal way, and they would help each other. Instead of, you know, pushing each other to finish up so they could have their turn, they would help each other finish up, you know. And when there were decisions to be made, the whole class sat down and made a decision. People would just offer what their thoughts were and they would come to a communal decision. It was so nice. There wasn't any tension in the studio. Eventually we had I think three soldering areas and there was never a crowd waiting. It was always good.

MS. YAGER: What was the experience level of the students?

MR. FENSTER: They were experienced. They had never worked in pewter before except for one girl who taught herself, but – and one guy who was very experienced. There was a young man named Chen who built temple guardian figures. These are huge, eight-foot figures with terrific musculature, and he raised the elements and fused them together and –

MS. YAGER: In pewter?

MR. FENSTER: In pewter. Yes. His father had done that so he had a good beginning. And he worked in a little tiny space. He worked on a little – just a little table. The figures were amazing. He's supposed to send me slides. I don't know if he ever will. He took my name and address. And he came to me asking if I could use his slides, so I hope he sends them. But Chen's father is really famous in Taiwan and Chen is really famous in Taiwan for these figures.

They make life-size sculpture pieces of animals, human figures. There are a lot of animals. Snakes. All out of pewter. Pewter and – Chen builds these big – big chests, like containers, out of copper. Mostly pewter with copper and bronze involved, and they're really impressive things. They're like landscapes –

MS. YAGER: That must have been very exciting for you.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I'd never seen work on that scale before. I mean, he was – he came to me and

he said, “What do you think of my work?” And he had won national awards in Taiwan. There’s a picture of him with the president of Taiwan receiving an award. And I said, “Chen, I’m sure everybody tells you that your work is wonderful, and I’m going to tell you that your work is wonderful. But I’m also going to tell you it could be better because you’re not defining your areas well enough, you know. The craftsmanship tends to be a little sloppy.” I said, “I’m telling you this because you asked me, and I’m telling you this because it’s true.” So he seemed to like that, actually, because I don’t think he’d got good feedback from anybody. He just got praise, and he’s too smart to –

MS. YAGER: Well, that’s the advantage of international connections.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Well, Mei Ing brings people in all the time. She – she has her degree, as I told you, with Chunghi Choo in Iowa and she was eight years in the States. And Sarah Perkins has been over there and several English jewelers have been over there, and she brings really good people in. It was good with us because I could do a variety of things, you know. She wanted to know how to make stakes, snarling irons. So I said, “Let’s go to the hardware store and try” – I got tire irons, you know, for automobile tires and I said, “We’ll make snarling irons out of these.” I set up a little fire brick forge and piped the acetylene torch into it and we made stakes, you know. And something – I sent her information on getting a forge so that she could make a lot of things and do iron forging in the studio.

And we visited blacksmiths when we were there who made kitchen choppers and garden shears and garden choppers, so that was a really good experience. The next time I go back I’m going to be doing a lot of forging.

MS. YAGER: Was this in – where in Taiwan?

MR. FENSTER: It’s called Taiman College of Art. And it’s –

MS. YAGER: In what city?

MR. FENSTER: Taiman. It’s surrounded by small towns. It’s an agricultural area and it’s really interesting because it’s semi-tropical – sub-tropical, I guess they call it. Bananas, mangoes, papayas, coconuts, lychee nuts, this stuff all grows there, and you can just walk out – out of the school and pick mangoes off the trees and pick papayas off the trees. There are big orchards full of trees, and every little town you go into is selling this stuff on the street that’s absolutely fresh. It was a wonderful experience.

MS. YAGER: I wanted to talk about your work experience, or work processes now. I have read that you refer to yourself as a process guy. Can you tell me—can you talk about starting a piece and how you might go through?

MR. FENSTER: I usually do a lot of sketching and so ideas come from many sources. Many ideas come from the work process itself, you know. When I’m working on one piece I’ll think, well, I could do a whole bunch more of these and try out some of the different ideas I had, like those – like those disk salt and pepper shakers that I do. I’ve made big ones, you know, for forms, and I always have a lot of pieces around in progress so I’m always looking at them. But generally I’ll do a lot of sketching first, usually at faculty meetings. I have a hearing disability, you know. I don’t hear well and so – I’m fine one-on-one, but in a group I miss a lot of the meeting, so I usually just sit and sketch. A lot of really good ideas come from those meetings, for me anyway, individually.

And then I will sometimes make paper models and then I begin the piece. And I work in pewter because it’s very fast and I can realize my ideas in a short time and because I’m so familiar with the material I’m not afraid of messing it up or making a mistake or anything. It took me a long time, but now I really have begun to trust my decisions in a different way, you know. Instead of figuring out the rim or the handle or something, I’ll say, you know, I’ll have a general idea for it and I’ll say, I’ll figure it out as I do it. And every one of the handles and rims comes out differently because of that. Because I finally trust myself to do a decent job of it.

Silver is a much more demanding material and I'll do more drawing for that. It's a much more exacting material, difficult material.

MS. YAGER: Have you worked in copper or brass or bronze?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Copper, brass, bronze. I did cooking pots years ago that won an award in the "Copper Two" show in Tucson ["Copper Two," International Sculpture Competition, University of Arizona at Tucson]. I mean, I was surprised at the award. I just made the pieces for my wife. We had an extensive garden out in back here, so she wanted a – like a stew pot. We were growing a lot of okra one summer, and I said, "I'll make you a pot for the okra." So that was the first one and I liked doing it, and I made another one. And then I – I had them for some years and I submitted them to that show, and to my amazement I won an award. They were really nice pots. I still have them.

MS. YAGER: These were raised? From a flat sheet?

MR. FENSTER: They were raised. Actually they were seamed.

MS. YAGER: With a [hand gesture of interlocking fingers] –

MR. FENSTER: Yeah, they had a lap seam and the bottom was added and then the handles were forged and attached.

MS. YAGER: These were copper, and then did you do a –

MR. FENSTER: I tinned the inside, yeah, did the whole thing, and we used them for many years. I still have them. They're still useable. I made three of them eventually. I didn't finish the last one while Valmai was alive, but we used to make this dish called Potatoes Anna, which you cook and then you turn it upside down to serve it, and there are these potato medallions that you – you sprinkle butter, chunks of butter and – oh, well – you know, what else. There's a lot of butter, and garlic, I guess. And then when you cook them the edges of the potato slices, which are laid out like a zinnia – it looks like a zinnia when you cook it, and you flip the pan over when you serve it so the edges are all kind of burnt, and it looks like a big flower and it's delicious. So I said, "I'm going to make you a pot that you can flip over." It's got matching handles, you can flip it over to serve and each pot will be available individually for cooking, or they can be put together for potatoes Anna. So I finally did it but that was after she died.

And that was fun. We used to bring them to parties and everybody always ooh'd and ah'ed, you know. And I'd have my students make that. I'd use them as examples in school and the students would often make copper pots in the hollowware class, and they loved them. They absolutely loved them. We'd make the handles out of angle iron, which was forged, you know, flat in one part and then it was left – where you grabbed it there was like – the angle was still intact and we'd forged the bottom out and open it up and rivet it to the pot.

MS. YAGER: What gauge copper would you use?

MR. FENSTER: Usually 18-gauge. I had people make big woks. I had one guy make a really large – I think it was a 30-inch copper wok with – he didn't have enough material so he dovetailed on the four sides of it. In other words, he had a square for the bottom and then he – for the circular form of the wok he added pieces that were dovetailed on, you know, and the lap seam dovetailed, so that was really great.

MS. YAGER: I read somewhere that you didn't – you don't like to do an exact repeat, that you like there to be slow evolution. Can you – there was one quote that I just thought, you know – you said that the experience of creating a piece was so transcendent it could never be recreated, so you needed to go on to the next.

MR. FENSTER: Well, I think the example of that, there's a pitcher over there in a case with that squiggly handle, and I did that for my wife. That was the first thing I made for her after we got married. And I just said, "Do you want me to make anything for the house?" She said, "We could use a creamer, a cream pitcher." I said, "I'll make you one," so I made that. And years later I got a

call from the RISD Museum at the Rhode Island School of Design, and they asked if they could have some slides of my pewter work. I said sure and I sent them slides, and they picked out that piece. They said they'd like to buy that piece. And I thought, okay. And then when I was ready to send the piece, I thought, you know, I made that piece for my wife. I don't want to send that piece. I'll make another one. I thought, I don't want to make another one. In the end I didn't make anything. I just thought, I'll get money for the piece and the money won't have any value to me anyway. To hell with it. That's what happened. I never sent them anything. [Laughs.]

I went through this – I went through this whole experience and every time I try to reproduce a piece that I really like, I can't do it, you know, because it's not the same experience. There's an excitement in the initial experience that's linked to that one piece and you can't capture that a second time. I've tried it over and over again, and it's much better for me to begin a different piece, you know. You know, that's something like the first piece but it never is, you know. It never is.

MS. YAGER: Do you prefer to work alone, or have there been times that you've worked with others?

MR. FENSTER: No. I prefer to work alone. That's one of the reasons I have a studio in the house. No, you know, I do these workshops and I work in the studio there and I'm okay, but you know, I'm able to focus in, but if I'm going to do my best work, I really – especially in silver, where you really have to be focused in a much more intense way, I prefer to be completely alone.

MS. YAGER: So there's no stage of the process that anyone else has done on your work?

MR. FENSTER: Well, no. I really like to do it all alone. I never seek outside comment for anything. I prefer to do it alone. Nobody knows – nobody knows what you're trying to do like you do, and you can't really – I mean, it's not helpful at all for people to tell you, "Oh, that's so nice. That's beautiful." It doesn't mean anything to me, especially if I – if I don't feel a piece is as successful as I would like it to be, having somebody to tell me it's a good piece, that's totally meaningless, you know, because I'm the final – I'm the final say. I have the final judgment on a piece.

And you know, some pieces you do and they're good pieces but they're not terrific, you know. They're not wonderful or fantastic. They're not exciting. They're just nicely done and they're – they're passable, they're okay, you know. But other pieces are exciting, you know. You've broken new ground and you've had this really, you know, this really eye-opening experience of learning new things. That's the wonderful experience in working. There's nothing like that.

MS. YAGER: Can you – do you have a particular piece that you just think is like, that's the best piece I've made?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I unfortunately sold that piece. I shouldn't have done it. I got good money for it at a show, at the Smithsonian show [Smithsonian Craftshow, Washington, D.C.]. I had these other – there were other pewter guys at this show and they kept sending people over to look at my stuff. Finally the guy himself came over and bought the piece. Then I was – I was kind of flattered that somebody who specialized in pewter wanted to own one of my pieces, but then I thought, I should have saved that piece. I should have kept it. It was a really nice piece.

MS. YAGER: Describe that piece.

MR. FENSTER: It was tall. It was about 17 inches high and it was a piece where the side was split and it was pulled out, so I had to deck it, you know, I had to put a transition piece in there. It was round and it was boring and I did it when I was doing a workshop at Cranbrook, and I finally was bored with the piece. I thought I had to do something to this. I'll split it and I'll pull the whole side out and I'll put a transition in there so instead of being round, all of a sudden it wasn't round and there was a decked area. And then it was like a – it was like a piece of Chinese celadon, like a piece of fine ceramic. It had that feeling to it, it had this slightly Oriental feeling. It had a round top on it, and I just loved it when I got done. I'd never done anything like that before. And I sold it and I tried to make it again, and it was so ugly, my attempt was so awful and I got angry at myself. I haven't

tried again since. But I'll come back to it. I mean, I won't get the same feeling but I'll make something similar.

MS. YAGER: Now was that piece made in the 80's?

MR. FENSTER: No. It was made in – in – let's see. It was made in the early 90's, I think, or mid-90's, maybe. Let me think a minute. Yes, it was in the 90's, early 90's.

MS. YAGER: Tell me. I usually ask people, you know, can you describe the ideal studio or work environment. You seem – I suspect that you have the ideal studio, so can you describe some of your studio and the setting that it's in?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I'm a shop guy, you know, and I – for me the ideal studio has, is very rational, where there is – you set your studio up in a certain way so that whatever you do is logical, and one movement flows into another. I've been in shops all over the country and they're so illogically set up. You do your soldering over here, then you have to walk across the whole studio to get to the pickle. It doesn't make any sense to me. And if you look at the way I have my studio set up, my jewelry studio and my studio downstairs, I work in a kind of a quadrangle with a rolling chair in the middle of it and I have soldering in one place, the pickle next to it, the sink is close by as possible. And so what I do is I just push off on the chair and spin around and just basically – it's very efficient. I don't have to do any walking, I don't have to – to think about where my next move is. It's one move flows into another.

I like to work efficiently when I work, and so downstairs I have a lot of vises, these Chinese vises that you can flip over, you know, and get any angle you want for hollowware. I love them. I have five of them. They're cheap, they're readily available, I buy them right down here at ridiculous prices in Sun Prairie, and it's like they're too cheap not to have them. I have them in school. They're wonderful.

I also use pipe vises a lot. It's a chain vise that you can wrap the chain around any form and just tighten a knob so you can grab any kind of stake in it. I'll show it to you when we go downstairs. Nobody I know – nobody else I know uses those, and to me it's the most logical thing to do. You can grab any shape up to about eight inches and you get a very, very strong – you get a very, very well held form, you know. Once you grab something, it's going to stay put. So it's great for mandrels, it's great for stakes, it's great for odd-shaped homemade stakes, and so I have a bunch of those set up downstairs. And between five vises and two plumber's vises, which is what these are, when I'm doing hollowware I set up a stake in every vise, so I'm – you know, I just move right along. I love to work that way because I'm not continually taking stuff out of a vise and putting it in and taking it out and putting it in. They're all just set up.

MS. YAGER: Do you – you said that your studio is an old cheese factory.

MR. FENSTER: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Can you talk about that, what it's made out of?

MR. FENSTER: Well, it's made out of fieldstone and whoever built it never heard of a square or a level. They just eyeballed it, I guess. So I put windows in. Well, the addition that we're in now, I put that on working with one of my students.

MS. YAGER: But that's an original wall [pointing to wall]?

MR. FENSTER: That was the original outside wall and it's developing cracks now as the land settles. There's been a lot of heavy equipment around here lately with house building and road building and so I've been developing these cracks. But when I moved into it, I had to replace all the windows because they were all rotted and I couldn't do that for a while because I didn't have the money, but eventually I built new window frames and put new windows in. The walls are 18 inches thick and there's an outer wall and an inner wall of fieldstone, and then rubble in the middle where they just dump in everything that's left over. And when I put this addition on, I had to crack through

the wall, and you can see how thick it is over there.

MS. YAGER: About a foot and a half, two feet.

MR. FENSTER: Yeah, it's about a foot and a half. It's 18-inches thick. And those cracks are new, you know. That crack above the doorway, that just recently happened. I have that one, that one, and then there are two in the bathroom as well. And probably some of that's attributable to all the rain we've been having and the rest is attributable to earth-moving equipment that dug out the houses, you know, the foundations of the houses.

MS. YAGER: What year were you – did you come to this place?

MR. FENSTER: In I think it was 1970, something like that. It was '72.

MS. YAGER: And it's basically very agricultural, lots of –

MR. FENSTER: It was all agricultural. It was the only house in this area here and I was surrounded by corn and soybeans, and for all the years I've lived here, up until about four years ago, that's the way it was. And then they bought land to the north of me and just put a house in to the south of me. I used to have nightmares about that, but when it happened, I – I'm in the basement all the time anyway. I mean, I don't even see these people.

MS. YAGER: Yes. Just plant a few more pine trees.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I have. I put in all the trees that you see except for the biggest ones are trees that I put in.

MS. YAGER: When you drive up to your house, it is surrounded by trees.

MR. FENSTER: Right.

MS. YAGER: I wanted to – let's see. Materials that you've used. What percentage of your work do you think is pewter versus other materials?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I haven't worked in copper for a while, so now it's mostly pewter, and I switch off between silver and pewter. I also still do jewelry. I make wedding bands for people, I make engagement rings, I make gold, hollow gold rings on commission for a gallery in town occasionally, or for individuals. I don't do that much. My eyes are not that good now so I'm working on the bigger things, which is more comfortable for me. But I have a series of wedding bands that I'm doing for somebody right now. There are three people waiting for wedding bands, you know. Many of them are former students or colleagues who just, you know, I became friends with when they were here. They come back and I make that for them. So that continues.

But mostly it's silver and pewter. And I want to do more – there's a Judaica show coming up with the theme of the spice box, at the San Francisco Jewish Museum [The Contemporary Jewish Museum], which is going to inaugurate the new museum, I think. And I'm going to make a spice box, and I don't know when I'm going to make it but I'm – I'm thinking about it. So that will be a silver spice box.

And there's another show coming up that Roseanne Raab is involved in, and that's a flatware show, a tableware show. And I'm going to do a piece of flatware for that show in silver also.

MS. YAGER: So the theme of the show can guide you?

MR. FENSTER: The theme of this show is a spice box theme. Usually I don't do that. I like making these Kiddush cups a lot. I have a lot of other ideas for cups that I want to explore, and I want to make some bigger ones. So the only one I have left now is the one star cup that's in the case over there. And I have a – there are a number of others that I want to make, so I haven't – some of this stuff I'm saving for when I'm retired, you know, because I can – this one Kiddush cup is going to have a Jewish star, a tapered Jewish star as the stem. That's a really hard thing to do. I've only done it once before for really big candlesticks and it was the hardest thing I ever worked on. So the – the

segments, that hollow stem is made in three segments and they're all scored, folded and soldered together, and they have to be very exact. It's a difficult thing to do well. And I've done it in the past but as I say, it was so time-consuming and so difficult that I've only done that one pair of candlesticks that way. Although I've done it often in pewter. It's easy in pewter.

MS. YAGER: Where do you get your – what do you use as sources of inspiration?

MR. FENSTER: Well, lots of things. First of all, I try to acquaint myself with a lot of historical stuff so kind of – to get a general sense of form. And if you look at that Kiddush cup over there you'll see medieval cups that are vaguely similar in form, you know. I don't know if you looked at this cup, but it's – [goes to cabinet] – it's one of the cups that folds into a star. There's a whole bunch of these that – not a whole bunch but several of them that I do where the – looking at the outside you don't have a clue that there's going to be a six-pointed star inside.

So because I do that, there's usually not any symbolism on the cup, although this one has a Star of David on it. But I usually don't put Hebrew letters on these because the form of the cup is the star, you know.

MS. YAGER: You know, I was raised Catholic so I'm more familiar with –

MR. FENSTER: Chalice?

MS. YAGER: Chalice. What distinguishes a Kiddush cup?

MR. FENSTER: Not that much. They're very similar in use except a Kiddush cup is used in the home, and it's used to – to introduce the Sabbath. So when you – it's used by the family.

MS. YAGER: So this would be for the weekly –

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I mean, it's used in the synagogue also, but – but it's used in the home a lot, you know, so a family will have this as the centerpiece of the Sabbath table. And so when I make a piece of ceremonial art, where there is a chalice or a Kiddush cup, it has – it has this instant connection with history and the family loves it, you know. It's an heirloom. It's an instant heirloom, and so I like doing these things.

MS. YAGER: Now when would this – would this be given as a gift, or would it be purchased?

MR. FENSTER: It can be given as a gift. The first one of these I made was for my father, but the second one – the first star one that I ever did was given as a gift at a wedding to the bride and groom, as a centerpiece of their new home, starting their home.

MS. YAGER: The wedding ceremony or –

MR. FENSTER: Right. Starting a home. And interestingly enough, the candlesticks that I did were given by the groom's mother, who was marrying a girl who wasn't Jewish, in the hope that they would keep a Jewish home. That was her wish. I'm sure it didn't happen. But it was a good thought.

MS. YAGER: You know, the one thing that I'm always very interested in is that metal seems to – it's a repository of meaning and sentiment and the fact that this woman, you know, is hoping that this metal object will keep this son's focus. There's – I think there's a lot of significance in ceremonial things that metalsmiths have the power to do. Do you feel that way? Do you have any sense of the – there's something about a gift that's metal, that's silver or pewter.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. There's magic in these things. I do feel that way. I think that you – first of all, you're making something that is going to last indefinitely. It's going to be here long after I'm gone and it's going to be passed down in the family, whoever gets the cup, indefinitely. So I keep thinking, I have catalogues from Czechoslovakia, Judaica in Czechoslovakia that the Nazis confiscated, you know, and they catalogued everything meticulously. And this stuff is now being shown, this stuff that the Nazis confiscated, it's being used in shows, you know, and exhibitions of – in this case it was Czechoslovakian Jewish ceremonial pieces, whether they were Kiddush cups or whatever they were. There was a wide variety of forms.

But it's interesting to me, you know, that the Nazis confiscated it, not the idea of destroying it but with keeping it, you know. They catalogued it. They meticulously annotated and kept records of everything. And then once the Nazis lost the war, there it was available again. Presumably the people who now have control of it are trying to get it back to the rightful owners. Most of it's unmarked, you know. There wouldn't be an owner's name on it, so like with anything stolen, I assume they put it out and they advertise it and if people can identify it, they can get it back.

I mean, these things are loaded with sentiment and history.

MS. YAGER: The fact that even the Nazis, they felt a need to take away the culture –

MR. FENSTER: That's exactly it.

MS. YAGER: – and yet preserve it.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. That's exactly it. They – and of course they failed because this is only the outward manifestation of the culture. So you know, I'm not a religious person but I have an enormous amount of respect and care for people that are religious and for the objects that they venerate, and so I have a sense of veneration towards these things. I love seeing fine pieces, you know, historical pieces.

In Detroit there is a temple that has a very good museum that's right next to Cranbrook. The temple was designed by the architect [Minoru] Yamasaki and it's like a big tent, you know, this big arch. They had a – and part of the temple is a museum and they show Judaica. Well, it turned out that the museum was broken into and a lot of the Judaica was stolen and there was an attempt to melt it up and it was mangled and it was – they caught the boys who did it. Turned out that two Jewish kids broke into the temple, stole the stuff, tried to melt it down, were largely unsuccessful, and Cranbrook had the job of restoring these pieces, and I happened to visit one time. And so Dick Thomas showed me what was going on. I ended up visiting the museum, and one of the boys committed suicide. They were teenagers. After he was caught, you know. It probably started as a prank, and then when he felt the full weight of the community opprobrium, you know, he couldn't handle it, you know. I'm sure he didn't realize what he was doing.

MS. YAGER: Didn't understand that the value was not in the meltdown.

MR. FENSTER: It's pretty horrible when you think of it, you know. He had basically been a traitor to his people and he couldn't handle it. I'm sure the community would have forgiven him, you know. I'm sure they would have. The whole thing is sad.

So the students at Cranbrook rebuilt the pieces as best they could, and it was a really sad experience for me, you know. The museum was very nice. But I mean, it stuck in my head, you know, that these kids, kids did this, what they call race traitors, you know. I hate that term because I don't think that's what it's about at all. You know, it's like they found one official in the American Nazi Party, they discovered that he was Jewish, you know, and that just speaks to somebody who's extremely confused about who he is, his identity. Not a race traitor. That's –

MS. YAGER: I guess with the boys I would think of just, you know, childhood naiveté –

MR. FENSTER: These kids were too young to realize what they were doing. And as I say, I'm sure the community, after its initial anger, would have reacted with compassion. More than anything else, the dominant thing would have been compassion.

MS. YAGER: Once they felt that the boys understood.

MR. FENSTER: Right.

MS. YAGER: Betty Cooke referred to her pieces of metalwork as points of communication, that that was, you know, that this was where people focused their energy and were able to connect with each other.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Well, you know, the ceremonial pieces, whether they're Jewish pieces or

chalices, because I've done quite a few chalices, they're really interesting to me because there's an historical context, and I know the first chalice I ever did as a commission, I went to Milwaukee. I watched the priest perform the service; I saw how he handled the chalice. That's why I went. I wanted to see everything that he did in this service, how the chalice was used, how it was viewed, from what angle people looked at it. And I made a chalice with a jade stem and the family came to me from Milwaukee and they commissioned me to do it, and then they called me up while I was in the midst of doing it and they asked if they could come over and visit. I lived in Madison at that time on the west side, and I said sure. And when they came, I said, "I doubt that you know what goes into making one of these, so I'm going to show you what's involved." And I annealed a chalice cup and I had a little back room that was pitch black and so it was like opening a kiln and the cup was just glowing really bright, and they were so impressed with that.

[Phone call. Break in conversation.]

MS. YAGER: You were talking about opening – not opening the kiln but –

MR. FENSTER: Oh, annealing. Annealing the chalice cup. And so I showed them the annealing and they were – there were I think four people who came up, his parents and two other people, and their breath was taken away. They were just like, "Ohhh, is that how you do this?" And I said, "That's part of the process." And the cup came out really well. I – I had never used jade as a stem before so I had to cut the jade and grind it to shape on my lathe, and drill it. It was quite a chore.

MS. YAGER: Very hard material.

MR. FENSTER: It's tough. It's not that hard. It's tough, a very fibrous interlocking structure, and it came out really well. And years later, probably 20 years later, somebody stole the chalice from the priest. And he came back to me and I said, "You won't believe this but I still have the original drawings." And I did, and I made another one. And I like the first one better. You know what I said about re-making a piece. So I re-did it. The proportions were a little different. The first one was nicer, actually. But he got his chalice. It was very close. I'm sure in his eyes they were identical but they weren't.

MS. YAGER: There is a subtlety that develops.

MR. FENSTER: And I didn't like doing it again. I did not like making it again. I did not like that experience. I would rather have changed it, but from his perspective he was trying to replace something as closely as possible, so I had to do that. Interesting.

That was my first chalice – first chalice commission here. I had done chalices at Cranbrook. As I said, part of Cranbrook was a Lutheran seminary and Dick Thomas, the teacher, used to get these commissions and he would have us students do the commissions.

MS. YAGER: How were prices set on these things?

MR. FENSTER: I don't know. With him I don't know. I mean, he – he paid me a set price, whatever it was, \$150, \$200 for the cup. And then the chalice was his negotiation with the people who ordered it. I – when I set prices I usually ask people what they budget. Some people have no idea how time-consuming raising and hammering a piece this shape is, and if they're naïve about it and they think they're going to buy a chalice or a Kiddush cup for a catalog price or something that's manufactured by machine –

MS. YAGER: Which would be what sort of price?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I just did a cup for the Milwaukee Art Museum, and I asked them what they were budgeting, and they said \$3,000. It was a presentation cup for the president of the board who was retiring, and they said, "Can you do it?" And I said, "Yes, I can do it. I think that's a fair price." And it was. And I did it right before I left for Taiwan.

MS. YAGER: This was pewter?

MR. FENSTER: No, it was a silver – a silver chalice. A silver presentation cup with a basket stem which, you know, that, like the blacksmith basket. And I did not want to do that, but that's – I sent them about eight slides of cups that I've done in the past and that's the one. I should never send that slide out because that's the one that people invariably pick and it's really hard to do.

See, like I like the proportions of this a lot, and I'm going to do one like this, except this part is going to be a Jewish star tapered to a base like that. So it's going to be a six-pointed Star of David.

MS. YAGER: Much more complex than the six-sided –

MR. FENSTER: This is just a hexagon and I have to do, you know, all the scoring and it folds up and that's it. The star has to be made in three separate sections, each one of which has one full point and two half-points, and then it's assembled.

MS. YAGER: Do you do the scoring by hand or do you have a machine?

MR. FENSTER: I make my own scrapers, you know.

MS. YAGER: The scoring is where you're grooving out material in the metal and then folding it.

MR. FENSTER: Right. So the shape of the scraper is, it has to be the supplement of the angle you want, so if you want a 60-degree angle, which is the point of a star, you have to scrape 180 degree – a 120-degree groove so that it folds up to 60 when you close it up. And that's really hard to do. Takes hours to scrape those out, and then I finish with a file to make sure they're – but I – once I started doing silver like that, I got this great – I got to really be able to make these scrapers accurately and learn how to sharpen them well. It's still a lot of physical, hard physical work to do that.

MS. YAGER: Now the ceremonial pieces would be in either silver or pewter, no –

MR. FENSTER: Most of the ceremonial pieces I'm doing are in silver. I have – I think there's a pewter cup over here. That's the other kind of cup I make. I've made these in silver in the past and so that you have – you basically make a small bowl and you score and fold the top of the bowl and you put a plate in and then you – you extend it. So this is pewter and this is silver. But they both have that star as an integral part of the structure of the cup. And there was another one I used to do, but these two have been the most interesting ones.

MS. YAGER: I think we have to stop here.

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Fred Fenster in the artist's home and studio in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, on August 10, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number four, session number two.

Fred, I wanted to talk just a little bit more about the intent of your work, and one of the questions I had was, is there an element of play or a need for delight in any of your work?

MR. FENSTER: That's an interesting question. It's – if there is, it's subtle and it's for me, you know. I don't usually – like sometimes you'll turn a piece over and there will be some little funny thing on the underside of it, and I just do that for myself. I – when I design things, I try to make them very spare. Try to remove everything that's – I consider superfluous to the form. And so I consider myself a very functional designer. The cups I make balance well, they clean out easily, they handle well. They're sturdily made. They function well in their given function. If it's a pitcher, it pours well. If it's a bowl, it sits well. So I try to meet all those obligations which I think are inherent in my obligation as a craftsman.

Beyond that, there are funny little things that I do with the rims and some – not with these, but in some cases I play with the rims, or I'll have some little detail that's hidden from the general view. Like on one of the cups I made I put a little detail in where it looked like a baby's bottom on the underside, that nobody could see, but when you turn the cup over there's a little baby's bottom on it.

Or I did a piece for a – as a commission for a man that was supposed to be – the only time I ever did this was a Paul Revere flagon, and he had an altered flagon that he had bought. And he wanted the original Paul Revere flagon and he asked me if I'd make it. I said, "It's not really what I do, but yeah, let me – it will be a new experience." So I made the flagon, which was really a hard thing to make. And where the hollow – it had one of these S handles on it, and where the hollow handle was, I decided to cap the end of that hollow handle with a heart, which Paul Revere never would have done, knowing that this guy might really get upset about it. And I did that because I was delivering it to him on Valentine's Day, and he happened to be at the museum, the Milwaukee Art Museum. Or at the Vilas actually, which is an offshoot of the Milwaukee Art Museum. And I delivered it and he looked at the handle where I capped it with a small heart and he started laughing and he said, "I guess that's appropriate. It's Valentine's Day." So it was okay. So that was my little visual joke.

But yes, there are small things on these pieces that I sometimes do just because I want to, you know. But I don't do them for the customer. I just do them for me.

MS. YAGER: Now the function issue that you place a lot of importance on, do you make sure that you use these things and see how they pour and –

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I make sure that I think about that a lot and that I try them out. One of the reasons that I'm interested in function is because there's this awful sentiment out there expressed by visual artists that if it's functional, it isn't art. And I've heard this ever since I've been in this field. So I've chosen to do functional things because these same people who make that statement collect ethnic artifacts which are functional. They'll collect ladles, they'll collect bowls, they'll collect all kinds of things that they just love and they're functional objects. And I don't understand how they can draw the line. We don't do that with other – in other cultures they don't do that, you know. In Western culture we do it, European culture they often do that. But in the Eastern cultures they don't do that. Art is – everybody's involved in it and they don't draw a line between the functional object and the aesthetic object, the art object.

It irritates me and it seems so senseless to me that they would do that.

MS. YAGER: I think it's an added bonus if it's functional. Then you get to use it every day. You get to actually – that's the best.

MR. FENSTER: I feel that way. One of the reasons I use pewter is because it's very tactile. Like I don't mind picking up my pewter cup and touching it. I don't like touching the silver because of fingerprints, you know, and it's got that kind of finish on it. But the pewter is in use every day. It's an object that you surround yourself with in your home and you use every day. It gets better looking with age as it gets scuffed by use, and it gets handsomer as it gets age-worn. And I like the idea of the pieces wearing and taking on the patina of time and use, you know. That's part of the object.

If I can make an object that will stand up to that kind of wear, I'm really pleased with that idea.

MS. YAGER: I was talking to a collector of jewelry and he was saying that no one's ever asked to touch a painting, you know. That he felt that he had something that was so much more desirable because it was something you could handle, wear, touch.

Let's see, I wanted to ask you, Brent Kington had referred to that you had started dealing with surfaces. Some – what are some of the surfaces that you use? You have matte, you have filed.

MR. FENSTER: I used filed surfaces a lot. I don't like hammered surfaces, oddly enough, though I hammer all the time. I don't like the planish marks on my pieces. I see other pieces I like them, but I don't like – I'm not comfortable with that. So I don't use them on my work generally. But I like the filed surface a lot. I like a steel brush surface a lot, which I often use over the filed surface to make the surface more even and consistent.

So I use the steel brush a lot, and occasionally I'll contrast that with polished surfaces. Like the rims on my pieces have generally, you know, polished, and here you have a filed surface.

MS. YAGER: And they appear to be very thickened and smooth, so that you're probably very conscious of it when you're drinking from it.

MR. FENSTER: Well, I like a heavy rim on a piece, especially with pewter where the rim adds a lot of strength to the object. Pewter is not a strong material so the only way you make it stronger is to thicken it.

MS. YAGER: How do you thicken it? With a hammer, or you're adding on a –

MR. FENSTER: No, I'm soldering on a rim. And all my pieces have heavy rims on them. And the rims are a big component of the aesthetic effect of the piece. Let me get this pitcher over here. I'll show you.

So I know that I'm going to need to strengthen the top edge visually and physically, so I might as well take advantage of it and add some kind of a rim that will enhance the object. The only thing distinctive about the cup is the rim.

MS. YAGER: So on this piece it's a small little cup. It's probably three inches high, three and a half.

MR. FENSTER: Two and a half inches across.

MS. YAGER: Tapered at the base, and then wider. You have – it looks as though you've got a heavy wire of pewter that's been forged and tapered at each end and then sort of snaking, wrapping around like a grapevine. Beautiful.

Now tell me about the inside.

MR. FENSTER: Oh, that's one of my little jokes. Sometimes I put my own image in there. I have a –

MS. YAGER: You mean your face?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Just for fun. You can't see it.

MS. YAGER: Now how is it this one has a –

MR. FENSTER: It's a rolled texture.

MS. YAGER: Okay, a pattern –

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I've been doing that lately. I just put little patterns in there.

MS. YAGER: Sort of a checkerboard.

MR. FENSTER: And then – I never used to put my name on my pieces but so many people asked me to do it, I finally do it all the time now.

MS. YAGER: So now you have a stamp. It says "Fenster Pewter"

MR. FENSTER: "Fenster Pewter," yes.

MS. YAGER: Do you date pieces?

MR. FENSTER: No, not usually. If I really like – if I really like something, if I thought it was that unusual I would date it. Pieces like this are demonstration pieces. When I do a workshop I usually make one of these while people watch. The first thing I do, I say, "I need – I'm an orange juice drinker and I need a cup for juice so I make a cup," you know, and I'll drink juice out of it. And this is a different kind of a rim, where the rim is thin in the middle and gets wider as it goes to the back. And this is the piece that I made for my wife when we just got married.

MS. YAGER: This is a beautiful piece.

MR. FENSTER: That's the piece I wouldn't give to RISD.

MS. YAGER: This captures –

MR. FENSTER: That is the oldest piece I have here.

MS. YAGER: – it really captures a lot of all the wonderful things about your work.

MR. FENSTER: Yeah, I decided I'll keep that one. I'll keep it because of sentiment, you know. It's the first piece I made for Valmai after we married and –

MS. YAGER: This does have a little – a very small stamp that says “Fenster.”

MR. FENSTER: That's probably “Fenster,” yes. I didn't have a pewter stamp at that time. That was made in the 70s. Probably '72.

MS. YAGER: It's a very wonderful piece. I can see why the RISD Museum wanted it.

MR. FENSTER: I make them differently. I make them a little better now. This one I was soldering the seam over here, and so there's a solder line across here. Now I fuse that with a soldering copper so there's no seam.

MS. YAGER: A soldering copper?

MR. FENSTER: Yeah. It's an old way of joining pewter. You take a heavy piece of copper and you coat it with pewter, and then you deposit a layer of pewter. You burn it together actually. You burn separate parts together. They were doing a lot of that in Japan when I was over there. They were making component parts out of separate cast pewter elements, and then they were burning them together by just melting – running the copper between the parts and fusing the pewter together.

MS. YAGER: So are you saying there's a piece of copper in there?

MR. FENSTER: No, no. There's soldering copper, separate soldering copper that's got a bubble of pewter that's coating it, and then if you can – you just deposit that bubble of pewter and you can fill in areas and build up areas. And it's a way I repair things too, if I do repairs for people. See, this one's got a little heart in the back because I made it for my wife, you know.

MS. YAGER: And then the tendril looks as though it may have been, what, two feet long at one point? Before the curlicues?

MR. FENSTER: No, it wasn't that long, but if you notice, every one of these things is soldered. Every single little component is soldered because you need that for strength. Every one of them. And this has really stood the test of time. It's a piece that I've grown to like, you know, over time. Better and better.

MS. YAGER: Did you use it in your family home?

MR. FENSTER: What's that?

MS. YAGER: Did you use it for cream?

MR. FENSTER: We used it when Valmai was alive. Now I don't entertain here any more and I rarely have people out. Occasionally Thanksgiving. And here's a piece where the handle becomes the rim of the ladle, and then the rim of the ladle winds up and intertwines in the twisted handle and just lays itself in. That was – that was a demonstration piece also.

MS. YAGER: Did you do blacksmithing as well?

MR. FENSTER: No, but I'm influenced by it. There's no question that I'm –

MS. YAGER: Because some of the thinking –

MR. FENSTER: Absolutely. There's no question that I'm influenced by ironwork. I watch people do it. I love the fluidity of working with iron. And I always have blacksmiths take my pewter workshops, and the same thing happens every time. It just happened at Penland. A big burley young man, Rick – or Rob, rather, says, “Can I do the same kinds of things I do with iron?” And I said, “You can but you don't want to think that way. If you start whacking the pewter with the kind of authority that you use with iron, you're going to wreck it.” And of course he did, you know. And

then I read my evaluations later on, you know, because I had to caution him over and over and over again because he usually wouldn't listen to me the first time until he did something wrong and he had to re-make the piece, which he did continually. And then in the evaluation, because I was right on everything I told him, the evaluation said, "Fred rocks!" Which I'm going to – next time somebody gets into my class like that, I'm going to say, "I don't want to" – I'll say, "Why don't you listen to me the first time instead of being convinced by every failure that you get to because you're not listening."

MS. YAGER: Everybody learns on their own time. I love that ladle.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. You see – and this is the ladle that you can pick up easily because the handle's arched. Those are things that I think of, you know. And the partial rim is something I started doing later on, where I stopped the rim and it becomes the line. So I did one of these in Taiwan.

MS. YAGER: Now this one is not a signed piece. Is that true? Is there a marking here?

MR. FENSTER: I guess not. I think this was one I did up at Haystack as a demonstration. I should sign this actually. I didn't realize that.

MS. YAGER: Do you – do you archive your work? Do you try to keep any – keep track?

MR. FENSTER: No. No.

MS. YAGER: Do you have any idea how many pieces you may have created over all these years?

MR. FENSTER: No, and what was funny, when I was at Penland this time, it was the 75th anniversary session. They brought people back who had been at Penland many times over the years, and so all these people showed up that I knew from years ago. And to my surprise they said, "Do you remember that cup that you made for me with that rim?" And I said, "No, I don't have a clue." And all these people had these little cups that I made and gave to them. So it was very funny. They were nice. They had beautiful rims on them, and they were black with age. This one has been darkened, you know, and it doesn't have anything coating it, and that one does, and this one is sprayed with lacquer to preserve that finish. But these people had these really black cups, with these beautiful tapered rims on them. I got a kick out of that. I thought it was really funny.

MS. YAGER: I have a quote here that – that you consider your work to be a "record of experiments with techniques and form, minimal in concept, no applied design." And another quote was, "intimate interaction of idea, hand, eye and material."

MR. FENSTER: I couldn't have said it better myself. Especially in a quote.

MS. YAGER: You did say that. [Laughs.]

MR. FENSTER: That's exactly the way I feel. That's exactly the way I feel, that, you know, I work these out as I do them. I have a general idea of where I'm going when I start, and to me, as I've said, often the pewter is very much like clay, so I feel free to – freer to do different things with it than I would with silver, which is a more protracted operation and has to be thought out more carefully.

MS. YAGER: You almost treat it like taffy.

MR. FENSTER: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I do. I think of it as claylike. It's the main theme of every workshop I do, you know. And I show slides of clay pieces, you know, where – I mentioned Don Reitz before. He works with clay in the most beautiful way, and his handles are beautiful. And so when I look at that, I feel like I can do the same thing with pewter that he does with clay, or that glass people do. You know, when the stuff is fluid, they put it on right on the spot, don't figure it out. They just drape it on there, and that's the kind of thing I like to do with the pewter.

MS. YAGER: I wanted to talk about why metal, and one of the first questions I wanted to find out is, were you ever a Boy Scout?

MR. FENSTER: No.

MS. YAGER: I ask that because there were so many metalsmiths that I've spoken with that that was one of their first –

MR. FENSTER: I'll tell you why I was never a Boy Scout.

MS. YAGER: Okay.

MR. FENSTER: It's interesting. I wanted to be a Boy Scout. I came to my father and said, "I want to be a Boy Scout." And he thoughtfully said, "You have to wear a uniform for that, Fred." This is a man who fled Europe, right? And so the image of the Boy Scouts was like the Nazi youth to him. And he said no. He never explained it.

Later on in life my son David came to me and he said, "Dad, I want to join the Boy Scouts." And I said, "You have to wear a uniform, David." And I found that I had the same attitude that my father did. I was really surprised. I didn't realize I had that attitude. And I told him. I said, "When I was your age I also wanted to join the Boy Scouts," but something about the regimentation and the idea of wearing a uniform that prepares you for a secondary choice in life later on of wearing an army uniform really bothered me. And I told him – he was disappointed. And he has two girls, so it's not going to come up. But that's why I was never a Boy Scout.

MS. YAGER: That's interesting. There may have been a Christian emphasis as well. I wonder if that –

MR. FENSTER: Well, you know, when I was married to Valmai we went to New Zealand and there was a huge convocation in New Zealand of scouts, Christian scouts. There's a Christian thing, a giant, huge thing with all the islands, you know, like Tobago and all the islands near New Zealand and they all sent their scouts, and they were all performing. Fiji sent a group and Tobago sent a group and I was at this convocation and they were all performing their dances and songs. I thought it was great, but I wasn't involved in it. If my son had to wear a uniform, I would have had a problem.

MS. YAGER: Can you describe your first memory of seeing someone work with metal as a child, or your own first experience?

MR. FENSTER: I can describe my own first experience. It's very vivid in my mind. My father was a floor coverer. He used to work with his hands, and he'd often come home with things that he would find places, and he brought back a hunting knife, which I still own. And I happened to be sick. I used to get these respiratory infections all the time. And I was sick and I was home for four days. He put the knife in my hands and I caressed that knife for four days. I just couldn't stop touching it. The tactile sense in dealing with metal has always been of supreme importance to me. I love touching the metal. And each one of the pieces I do, I end up kind of rubbing the piece up by hand after, you know, with a cloth to bring up the final shine. And that was the first time I ever felt that kind of a connection. I still have the knife. It's downstairs. I don't rub it any more because I've got all these other things to rub. But that was really important to me. I loved that knife. I used to wear it on my belt all the time later on, you know, and I just – I still wear a knife on my belt.

MS. YAGER: How large was it?

MR. FENSTER: Hmm?

MS. YAGER: How large was it?

MR. FENSTER: It's about eight inches long.

MS. YAGER: A straight knife, or a folding?

MR. FENSTER: No, it's a straight knife, and it's a typical what they call a hunting knife with a serrated back on it so you could scale fish. And the handle was made up of leather, you know, like washers that are put on, oval washers that are put on over the shank of the tang, you know, leather

washers that are put on over the tang.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about the first time you were actually able to use metal, or transform it.

MR. FENSTER: Well, as I said, I saw this demonstration at City College as part of a class I was taking. I had never seen anybody work with jewelry. I had never seen anybody – that's not true. Actually my dentist – I wore braces as a kid. I used to watch him make the braces and fit them to my mouth, so that was the first silver soldering experience. And then at City College I saw this guy melt a piece while he was trying to put the back on it. And I went home. I went to this little basement gymnasium we had and I – somehow I bought a torch used from somebody, and I started teaching myself how to do it. And it was thrilling to me, you know, to be able to do things.

MS. YAGER: So the orthodontist created your braces?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. He would make them on the spot. He would bend them to fit. He had like a little super Bunsen burner that was very hot and he'd put a little paste flux on it, a little piece of solder and he would solder them together while I watched. His name was Dr. Krummerman. Dr. Krummerman was the cause of a lot of misery in my life. I always emerged bleeding and my gums were gouged. Anyway, that went on for four years, so I saw him do a lot of soldering.

MS. YAGER: That's astounding. Wow.

MR. FENSTER: That was pretty interesting. That was the only good thing about the orthodontia work.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. Could you discuss your views on the importance of metal as a means of expression. As a vehicle – well, we talked about that somewhat, really. You know, why the choice of metal.

MR. FENSTER: Well, I'm comfortable with it and it feels really natural to me. I spoke yesterday about the fact that I was originally interested in woodworking but I wasn't good enough at it. I couldn't satisfy myself. At Cranbrook I had a minor in ceramics, and I also wasn't good enough at it. I made reasonably nice pieces and – but they didn't satisfy me in the same way. I didn't have the control that I had over metal. I couldn't exert that degree of control that I wanted. There were too many things that were out of my hands.

MS. YAGER: One of the things that I'm curious about too. Did your – in your family did you have any metal objects that you were growing up with? Did your father have a Kiddush cup at that time, or did your mother have any particular jewelry or things that you remember clearly?

MR. FENSTER: No, but my father, being a man who worked with his hands, he had a lot of tools and I started teaching myself to work with tools on my own, building Adirondack chairs when I was pretty young, sawing everything out by hand. And actually I made good chairs that lasted for years. I taught myself how to do it. And I didn't want him – I didn't even want him seeing it because he was a very competent man and he would have taken over, and I wanted to do this on my own, you know. But I used to work with him on weekends and I learned how to – he was very good at solving problems. When you do floor covering and you don't want to take a heavy radiator out of the room, you jack it up, you brace it, you slip the floor covering underneath, and you pull out the props, and he was very clever about solving problems like that. And I learned to think in a different way. I learned to solve problems in a different way.

I remember taking geometry in school and being very proud of the fact that I could figure out area, you know, the amount of footage in an area. And I said, "That would be good for you, pop. You have to do estimates all the time." And he said, "All right, I tell you what. Set something up and we'll see who can do it faster." So I said, "All right, a triangle." So you know, there's a way to figure out the area in a triangle, and I'm starting to figure out the area, and he tells me the area instantly. And I said, "How did you do that so fast?" And he said, "I did a rectangle, and then I just took half of it, and that was the triangle." I said, "Good. Really good." Practical way of thinking.

So I learned a lot from him. I learned a lot because he had a really strong work ethic. I learned a lot because he had a penchant for quality, you know. He didn't let things go. He was – it was my job to fix up his little mistakes, you know, by cutting little pieces of linoleum and filling in the areas where he cut badly. And so I admired that. We would spend a long time, you know, touching up areas that weren't just exactly right. Even in areas that wouldn't be seen that were going to have molding over them, we would fix them up. So he didn't just walk away from things that were not right. If he really messed up, he'd cut a whole new piece for it at his own cost to himself in time and material. That was a good thing to know.

MS. YAGER: I wanted to talk to you about – let's see, there was one other question about metal. What strengths and limitations. We've spoken about the strengths. Are there any limitations?

MR. FENSTER: Well, yeah.

MS. YAGER: I didn't write this question. [Laughs.]

MR. FENSTER: One of the – one of the things that was in vogue when I was at Cranbrook was the Saarinen chair, the one on the pedestal base, those white chairs that sweep down. I wanted to make a teapot like that and every teapot I'd ever seen always had a short, stubby cone-shaped base, you know, like a pear-shaped form and then it would have a short, stubby base. And I thought, I wonder if it has to have a short stubby base. I wonder if I could put it on a Saarinen base. So I made the base and I made it delicate, and it raised the pot up so the bottom of the pot was up in the air. And it had a side handle on it. It was really an interesting piece for me. I had to put a steel – a piece of steel in the – in the pedestal where it really got thin. So it was wide on the bottom, thin in the center, and then wide where it came off the pot.

So I solved all the physical problems and I put the thing together. And then in handling the pot I realized that the center of gravity was now higher than it would have been with a cone-shaped base, and it didn't feel right because of that. And that told me that the cone-shaped base had a good reason for being low, squat, and inelegant from what I thought. And the elegant base that I made wasn't as practical. You know, the center of gravity made the pot – it wasn't going to tip, it wasn't – the base wasn't going to bend. It just didn't handle the way it should. And so I had to make a piece to find out.

I lost that piece in the move up here. The movers lost a package of hollowware. I think I had two or three pieces of hollowware that got lost and I thought, shouldn't I do something about this? And then I thought, nah. It was a silver-plated piece that was done in bronze, and I thought, I'm done with it. I'm not going to try to trace it down.

And then – also in – in the truck that delivered my stuff, there was an absolutely fabulous set of snap-on sockets, and I told the guy right away, I said, "Those aren't mine." And he said, well, he said, "Take them because, you know, we're never going to find the rightful owner." And I said, "They're not mine, I'm not going to take them." He said, "Well, if I bring them back, somebody else will take them. They're not going to get back." And I said, "Look, I'd love to have a set like this, but I lost a package, you know. And somebody has three pieces of my hollowware and I'm not going to take this guy's sockets to make up for that because it's not going to make up for it." And I thought to myself, dummy. But I never took them, and I went out and bought a set of sockets for myself. I was tempted. I was really tempted. But I love tools. But I didn't take them.

MS. YAGER: I want to talk about your exhibitions and the significance of showing work. The tally you had given me, a resume, it was from about 1995 to 1970, so that's really only a portion of your career, but that had 250 exhibits listed. Can you talk about – can you talk about some of the more influential shows. You know, was there one show that was very important, or was sort of a turning point for –

MR. FENSTER: I never thought about the shows in that sense. I always thought of the shows in terms of an educational opportunity, where I could let people see an idea, you know.

MS. YAGER: Educational to the audience?

MR. FENSTER: To the audience. I never thought about shows in terms of myself, you know, of doing something for myself. In every piece that I would do and send off to a show, I always thought this was an opportunity to show people a new way of looking at things, or a different attitude or something like that. I mean, I had to keep a tally of the shows because we were required to hand that in at the end of every year to the committee that salaries and –

MS. YAGER: For advancement?

MR. FENSTER: Yes, for advancement. So I did it because that was my obligation. But I didn't care about that part of it. I thought that every once in a while I came up with a really interesting idea. And occasionally another metalsmith would write to me, like David LaPlantz one time. I didn't know him well, just to say hello to. I had done a cup with a wire base where the wire spiraled around itself and then – I guess the stem was one piece. I think it was like this long, and the stem came down. The stem was twisted, came down into a long taper, and the taper started going out horizontally. And then that made the pedestal base. And then I took the end of that spiral, brought it underneath the cup, pushed it up through a hole and wound it into the original twist. That was a nice idea, and David wrote to me and he said, "Great idea, Fred," you know. That was what it was about for me. I thought, okay, you know, one person sees it and appreciates it and he's another metalsmith. And David is a very good metalsmith. So I appreciated that. And I had done the same thing on a rim one time where the rim went around on the rim, spiraled down the inside of the bowl, went out the bottom, and became the base. It became – it actually wound around itself and became the base of the piece. That one I didn't do as aesthetically well as I did the cup, so that was a little – that was a little disappointing. But the idea was something that I'm probably going to revisit in the future. It's a really nice idea.

MS. YAGER: Did you ever attend any of these exhibitions?

MR. FENSTER: If I can, you know. I mean, I like to see what other people did. One of the exhibitions that was important to me was the show at the Smithsonian, at the Renwick [Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum], that –

MS. YAGER: The goldsmith's show?

MR. FENSTER: "Objects USA."

MS. YAGER: Okay. That was in 1971.

MR. FENSTER: Okay. Mike Jerry – Michael Jerry and I went down. He came down from Stout, I drove down in my wagon. I'd never – I was like a hick in a big city. I'd never been in Washington, totally intimidated by the pace of driving there. We didn't have any money so we stayed at the Y, and I had my crappy little corduroy suit and I went to the opening, which was a really posh opening where they served lobster and crab. And everybody was in the know, so nobody looked at the show until they went to the – until they ate. They got all the lobster and crab out of the way. I went to look at the work because nobody was at the work. I thought, what a great opportunity and I'll see the show. Then I'll go and get something. So – and I had a Kiddush cup in that that was kind of a jazzy cup which I didn't like, which was commissioned by the Johnson people [Johnson Collection of Contemporary Craft]. I tried to make a showpiece. I never did that. But I tried to make a piece that was going to be very special, and the piece – I was self-conscious about making a show piece, and I think the piece was a self-conscious piece. And it got a lot of publicity, it was featured in magazines and things like that. I never liked the piece.

MS. YAGER: So it was commissioned specifically for that show?

MR. FENSTER: Yeah. The other thing they did was they paid first, which I don't like. I don't like it. I don't like when that happens. I – I want to make the piece, have it accepted, and then I get my reward after. I don't like being paid up front because it's confusing to me. So I made the piece and I made a very jazzy piece. We were talking about special little things in a piece, and this cup had – it

was a Kiddush cup. It had 12 divisions on it which were invisible to anybody but a hammer guy. I made the divisions by using my planishing blow side by side so that they created a facet on the cup. So that means I made the cup, planished the cup, and then re-planished it so that the hammer blows created a subtle facet, and there were 12 of those denoting the 12 tribes of Israel. It had fossils in it, it had gold in it, it had – it had everything in it. It was just over the top. And people liked it, but I didn't.

Jack Prip was in the show. He had two pieces, two wonderful pieces, and I stood in front of his – that for me was the whole show. Those two pewter pieces, two nice-sized pewter pieces. And I just stood there with my mouth hanging open.

MS. YAGER: Can you describe those to me?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. One of them was a torso form that was oval and two little like nipples in the front of it. That was one, and the second piece, I can't remember what the second one was but I was just mesmerized by those pieces. An interesting thing happened. Olaf Skoogfors was there at the opening and Jack must have been there, although I didn't see – I had never met him. Anyway, we're invited to go up to Philadelphia after the show on the way home, and we went up. Stanley was there, Stanley Lechtzin. And we had dinner at either Stanley Lechtzin's house – it must have been Olaf's house. And Olaf's father was the first cellist in the Philadelphia Orchestra, or father-in-law, maybe. Father-in-law, must have been. And Jack Prip and his wife were there. And Jack Prip was like a god to me. I was in awe of the man.

I sat next to his wife –

MS. YAGER: Karen.

MR. FENSTER: And his wife said, "Did you see" – she was Swedish and she had this nice accent. "Did you see the piece of crap that Jack had, that Jack made for the show?" And I said, "I saw the pieces he had in the show. They were wonderful pieces." And she said, "He didn't put that piece in the show, it was so bad." And I thought Jack Prip makes a bad piece? That was a revelation to me. And I said, "He made a bad piece and he didn't put it in the show?" I couldn't get over it, you know.

And Jack – Jack doesn't talk. He's very shy. He doesn't talk. But she talked a little bit, and so that night was a really special night. We saw the show, we drove back to Philadelphia, which was like, I don't know, two and a half hours, three hours away, and then we had an impromptu quartet play for us, a cello, violin. They did this beautiful musical piece. We had a nice dinner, great company. It was an amazing evening.

MS. YAGER: Were all the pieces in the show commissioned?

MR. FENSTER: Probably not, but I think the people in Wisconsin had a little – they were – they were commissioning us, you know. The show was very uneven. It was a very uneven show, and I thought – I thought the metalwork was all over the place. Hans Christensen, who's another guy I revere, had a chalice in the show which I didn't think was one of his better pieces. Jack's pieces were the best pieces of metal in the show, I thought. I guess Michael had a piece. I don't remember what that was. But you know, for me it was the first time I'd ever been to the Smithsonian, first time I'd ever been to Washington, and I was, you know, I was just open-mouthed at the elegance of the presentation, at the size of the Renwick. The whole thing was over my head. I was so awe-struck by everything. I kept thinking, I'm from New York, I shouldn't be awe-struck. I'm from New York. Get over it.

Later on I lived in Washington, you know, and I used to go the Kennedy Center [John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts] often, and the Renwick all the time. So that was the first time, though.

MS. YAGER: You know, you talked about your crappy corduroy suit. And Earl Krentzin mentioned something about a suit that you traded with him.

MR. FENSTER: Really? A suit?

MS. YAGER: You had repaired a box and traded for a suit or something.

MR. FENSTER: I don't know. We were very poor. When I came up there, we didn't have enough money to make ends meet, you know. I mean, I had one child who was five when we – who was five when we moved up here, because he'd just started going to school. And then Mark was about to be born. And I just didn't have enough money to make ends meet. I was making \$4,600 a year, or \$4,400 a year, something like that as an instructor. Not a tenure track position. And I got my shop up and going and I started doing fairs. I took on anything. Anything from anybody that would bring money in, and I still couldn't – I still couldn't make ends meet. I could just barely, barely get through the first year and luckily I did the Art Fair on The Square here, which is a big art fair, and that was really nice because it – I didn't sell that much but I gave out a lot of cards, and giving out a lot of cards made it possible for me to build up business locally. And I built a very solid, lucrative business. I did that summer fair every year, and I had a nice business after that.

Stuff would just kind of ooze in all year long at a steady, slow rate, and I was able to supplement my income very nicely.

MS. YAGER: There were a couple of shows that I was – that I read on your list that I was interested in. There was one in the 1960s, 1966, at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, and another one, a pewter show at the Art Alliance. Do you remember?

MR. FENSTER: Vaguely. Sometimes I would be embarrassed by those shows. They would put these grandiose titles on them, like “Masters of Metal,” you know. And I never felt like a master of metal. I always felt like I was, you know, trying to find my way through, like most people who struggle with things in art. And I frankly was embarrassed by the titles. The same thing at Arrowmont, they put a title on this thing, something master something or other. “Master Class,” you know. Pah. Okay, that's the title. But I don't like that. I think it's grandiose and it doesn't really speak to the fact. I mean – I mean, I know that people consider me very experienced in pewter and I guess I am, but I don't consider myself a master of a – a master pewtersmith. I would never take that on.

MS. YAGER: Phillip Fike used to say that he was competing with the excellence of the past.

MR. FENSTER: Yeah. And I – I – you know, there are so many wonderful things that have been done over time. I think I'm okay at what I do, you know. I think I'm good at it, but I see people whose work I like better. I wouldn't arrogate that title to myself ever, in any way. I think it makes the people who put on the show, puffs them up a little bit, you know, but it doesn't – I don't feel puffed up by it. I feel it's a little embarrassing. It's over-stated.

MS. YAGER: There was one show, the “Uncommon Smith.”

MR. FENSTER: Oh. I remember the title. I don't know what I had. I probably had pewter in their show.

MS. YAGER: And there was a show at the Vatican [“Craft, Art and Religion,” Vatican Museum, Rome, 1978].

MR. FENSTER: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Did you happen to attend that show?

MR. FENSTER: No. I sent a chalice that I had done at – at Cranbrook. Actually I think that's – no, I'm sorry. I didn't make it at Cranbrook. I made it here, but it's in the Cranbrook collection now. I sent that chalice to the Vatican. I was really pleased to have that piece. It was one of the pieces that I liked. It was a very simple chalice. It's very much in line with church teachings today, where I get calls from priests asking me if I made chalices in non-precious material. And I say, “Well, I make chalices in pewter, and I don't think most people class that as a precious metal.” “Oh, that's

perfect,” they say. “You know, we don’t want to have anything that reeks of money, in the light of where the church is – what’s happening today.”

So I was really pleased with it. The form was simple. It was an elegant piece, it was done – it was – I thought it was a well-done piece, you know. It had a basket in the center of it and it had a brass cross that was put through from the back so I didn’t have to interrupt the – I didn’t have any clean-up in the front. That would have messed up the texture of the filed surface, and it had a brass rim on the bottom. So it had a strong bottom rim, a good solid brass cross that stood out from the surface, and then it had a nice heavy top rim like that. And the form was something like this. Something like that. But it was one that I liked a lot and I was pleased that Paul Smith picked that to go over there.

MS. YAGER: I was curious about the – the Cranbrook collection. How – have they always collected a piece from each student? Is that how –

MR. FENSTER: No. No, they hadn’t. In fact, when I was there they didn’t ask me for anything when I graduated. But years later Dick Thomas asked if I would – contacted me and asked if I’d give a piece, so I gave them the best piece that I had at the time, and he seemed really surprised because I guess a lot of people gave them something that they didn’t care about. But when you give a gift, you give the best thing that you have, so I gave the chalice, which I still feel good about.

So yes, this was after I graduated. He came back and he asked a number of us if we would give a piece to their collection. Their collection was really a good collection, and it was important in my schooling because I – the collection was in his office and we could go in and look at it any time, and this silversmith Stone that I mention, he had pieces in that collection. There were pieces from Russia that were deeply chased. Beautiful, beautiful work.

MS. YAGER: So these were not pieces of students. These were pieces of his private collection –

MR. FENSTER: No, these were – it was a professional collection. Yes. And I don’t know where he got it. I don’t know if somebody donated a private collection, but it was a very, very fine collection of mostly European metal work.

MS. YAGER: So visual library, which is kind of what you have here sitting in this living room.

MR. FENSTER: A little bit, yes. A little bit for the pewter. I mean, I’m trying to represent different attitudes of thought and form and so on. And I find that the students really benefit from that. I dragged these pieces in constantly. I know Harvey Littleton did that in glass. He visited Europe, he collected glass, he pulled all that stuff home, and he let his students be inspired by what he saw. He also brought in European glass blowers, constantly, and built up his program that way. It was the best program in the United States at one point. It’s important, I think, to have those tangible examples of work.

MS. YAGER: It’s like a library for – text people have to have a library – and we need the stuff.

MR. FENSTER: That’s one of the things we have at school. One of the first things I did when I came in was I put in a library. When Vierthaler was away for that year, I built library shelves, I ordered books, and I put in a library. And we have a library of periodicals and as many metal books as we can get our hands on. And it’s right in the shop, you know. We don’t lend it out but anybody can come in and look at it. We now have videos as well, so we try to have as much stuff on hand as possible so that if a student misses a demonstration or something and we have a video on something like that, they can pick it back up.

MS. YAGER: Do you have videos of your own demonstrations?

MR. FENSTER: Actually – actually I’ve had a student, Hiroko, who’s been video-taping me for a long time, but I don’t usually use – I don’t like to look at myself so I don’t use those in school at all. But I have videos of other people.

MS. YAGER: But those are great documents.

MR. FENSTER: You know, I haven't even looked at them. She gave me – she gave them to me and I – I just don't like watching myself. But I have videos of a Japanese craftsman, a pewtersmith who's wonderful that I use in every one of my pewter demonstrations or workshops, Mr. [Masafumi] Sekine, who we visited when we were in Japan. I use him and I use slides. I have an extensive slide collection of pewter work.

MS. YAGER: Let's see, I wanted to ask you if there was any particular – I mean, you spoke about seeing Jack Prip's work at the Renwick. Can you think of any other exhibitions that were just, you know, historical or whatever, that were just very inspiring, or sort of a significant marker for you?

MR. FENSTER: Well, at the SNAG [Society of North American Goldsmiths] conferences, you know, they would have shows and I remember – again, it was down in Washington at a different time, where they had a SNAG conference. I remember I stayed – I think I must have driven down there at a different time. There was a show at the Renwick that Mike Monroe set up in glass cases that were just sort of packed in with work. And there was a lot of work in that show, a lot of metal work that was high quality. And I would go through the show very carefully alone, by myself. And usually I would come away thinking, well, I was dazzled initially, but when it comes down to it, there are just two or three pieces I like in a show, which is always the way it comes down for me.

At that show, that particular show I met Chunghi Choo, and I'd never met her. And I didn't know if it was a man or a woman. I heard the name and so I – I remember we were between these big cases, big glass cases, and this little woman steps out in this low voice, she says, "Hi. I Chunghi Choo." And I said, "I thought you were a guy." And she goes, "No, I woman." Later on we got to be friends. It was very funny, though. She's wonderful. She still goes strong. It's amazing.

MS. YAGER: Did you ever go to the, you know, Metropolitan [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City] as a kid?

MR. FENSTER: Not as a kid, but I went as an adult. My friend Bernie [Bernstein] is a museum nut and he actually chart diagrammed the metal work collections and published that article in SNAG, so you can – through Bernie's article, it's like a guide to the metal work collections in New York in general. And he's that way. He's a very scholarly person, so yes.

When I grew older I went. When I was in New York I did not go to the Metropolitan. I did go to the Museum of Natural History and I actually enjoyed the – in Chicago the Field Museum is a fabulous museum. And in that museum – I actually enjoyed going to that museum more than the other museums in Chicago because I could see ethnic artifacts, and that's what I've always been drawn to. They also had an incredible show there of Iranian locks, that – you probably have a catalog of that show.

MS. YAGER: I have the book.

MR. FENSTER: An amazing show. And it's an amazing – that book is amazing. Anyway, that was a breathtaking thing for me. I couldn't believe what I was seeing there.

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MR. FENSTER: But that was a treat. And then they had a lot of ethnic stuff from Africa, and I loved seeing these hand-wrought spears and the implements they use for everyday life. And I think in general I'm always affected by tools that are used to solve problems – chopping tools, harvesting tools. You know, these handmade artifacts are fascinating to me.

MS. YAGER: And the shapes have been honed over generations.

MR. FENSTER: Exactly. That's exactly – that's a good word, yes. They've been refined over generations of use into a really sophisticated – I'll tell you one experience I had. In Sydney, Australia my wife and I would go there every year after we were married because her family was actually Australian but they lived in New Zealand. Her brother lived in Australia. So we would go to New Zealand and go camping for – we'd go for the month of the Christmas break. You know,

we'd come back January 22, I guess, and start school.

But there is a display in Sydney of aboriginal work, knives. There was a display of knives and baskets, and the knives and baskets were so breathtakingly beautiful that I got all choked up. I mean, my heart just beat faster when I saw that, and I thought it's amazing. We have this term where we call people primitive people, you know, and they're so sophisticated when it comes to aesthetics, that, you know, it's just a misnomer, a mistaken impression to call people primitive in any sense of the word because they're not. They just work with different –

MS. YAGER: They're just not industrial.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. They're not industrialized and they work with different materials. But the work itself – I mean, you can – you can read archeology magazines and they'll talk about how sophisticated flint-knapping is to make spear points and arrowheads, you know, that sort of thing. There's a whole hierarchy of sophistication in those forms. In fact, there was a case that was written up in *Popular Mechanics* or *Popular Science*, where a guy became so adept at flint-knapping that he actually forged – he became a forger of arrowheads, which sell for – or spearheads, which sell for thousands and thousands of dollars if they can be authenticated. Anyway, his work was so good that nobody in modern times was as good as he was, and he had taught himself how to flint-knap.

He ended up selling the first one, naively, without trying to be duplicitous about it, but he got so much money at it that he started forging these things, and finally was caught as a spear-forger, a stonehead spear forger, and it became a big scandal in the field of people who collect these artifacts, you know. Many people who bought the pieces from him refused to believe that he made them, they were so good, you know. To me it's fascinating. I have a book on making spear-heads, on flint-knapping, just all about flint-knapping and how sophisticated it was.

Anyway, these aboriginal pieces were breathtaking to me. They reminded me of the Pukka knives in Finland that Tapio Virkkala designed. It's the national Finnish knife, and it's a very concise, about six inches long, beautiful, simple form. And these stone knives were very much like that in size and shape. And I just stood there dumbfounded at the quality and the beauty of these things. That was one of the, like the seminal experiences of my life. And I couldn't get over it. I thought about it a lot, you know, about how these people were – they didn't have to be that good to work. They didn't have to be that beautiful to work. But they were that good and they were that beautiful, so something was going on there that goes on with any art form, you know. It was self-expression, and that's what that was about, the desire of somebody to excel, inherent in every human nature, in every society. So that was a very emotional experience for me.

MS. YAGER: Thank you for that. [Pause.] I wanted to ask your recollections on some of the early shows at—you had mentioned in an earlier conversation the openings at the Detroit Art Institute and the Michigan Designer Craftsman shows, and the Wisconsin Designer Craftsman shows. Can you talk about those shows, your memories of those?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I have interesting memories of those shows. At the Wisconsin Designer Craftsman shows I was a student at Cranbrook, and for about three years running I won awards in those shows, and it was very confusing to me. I thought, I'm a student, these are my beginning pieces. Why am I winning awards? There must be a low level of achievement. I mean, this is the way my head works, you know. I'm very logical. It was upsetting. I wasn't impressed with the fact that I won awards. I just thought, well, people aren't doing very good work if I'm winning awards.

So I won awards for the years I was at Cranbrook. The year after I graduated, I put in three [two] pieces of hollowware ["Fifteenth Exhibition for Michigan Artist-Craftsmen," The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1961] and that was the first year I didn't win an award, and that was the first year I felt I deserved an award because the pieces were really good. But there was a couple, the Kenney's, I think, who were in the wheelchairs. The Kenney-Eagans [Marion and Fred], yes. They won the award [The Founders Society Purchase Prize, "To the Kenney-Eagans for their *Decorative Silver Jar*, \$275"], and I thought, okay, this evens everything out. For all the other years I shouldn't have

won, I won, and this year I felt I should have won – people came up to me and said, “You should have won an award.” And I said, “Hey, I’m fine with that. The Kenney-Eagans are terrific and I’m really happy for them.” And I was. I thought that was funny. So that was the – that was my experience.

Those shows were really good. There was a lot of good work in those shows and I really enjoyed going to the openings.

MS. YAGER: How influential was it – I mean, from reading those things, there seemed to be a system of, you know, showing local or area work, rewarding it with financial prizes, making, you know – recognition. Did that spur people on? I mean, it seemed like it was a very supportive atmosphere. What impact did that recognition have?

MR. FENSTER: Well, you know, I mean – I mean, I’m human. I enjoyed the recognition when I got it but I wasn’t ego-dependent on it or anything, and I took it – I didn’t take it that seriously. As I said, I thought I shouldn’t be winning awards at that stage of my career. But I kept exhibiting – as long as they invited me, you know, I thought, okay, I’ll send a piece down. And I won an award one year, and I had never juried shows up until that time. And I took one of my students, we went to Detroit and I visited the show and I looked at the work, and there was a woman in the show who was one of Stanley’s students, who did like knitted crochet stuff. I can’t think of her name. And I won one of the major awards at this show [1969 “Exhibition for Michigan Artist-Craftsmen,” won the Albert De Salle Memorial Award of \$200 for *Choker and Pendant with Pearls* (for Permanent Collection)].

When I looked at the work, I thought that her piece was much better than mine, but she had – it was a purchase award that I won. But she had \$2,500 on the piece [*Celebration of Eve*], and that’s why she didn’t win the award, because they couldn’t get the money together. So I began to realize that the mechanics of these shows – Marilyn something or other [Marci Zelmanoff].

MS. YAGER: How much was the purchase award valued at?

MR. FENSTER: Mine was probably \$1,000 or \$1,200 [priced at \$125], and that’s why they make the categories, and mine fit a category. I hadn’t thought about it. Mine fit the category. When I ran into this girl I said, “Hello, I really like the piece you have in this show.” She went, “Humph,” and walked away from me because she was angry. Her piece was better, better than mine. No question about it, she should have won a major award.

MS. YAGER: But it was not the budget of the award.

MR. FENSTER: No. The piece was priced so high. I can’t think of her name. She was a really poor craftsperson. The piece wasn’t crafted well, but it was really exciting. It was like a piece that was on the shoulder and all these crochet things. I know she’s one of Stanley’s students. She was a real pill of a personality, which I gathered quickly from her. I thought being that I won this purchase – I didn’t know what award I won, but when I won an award I thought, well, I’ll drive down and we can stay at the Y. And I took I think one student. I went with one student, and we had a lot of fun. It was an eight-hour drive.

But that – that was the first inkling I had of the structure of how awards are given, and then when I became a juror later on in life, I found that very, very difficult, you know, because we were awarding shows based on the – I mean, we were awarding prizes based on the category and the amount of money we had to give, and it’s not fair, you know.

MS. YAGER: I had a purchase award and it was purchased, but it was less than what I had set on a piece.

MR. FENSTER: Well, they usually call you and ask you, “Would you like to be in our museum collection?” That’s – usually I would say yes.

MS. YAGER: Yes. It’s tough, though, to –

MR. FENSTER: Yes, it is. Usually I'd say yes.

MS. YAGER: One of the – I mean, do you usually – do you hope for the museum to purchase a piece, or do you donate a piece? What's your philosophy on that?

MR. FENSTER: It depends on how attached I am to a piece, you know. Usually I'm not attached. I have very little attachment to my pieces. As I say, the worth is in the process of making it and the experience of making it, so I don't get attached. But occasionally, like the little pitcher, I'm attached to that. As I'm getting older, I think I'm getting to like my pieces a little bit more, some of them.

I sent a really nice Kiddush cup to this show in – in Texas, and this woman calls me up. So it's a Kiddush cup and it goes to a Judaica show. And this woman calls me up late at night. It must have – well, I don't know what time it was there. It was two hours earlier, I guess. And this woman says, "Hello, Mr. Fenster." And I say, "Yes?" And she says, "I'm calling you to tell you we will not be returning your Kiddush cup." And I say, "Under what circumstances is this taking place?" She says, "Well, we have purchased your Kiddush cup for our rabbi." I'm cracking up. Gee, well, it's nice to hear that, you know. Can you keep from laughing? I felt like saying, "Are you really Jewish with that accent?" It was so funny. That was one of the – I was happy to let that cup go. It was a really nice cup and I was glad it was going to a rabbi, you know, that they had gotten it for him.

MS. YAGER: How often did pieces sell from the shows? Was that a typical –

MR. FENSTER: The Kiddush cups sell. Every Kiddush cup I've ever made, except for these two, has sold, you know. And I'm really happy to have this one here. I don't push these things, but you know, if I really pushed the Judaica shows I'm sure I could sell out. I'm very bad about selling my pieces. I mean, some – a man from New York, a collector, called me up and I was watching "NYPD Blue" on Tuesday nights, which I like to watch. And he calls me up right in the middle of the program and he says, "I'm interested in buying a Kiddush cup from you." "I don't have any." I just wanted to get him off the phone. [Laughs.] And he said, "Well, will you be making some, will you have some?" And I said, "No." [Laughs.] And that was it. He didn't know what to say, so he said, "Okay," and he hung up and that was the end of the conversation. I thought, wow, I just lost five minutes of that show because this guy was really annoyed that he called up. But under other circumstances I would have been more courteous.

But the truth is, it – you know, if it's for a museum, I like that, you know, because then a lot of people get to see it. If it's for a private collector who really appreciates the work, I like that. But occasionally if it's for somebody who I don't feel, you know – is collecting for the wrong reasons for, you know – like I've had – at the shows at the Smithsonian a woman walks up to me and she says, "What kind of a discount can you give me on your Judaica?" And I say, "I'm not going to give you any discount. You want to buy it, buy it. If you don't want to buy it, don't buy it." She says, "I don't think you understand, Fred. I'm a dealer." And I say, "Okay. You're a dealer. You pay the price and you mark it up to whatever you want if you want to sell it, but this is my price." And she got really angry. She started berating me and huffily walked away. I thought, good riddance, lady.

These people who tell me they're dealers, they work out of – for Judaica, they work out of their homes usually and they hold a once-a-month showing or something like that, and they always give me a card, "If you're ever interested." And I know what the story is, you know. If it's an institution, I might be interested. If it's a private home that they're selling out of, I know not to do it. I've never done it, as a matter of fact. And, you know, I don't have any trouble selling this stuff myself.

I meet real collectors, you know, when I used to do the shows. This woman – this Jewish woman came by with an entourage of her family, and she looks my, you know, my display over and she says, "I'll take the – the menorah, the Hanukkah menorah." And she walks off with about six people trailing her. And I thought, is she really going to take it, or someone else speaks for her? Do I sell it? I thought, well, I can't. And I wondered if she'd ever come back. She's going to go through the whole show. And the end of the day she came back and she said, "I'd like to take my menorah now," and I said, "Take it. I wondered if you were going to come back."

And then she actually called me. She was visiting in Milwaukee and asked if she could come out. So she was a real collector. She was amassing a collection that was going to be given to a museum later. So that kind of person I like.

MS. YAGER: How significant have patrons been in your career? I mean, has this – have any of these relationships with collectors been long-term?

MR. FENSTER: Well, there have been a couple of women who have – who really did collect my work over a long period of time. One of them gave a couple of pieces to the Smithsonian, you know, collection of work, craft objects, at the Renwick. So I have two pieces in that permanent collection, a Kiddush cup and one of those teapots, like the one back there, the folded one. Then another woman just collected my stuff for years because she liked it. She was the wife of an architect in town who later retired to Tucson. And she lent me the money to buy the house. That's how she started collecting my work. I said, I'll pay you in work because I can't pay you in money. So every year I'd make her a gift. I mean, she collected way over the thousand dollars that she lent me. I mean, I just – she became a close friend, Patty Kaeser. She died some years ago. She was very good to me, very good.

MS. YAGER: What happened to the pieces that she –

MR. FENSTER: Her daughter has them, and I was thinking about whether I should ask her daughter to send some of the work back for the retrospective show, and I'm not going to do that just because I think it would be an imposition, but I can get –

MS. YAGER: It could be a compliment.

MR. FENSTER: Well, yeah. I'm sure she'd do it. I mean, we're on good terms, Carol and I. But I think I'll borrow pieces from this woman in Washington, Chevy Chase, Maryland, Ruth. And Stanley Lechtzin has a really good Kiddush cup that I made. So I can get –

MS. YAGER: Where is your retrospective going to be?

MR. FENSTER: Here, at the Elvehjem Museum, right next to the art department.

MS. YAGER: When is that?

MR. FENSTER: Who knows? You know, it was originally supposed to be this year. They put it off. They put it off twice already. I was talking to Eleanor. We're having, you know, a joint retrospective with our graduate students from the past, and I said, "I think he's waiting for us to die," so – no, kidding. It would be a real retrospective. She said, "Yeah, I think so." Because Eleanor kind of talked him into this. She – she made such a comprehensive approach to him that he couldn't figure out how to say no. So Don Reitz is having a retrospective of his ceramic work and the following year we're supposed to have one, but I understand they put off – his was supposed to be now, in this month, at the end of this month. I don't know if they're going to have it or not. Eleanor said they postponed his show as well.

MS. YAGER: So do you think your show might be a year from now, or three years from now?

MR. FENSTER: It's scheduled for 2005 or 2006. Supposedly I got a letter about this, but I don't – I think Eleanor got the letter and mine is probably still sitting in my mailbox at school. I haven't been to school since I got back from Taiwan. Yes, that's going to be a big show. Should be a lot of fun. Our old students will come back and we'll meet people we haven't seen in years. That will be very nice.

MS. YAGER: Commissions that you've had, is there – do they influence the design of the work at all?

MR. FENSTER: Definitely. When I do a commission I'm really thinking about what the person wants and how the piece is going to be used, and I think that commissions shaped the way I designed for a lot of years. I – I – I did a lot of – most of the commissions were rings, and they were

engagement rings and wedding bands and stone set rings from women who were divorced and wanted all the stones put into one spectacular cocktail ring. I finally got fed up with that and I stopped doing it. But yeah, a lot of them were loaded with stones, and I usually don't design that way. I don't try to fill the piece up with a lot of wealth. But you know, I try to have the design speak with a very simple stone setting.

So definitely it influenced me. And I always thought of the person. I thought that was my obligation, you know, to – to make somebody happy that way. And to make myself happy as well. I never did anything that I didn't want to do and that I didn't like, but I'm definitely putting, my priorities are that the person be happy, you know, and that you know, that I'm – that I'm satisfied as well. But I didn't put myself on top. Now I feel differently about things. Now if somebody commissions me I say, "Well, let me make something that I want to make. I'll show you what I do. If you like it, fine," you know. Now I'm in a position where – I didn't – for a long time I've been doing that, where I can just have fun myself and if they like it, they buy it, and if they don't – but they always buy it. Generally I'll let them see it or let them see what my thinking is.

MS. YAGER: What's the most important commission piece that you've had?

MR. FENSTER: I did the Kleisley Chalice for Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. The most I ever got for a piece. It was a silver chalice, big. Eleven inches high, six inches across on the cup. The paten for that was a 12-inch plate, and I had a lot of trouble doing it. It was a really difficult piece, and I did it. And I was relieved when it was over. It went really well.

MS. YAGER: How long ago was that?

MR. FENSTER: About 14 years ago.

MS. YAGER: And that was, how – like how long a period of time did you work on that piece?

MR. FENSTER: I didn't work on it that long because – oh, it probably took me, you know, about two or three weeks of actual working time, but what happened was that there was a time constraint on it and I was moving back here, and I realized as soon as I moved back I wouldn't even have a shop set up but I'd have to do the commission. I got really nervous, and for the first time in my life I broke out with hives because I was so nervous. I never get sick. I'm like, you know. I had the hives all across here. Big, you know, pimples, mass – this red mass of pimples.

And I called the priest up – it's a Jesuit school, and I said, "I have to talk about something with you." I said, you know, "The time constraints are so difficult that I'm getting physical ailments." And he said, "Oh, don't sweat it. We'll do – get it to us in a year. If you get it to us by next year, that will be perfect." So that's what I did. But the hive thing, I thought it was amazing. I thought, wow, me, of all people.

MS. YAGER: How did the commission come about?

MR. FENSTER: That's a good question. They called me up when I was still in Washington, and somebody must have referred them to me. It was the first time I ever said – I set the stage for this. I've been in situations before where I go down and the priest and the minister waste a lot of my time. And I had a situation where a minister did just that, where he hadn't talked to the congregation or to the purchasing committee, and he said, Fred, "I want you to make candlesticks for me. They're going to be low and squat." I'm sorry, this is the architect that's telling me that. He hadn't talked to the minister.

So I design these, and I don't hear anything for a year, and then the guy calls me up and he says, "I need you to bring your drawings in, your designs in." And I said, "I don't even know if I still have them." Well, they were all scrunched up in a drawer, and I remember I had to iron them flat with an iron. I brought them down there, and the minister in the church looks at them and he says, "No, we want tall, thin candlesticks." And the architect says, "I'm the architect. What's right for this – I designed this building. You want short, fat candlesticks." And I'm looking at this ping-pong game in front of me, you know. And I got disgusted in about 10 minutes. And they get into a verbal

argument that lasts about 30 minutes, and finally I said, “You know what? You guys fight it out. I’m going home. When you decide what you want, you let me know.” And I don’t think I ever heard from them again. I never did the commission, and I thought, that’s the last time I’m ever going to be in this situation.

So when the priest called up, I went down all guns blazing. And the priest was a very gentle man, and I said, “Look, I’ve been in this situation before.” I said, “Number one, I don’t ever want to meet with a committee. That’s your job. And I just want to meet with you.” And I said, “If we can do that then I’ll make a model for you. I’ll actually make the thing in pewter and do it in silver, and if we can come to an agreement.” And I said, “What’s your budget?” And the budget was \$10,000 with an extra \$500 thrown in for the paten. And I said, “That’s fine,” you know. And I said, “That’s fine.” And the piece had a \$3,000 diamond in it, you know. That was – I added separately.

MS. YAGER: A diamond? Interesting.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Wait a minute. I think I have a picture of it. [Goes to get photo.] Yes, I did it in 1990. The church had a rose window. You can’t really see this thing here. This was – I did a nice job with it. Yes, it had this three-karat diamond, which I put on a little screw mechanism so you could put it on and take it off when you send it out for cleaning. This is a typical looking chalice, but the base is nice. The base comes down and there – when you walk out of the church there are three steps that come out, and so the base of the chalice has three steps in the form of the rose window. That’s in the – that’s in the – in the church. So that was probably the most important commission that I did sort of commercially.

MS. YAGER: And this one has the beautiful publication about it as well.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. It was a nice chalice.

MS. YAGER: Show me where the diamond is –

MR. FENSTER: It’s on the base over here. This is the –

MS. YAGER: And what was the reason for including the diamond?

MR. FENSTER: Kleisley.

MS. YAGER: It was his diamond?

MR. FENSTER: It was his money that was buying the chalice, and his diamond. His family was giving the money and the diamond, so what they wanted was the kind of thing I hate. They wanted a big plaque on the thing that said, “donated by ah ah.” And I said, “You know what? I’m not putting anything on the” – I was so good. I said, “I’m not putting anything on the outside of the chalice, but when you pick the chalice up, on the bottom there will be a plate. You can put anything on the engraving you want. I’ll make you a three-inch plate on there. You can write anything you want to write, but I’m not going to disturb the outside line of the chalice.” So that’s what I did.

And the priest – I was – I just spoke my piece. I was really pleased with myself. I spoke out and I told him the way I wanted to do it, and he agreed. And we had a very nice relationship, you know. They paid me on the dot. I thought, this is great. I should – all my commissions should go this well. You know, I specified, I said, “You guys are responsible for the gold-plating” –

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Fred Fenster in the artist’s home and studio in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, on August 10, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disk number five, session number two.

Fred, one of the things that I wanted to talk with you about was the issue of selling your work, how well it’s been received. I mean, some of this we’ve talked about already. And how the market for American craft has changed in your lifetime. That’s a broad question.

MR. FENSTER: Well, when I moved to Madison I – I thought I'd put my work in some of the galleries in town and I quickly found that it didn't sell well. So I started doing the shows myself, the Madison Art Fair, which turned into one of the biggest shows in the country, something like 400 exhibitors. But at the beginning I was putting gold out on a little bridge table and letting people pick it up and handle it, and I got many, many commissions that way and I built a business where people just kept coming to my home and ordering things. It was mostly special order, ring business or special order pins or something for an anniversary, or a special occasion. And I managed to build up a good business, and I consequently I didn't have much to do with galleries who I would supply with my work because I did not want to pay them the kind of commission they were asking.

Nowadays I'm only affiliated with a very nice little gallery in Madison called The Studio Jewelers, and it's run by a friend of mine named Hannah Cook-Wallace, and she's very fair. She pays on time. She markets the work well. She displays it beautifully. She's a very good businesswoman. And that's the only gallery affiliation I have. Otherwise I respond to requests from galleries occasionally. This is the 75th anniversary of Penland, so two galleries in the area wrote to me asking me if I'd send pewter places to their galleries because they're having a show in conjunction with that. So I said yes.

But I don't do much with galleries. Mostly I market – I used to market the work on the road by doing shows. Now just – it keeps coming in on its own, not in a great flood but it keeps dribbling in. Former students order pieces, people who are having anniversaries order pieces, and it just – you know, it's not like I'm hurting for work and there are enough shows coming up where I just send the work out and it sometimes sells out of the show.

MS. YAGER: Do you think the gallery system works for artists?

MR. FENSTER: I think it's too slow, and I think that if you put work on – in a gallery on consignment, that to me is like giving it away. You're giving a gallery a show and you're getting a chunk taken out as a commission. So I think if a gallery wants to buy your work and sell it for whatever they can get for it, that's fine. But I don't think it works well for the artist. I would much rather sell directly to the person. I make new friends that way and it's always been my means of socialization. And I like meeting people that way and getting some feedback.

MS. YAGER: We had spoken many years back and you spoke about a gallery in Birmingham, or Bloomfield Hills, the Little Gallery.

MR. FENSTER: The Little Gallery.

MS. YAGER: And Peggy De Salle.

MR. FENSTER: Peggy De Salle. That's right. It was a good gallery. I didn't put my work in that gallery. What I did was, the gallery commissioned me to do pieces for them, so Peggy would buy stones and then she'd send them to me and she'd say, "Fred, would you make cufflinks, or would you make earrings, or would you make this." And so for the first six years that I lived in Madison I worked for the Little Gallery doing special order pieces, which she would supply the stones, and I would send her usually wax models of the design, and I would do the setting for her. It helped very much for me to make ends meet.

After six years I was doing okay on my own so I stopped doing that. It wasn't particularly lucrative, but it was money, steady money coming in. She was a very smart businesswoman, Peggy. And the interesting connection between that, Peggy De Salle and Cranbrook, is that Zoltan Sepeshy used to be her husband. The director at Cranbrook was her former husband. Who was also – they were both Hungarian.

MS. YAGER: What was the – can you describe that gallery? What did she have? If she didn't put your work in it.

MR. FENSTER: She had an extensive jewelry – the moneymaker in the gallery was jewelry, but she

had paintings, she had some glass, she had – Stanley Lechtzin also worked for her and she stocked his various kinds of rings. I just worked on – on commission. She'd give me a bunch of stones basically and I would make stuff. But she would pretty much tell me what she wanted. Make earrings, make this, make that. "Here's a bunch of diamonds, make a pin with these," you know. That was how I had my first experience setting diamonds. Or I made wedding bands.

So she would get a quote from me and she would get a quote from Stanley and she'd play us off against each other until we decided to talk to each other. Okay, whatever your quote is, that's my quote. And she stopped – she stopped being successful that way. But it was – she was a very good salesperson, Peggy, and she was a very smart and sharp businesswoman. Personally she was kind to me, but on the business end of it she was a cutthroat, you know, so I had to be very careful in dealing with her on the business end. On a personal level she was great to me, but when it came to business, that's business. You don't have any kindness on that end. So I had to learn that. I had a hard time separating that in the beginning. But she was very nice to me and she – she – she helped me at a difficult time in my life when I was very low on money. And her – her business, you know, got me through that period.

MS. YAGER: So – and what about solo shows?

MR. FENSTER: I never – you know, I never went after that. I've had a few. I had one at the Union when I first moved to Madison. I had one up in Philadelphia at one point, a small show. But I never really cared about it, you know, and I – I just didn't – didn't pursue it, you know. I just never thought much about it. Tons of group shows.

I never had much of an ego about my work, you know, so it wasn't like I was pushing it out there and making a big deal out of it. I just did it and if people liked it, they got it. If they didn't, they didn't, you know. My time was basically wrapped up in teaching and my energy was wrapped up in teaching. I think that if I hadn't been teaching I probably would have been focused differently and I would have had to promote myself, you know, more than I did.

MS. YAGER: What kind of venues are students that you have taught? What are they – how are they showing their work and selling their work?

MR. FENSTER: Well, they seem to be – most of the good ones are still active, you know. Some of them are teaching, some of them are full-time metalsmiths, like, you know, Jon Michael Route and Eric Olson and several others. They just market their work, or most of them have either full-time or part-time jobs where they do something to make money and then they do the kind of work they want to do. Then that's an individual choice, you know. When we have that discussion, I say, well, the only kind of work that I'd rather do is metal work and I don't want to clean people's houses or wash floors or whatever. I'd rather do this, and if I have to, you know, do a certain kind of metal work that's mechanical, whatever, I'd still rather do the metal work because that's what I'm good at.

But I remember one of our girls, Gail Kirschner, was a really good student and I think she cleaned houses. But when she worked, she did exactly what she wanted and spent the kind of time she wanted. She never compromised the work. So there are all kinds of things. One guy works for an eyeglass company and that's kind of related, you know. He uses his skills. But when he works, he does what he wants.

MS. YAGER: How does that differ from when you first started teaching over these different years? Do you think there are – people are balancing more jobs now or less jobs?

MR. FENSTER: I think they're balancing more jobs, you know. They'll take – I just got a card from a girl named Ann Hallam, who got her graduate degree with – with Helen Shirk in San Diego. She just got a part-time job at a museum. Museum jobs seem to be more in evidence because they're offering classes to kids, you know, or adult classes at night, so they have that possibility that I don't think was as prevalent years ago. And community centers. So they have more opportunities in some ways.

And I have this girl Susie Ganch is my favorite student now. She works part-time for a jeweler, teaches a class out in San Francisco. And then she's gone online. She's coordinated with another former acquaintance of mine and she's giving a class on the Internet. And –

MS. YAGER: On the Internet?

MR. FENSTER: Yes. That's online, right?

MS. YAGER: Yes. Yes.

MR. FENSTER: And she just called me the other day to ask me some questions about the kind of kit that we have our students buy. So I gave her all that information and she's really excited about this because she thinks it has real possibilities, and to my knowledge I haven't heard of anybody doing this. She's a wonderful teacher. She had a three-year residency at Penland, and everybody talks about her because she was so good and so effective as a teacher.

MS. YAGER: How do you spell the last name?

MR. FENSTER: Ganch, G-a-n-c-h. You'll hear more about Susan because she's just – Susie – she's great. She's just a great person. Her parents are from Hungary also and she's – she spent some time there, she speaks a little Hungarian, she lived in Israel for a year. Her parents live up in Appleton. This was a girl who got her degree in geology. She was going to go into oil exploration and she took one metalworking class, my beginning class, and she got hooked, and she took another one and she told me how much she loved it, but that her parents would not – they would feel terrible about her. She had gotten her geology degree. She had finished it, took this for fun. And parents wouldn't let her continue going to school. I said, "You don't know that. Why don't you bring your parents down? Have them come down, I'll sit and talk about this."

So her parents came down, her uncle came down and we sat around and talked and they were very skeptical. And they let her take more classes, and then she applied for grad school and they let her do that. Then when she had a graduate show, it was the best show that I'd ever seen. It was – she had 14 live models modeling all this adjustable headwear and neckwear pieces that were worn and made to conform to the body. They're very cleverly done, wire pieces. And it was just beautiful. It was like a Hollywood opening. Her parents – her parents made Hungarian pastries like rugelach that were snapped up. They were so excited to see. She had a huge reception. People crowded the gallery at school.

And then there was a goldsmith show, the SNAG show in Washington, the SNAG conference in Washington, and Mr. Ganch and his wife came down and they loved the conference. And he came up to me just as I was about to pull out and come back home, and he said, "Fred" – he has a heavy accent. "Fred," he said, "We are now groupies. We will go to every conference in the future." And they were completely won over by the professionalism of the conference. But whenever I see – his name is Eugene, and he always comes up to me and says, as if I would forget him, you know. He says, "Eugene Ganch." So her brother lives in Mt. Horeb, which is about 20 miles from Madison. He also has a degree in geology and the parents are European so they had dreams of their children becoming highly paid professionals. So Susie's brother became a woodworker and he restores houses and builds furniture now. And then Susie had to dash her parents' hopes by becoming a jeweler, and she's getting married November 14 so I'm flying out to San Francisco for the wedding. Her parents are very proud of her actually. They're just worried about her future.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. We talked a little bit about different venues. Didn't we talk about venues of showing and selling – New York Armory Show?

MR. FENSTER: Not really.

MS. YAGER: Philadelphia Craft Show.

MR. FENSTER: I've only done a few of those. I've done the Smithsonian I think three times. I think I did the Armory Show [The Armory Show, the International Fair of New Art, New York City]

three times, and then I've done stuff in the state here and in Minneapolis for some years, but I haven't done any of the shows now for quite a while. The problem with both the Armory show and the Smithsonian show is they usually conflict with the end of school, so I began feeling duplicitous, as if I was taking time off from my students and going off to make money, which was the case. So, plus the fact that it's hard to get into those shows. Sometimes I got in, sometimes I didn't. The one time I got into Philadelphia I didn't have enough work so I didn't do it. I didn't expect to get in so I didn't prepare for it.

MS. YAGER: It does require a lot of work.

MR. FENSTER: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. Then other avenues of funding. You've got two grants, two National Endowment for the Arts grants, and two from University of Wisconsin.

MR. FENSTER: I got more. I got many from the University of Wisconsin. There were a lot of summer grants, you know, where they would just subsidize the summer. And I would just do my own work. After a while I thought, you know, I'm making enough money now, I don't need the grants, so I stopped applying for any of this stuff. I thought they should go to the newer members. Like Lisa's been getting great grants when she's here. She really got good funding, which I think is appropriate for somebody coming in. But it's not appropriate for somebody like me, applying for a grant when I could – at this point I can subsidize my own time easily enough. I haven't applied for anything in a lot of years. I'm too lazy to do the paperwork, you know. I just hate doing that stuff.

MS. YAGER: But were those, at the time that you got those what impact did they have?

MR. FENSTER: Well, they were very encouraging, you know. It showed that the university was supportive of my efforts. And I thought the trouble with the grants was that there was no follow-up and they didn't ask you what you'd achieved. So I thought that would have been very helpful for you to know that there was going to be an accounting at the end where you had to show what you did, you know.

They did eventually become more careful about documenting what you did, and when you applied for a new grant they would ask you what you did with the last one or something like that. They were very encouraging. I mean, it was great to get a grant. One of the grants I think was a sympathy grant. I got it when my wife died, and I didn't think that was – that was about the grant. That was just because the faculty members felt lousy about the whole thing and wanted to give me some time off. I had applied for a sabbatical – the first thing I applied for was sabbatical. I didn't get it, and so they gave me this Vilas grant which – I don't know, it gave me a year off or two years off or something. A year off, I guess. And then the second year I took off on my own. And I got some good work done. I did some really bad work, which I anticipated. I thought before I – you know, I'd been working on commissions so my head is, you know, funneled toward a certain end and all of a sudden I have this open time where there's nobody waiting at the other end with expectations. I thought, I'm going to do some stuff and I'm going to hate it, but I'll get through it, and that's what happened.

Then I got really excited. I got really excited by the opportunity to work, and I did some really nice pieces which I was very happy about. I was really thrilled with some of them, which doesn't happen to me often.

MS. YAGER: How often have you taken sabbaticals?

MR. FENSTER: I haven't. I never got one. I only applied that one time after Valmai's death and I never – we don't have – at that – in the past we haven't had that as an institutionalized part of the university. Nowadays I think that they're much easier to get, but we did not have – you couldn't expect every seven years or whatever it was to get a year off or whatever it was, you know. So – but summertimes, you know, I couldn't afford to take off initially but then I got to a place where I was able to take summers off. Most of the time I did workshops in the summers anyway.

MS. YAGER: In looking at recognition and awards, as systems of support and validation for artists, one of the ones that I – that kind of jumped out at me was the book by Phillip Morton, *Contemporary Jewelry: A Craftsman's Handbook* [*Contemporary Jewelry: A Studio Handbook*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; 1970]. And in that book he names, and you were among them, the most influential young contemporary jewelers in America, and there were 13 people.

MR. FENSTER: Oh, I didn't know that. I didn't know I was named in that. I never looked at that. That's interesting. I didn't know that. That's the first I hear of it. I should read those things. I just look at the pictures usually, you know.

MS. YAGER: Well, congratulations. It was in 1970. [Laughs.]

MR. FENSTER: Really? That's interesting.

MS. YAGER: I was going to ask you how you felt about it, but if you weren't even aware of it –

MR. FENSTER: I wasn't aware of it. Well, I guess probably it was because I was –

MS. YAGER: You must have known about it, sort of.

MR. FENSTER: No, I didn't. I had done a commission for Phil Morton, you know. I had done a tray and a pitcher, I think it was. But I really didn't know him at all. I mean, we really hadn't discussed anything. I mean, I did this thing by mail. So I really didn't have any contact with him and there was no discussion. I didn't realize he did that. I think probably it was the position teaching at the university here that made him say that.

MS. YAGER: I thought it was such a bold move on his part to name people early in their careers and what – and how did that help in their career. I can tell you who else was listed. Haakon Bakken. I'm not pronouncing that right.

MR. FENSTER: No, that's right. Haakon Bakken. Haakon was king of Denmark and he was named after the king. Haakon Bakken, where did he teach?

MS. YAGER: Ontario [Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning, Oakville, Ontario].

MR. FENSTER: Ontario. I thought it was, yes, in Canada. That's right.

MS. YAGER: Yes. And then yourself, Fred Fenster.

MR. FENSTER: Wow.

MS. YAGER: Philip Fike. Michael Jerry. Brent Kington. Earl Krentzin.

MR. FENSTER: Oh, it's a good list.

MS. YAGER: Stanley Lechtzin, Paul Mergen, Frank Patania, Al Pine.

MR. FENSTER: Frank Patania. Okay. Al Pine. That's a pretty good list.

MS. YAGER: Victor Ries. Heikki Seppa, and Olaf Skoogfors.

MR. FENSTER: And Olaf? Yeah.

MS. YAGER: Now was this – were all of you well-known already, or was this – he just could pick out who was going to succeed?

MR. FENSTER: He picked it out, I guess. As I say, honestly, I didn't know about that. I should have – that was in the book? He said that in the book?

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MR. FENSTER: I didn't read the book. I mean, I just did really look at the pictures and flip through it, which is usually what I do. I didn't realize that. That's a pretty good list, though.

You know, Earl, Earl Krentzin had this job, my job before I came, before Richard Mazur came. And

Richard told me not to take the job, that I wouldn't be able to hold it because of Vierthaler, and I talked to Earl, who I knew from Detroit, you know, because he lived near Cranbrook at the time. And he said, "You can get along with Vierthaler. It's not that hard." And I did basically. And I was nervous because of what Dick Mazur told me, but Earl said he got along well with Vierthaler. There was not a problem. Mazur was a kind of flamboyant, pushy guy and he just ran head-on into Vierthaler, who wouldn't tolerate what he was doing.

The other people on the list are good people. Frank Patania I never heard much of. I know he used to do these forged chokers that I would see in the books once in a while.

MS. YAGER: He's from Arizona.

MR. FENSTER: Okay.

MS. YAGER: And Victor Ries?

MR. FENSTER: California. Yeah, from California. I don't know – I can't bring an image to mind specifically but I do know he had a good reputation out there. That's the only thing I know about him. That's a good list.

MS. YAGER: I – I wish that Philip Morton was alive. I would ask him some questions about all of that. That book I thought had some very interesting – he really was trying to build a foundation for the field in a lot of ways.

MR. FENSTER: Which he did. I mean, you know, he founded SNAG and he came out with that contemporary jewelry book, which was a very good book for its time. That's interesting.

MS. YAGER: You never knew.

MR. FENSTER: I never knew. It's like somebody wrote an article that I did see, and they called me a "hero of the field." And I thought, well, you should come out here because you can really see the field out here. [Laughs.] I don't think you know what field you're really talking about.

MS. YAGER: Well, some of the –

MR. FENSTER: I changed it to hero of the farm field.

MS. YAGER: I wanted to talk about influences on your work, and some of that we've covered. I think one of the most powerful influences of your work is Scandinavian.

MR. FENSTER: It is.

MS. YAGER: Is that – at least I've heard you say that before.

MR. FENSTER: Yes, it is. There's no question about it. Clean design. Clean functional design. I – I'm happy that it is, you know. I've always admired it. I still admire it. I admire the things that I came into contact with in the 50's. I still have good feelings about those pieces.

MS. YAGER: I have a quote here, "I grew up in that era when Scandinavian design was top-notch. The best stuff you ever saw was Scandinavian." Where did you see that work?

MR. FENSTER: That was what was in the stores and the design magazines. It was the best stuff that I was looking at. The architecture magazines had, you know, the rooms were filled with Scandinavian furniture. And the articles were about Scandinavian design. There was this wonderful article on flatware where they actually x-rayed the bones of the hand holding the flatware to show the grip. I thought that was great. And Dansk design was the leader, you know, in the field of, you know, wooden ware and flatware, and I always looked at Dansk design. I thought it was really good. I used to haunt the department stores to see what the flatware designs were and what the tableware was, both ceramic and, you know, metal.

MS. YAGER: That's interesting that the great design was at department stores.

MR. FENSTER: Oh, yeah. I used to – I used to make weekly trips and just wander through those.

This raggedy looking guy, you know. He's not going to buy anything. We're not even going to ask him if he's finding what he needs. No one would ever bother me. I'd just kind of drift through and I'd look at stuff. I still go to Ikea once in a while to see what the offerings are, you know. I really enjoy doing that.

I'm a woman's dream, you know, because when I go to a department store I really enjoy myself, and my friend Ruth used to be always interested in high fashion and really good clothing. So we'd go to Saks or we'd go to Bloomie's in New York and I would have a great time. She disappeared into the clothes area and I would just look at everything. Design is design. I like looking at good clothing design. I still do.

Shoes. My wife Valmai was a shoe – she just had a shoe fetish. She'd come home and she would say, "You're going to be really angry with me," and I'd say, "You bought another pair of shoes." And she'd say, "Yeah." She was very downcast. And I'd say, "Let me see." And she put them on and I said, "That's a great looking pair of shoes, Valmai." She said, "Yeah, but they're a lot of money." I said, "What you have to realize is that you're buying shoes as an art object, not so much as clothing. You really – what you're looking at is you're really admiring the design," which is true. And you covet the thing in an aesthetic way and not just as footwear, you know. You go way beyond that, and I said, "You should stop feeling bad about yourself." My wife loved me. She did. But that's what's true. What I said was true. I mean, I buy tools as much for aesthetics of a tool as for the tool. If I had a choice, I'm going to pick the one that appeals to me aesthetically, you know, that's really well designed. So it was the same for her.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. One of the questions was, and we've touched on this already. Does religion or a sense of spirituality play a role in your art? We discussed the religion part. How about spirituality in general?

MR. FENSTER: Well, I think that this love affair with aesthetics has to do with spirituality, you know, getting to the essence of the thing and getting – getting to core of something so that when you make the object that you can really believe in it and feel good about it. Those are the best kinds of objects, and if I can combine that with the making of a religious object then I have – I put it all together, you know. So – sometimes I can.

That's one of the reasons I don't use, you know, designs on the surface, although there's an artist named – metalsmith who's dead now. He and his wife. Ilya Schor. Ilya and Resia Schor. They did Judaica. And they lived in Milwaukee for some years. They made beautiful work and it was very detailed and it was figurative. It was everything that I wouldn't expect to like. And it was wonderful.

They get very high collectors prices for their work. They used to make wedding bands with little – little rabbinical figures on them, of Jewish men and women. These little tiny, miniature, absolutely charming. It was like – it was like naïve art in a way except that it was very sophisticated. But they used that kind of naïve art images. And I was surprised that I liked it. I more than liked it. It was wonderful. And I see it occasionally listed on the Internet, or my friend Herb, who collects Jewish ceremonial pieces will say, "Wow, did you see what these Schor pieces are going for now?" And huge figures, a lot of money. And great. I love it. And I like the work. It's just – I'm very surprised. It's the polar opposite of the way I think and it's well done. It's well conceived, it's well executed and it's beautiful, and that's fine.

So you know, I mean, the spiritual quality in a work seems to me to be about those – those aboriginal knives I talked about where you really reach into yourself and you put out the best kind of effort, the most refined, sensitive effort that you can put out. I don't think anything can be more spiritual than that, you know, in terms of connecting with another human. Certainly that – those aboriginal knives connected with me as somebody who's a maker of objects and concerned with the aesthetics and the function, which is what they were concerned with. I mean, that transcends time. You know, these knives were hundreds of years old. They were Stone Age pieces basically. They

didn't have any metal in that culture. So they made the pieces with other stones by just chipping them to shape. It's remarkable.

MS. YAGER: And they're still speaking, after all these years, and all these miles.

MR. FENSTER: I think about them every once in a while. I still have that same visceral reaction that I had. I go, "Oh," like this. I get that same rush that I got. My wife was with me. We were standing there together and I said she was really good at receiving the same kinds of messages. And I said, "Do you believe this?" I said, "It was worth coming to Australia just to have this experience standing in front of this case here." I think there were three or four knives in the case and then a series of baskets. And the baskets were beautiful but the knives really got to me because of the – the sheer beauty of this functional form. It was just great.

And I don't know if they were made as trade pieces because obviously in every culture there are people who do things better and the pieces are more valuable and so they can trade with other tribes. I don't know what the history was. There wasn't much in the way of information in the case, but there didn't have to be. You know, I mean, I got it. I got it just by looking at them.

MS. YAGER: This visceral reaction that you talk about, that's – is that sort of the bottom line, it has to affect you in a physical way?

MR. FENSTER: It happens infrequently but I do. I get a physical reaction. I remember – I'm not a big music buff but I remember hearing Madame Butterfly in Detroit. My first wife was an opera buff and so I got these terrible seats, in downtown Detroit, and we sat behind a pillar, listening to Leontyne Price sing, and the hair lifted up on the back of my neck. I mean, it was so fantastic. And then when I was driving to work one day, again in downtown Detroit, she was on the radio singing again Madame Butterfly. I think it was the death scene. And the same thing happened. The hair went up on the back of my neck over here. I just – I could feel it. I could feel that, this feeling went right through me. And I was surprised that it had to do with music but it – it was a great performance. I had a very strong physical reaction.

It's the kind of thing that could make you cry, you know, it's so good. And a lot of people do. You know, they get that emotional about having that sort of experience, and that's why these singers or visual artists are, you know, are – are great at what they do. Interesting that an Australian aborigine sitting bowlegged on the ground, chipping away, you know, with a stone on another piece of stone can get that reaction from me. That's a wonderful thought. Excellence is excellence, you know, in whatever field.

MS. YAGER: Gender is one of the issues. Do you think that you approach your work as a man? Do you design it in a certain way, being male?

MR. FENSTER: Probably. I think that my background as an industrial art teacher, using materials in an all-male class – I think there was one female student when I was going through City College in our program. And my interest in ironwork, which at the time I started having that interest was almost all-male, and now there are a lot of very good women working in the field. But that's an interesting question. I think a lot of it has to do with my interest in tools and processes, which were basically male things when I was a kid. And now it's a little different, but it isn't that different, you know. So I was interested in machines and tool usage and doing the things that guys did and women didn't do.

In my shop classes in junior high school I took woodworking. They were segregated. There were only guys in the classes, and when I taught in junior high school later on, I only had male students. I never had women in the classes. So we're, you know, funneled into roles in life and I'm sure it had an effect. When I first started teaching at the university, almost all the students were women, with a few men in the classes. And I was surprised at how good they were, you know, and I became increasingly impressed with how capable and how well they learned. And the guys weren't very good, and it's been true all the years I've been there, that the women were the outstanding students

in the class and for the most part the men weren't as good.

MS. YAGER: How did they approach it differently?

MR. FENSTER: I think they were more focused. They were more open to learning. They just worked harder. They out-worked the guys, you know. Wisconsin was a good place to be because there's a good work ethic in the state and the students who came in were very used to working hard, and I mean, I've had some spectacularly good women students. There's a woman up in Alaska in Juneau who came out of Sheboygan, and she wasn't even an art major. She was an art history major and an anthropology minor or something, and she took a jewelry class. Her name was Ellen Roblee [now Ellen Carrlee], and she was an incredible student. I said, "Where are you from? I don't understand how you can be this much better than anybody else in here." If I assigned a problem, she would do three rings for the first problem, all three with stone settings, and get the work done on time.

I said, "What kind of background do you have?" Turned out her father was a dentist but he had a hobby of watch making so she used to watch him work. And we became really good friends and I went to her wedding when she got married and I – Susie and I went up to Alaska on a trip and I went to visit Ellen. And she is now – there are four conservators, museum conservators in Alaska. Her husband is one, she's the second one, and then there are two others. She does the city museum in Juneau [Juneau Douglas City Museum]. He does the state museum in Juneau [Alaska State Museum], and the two of them are just totally involved in collecting and restoring Alaskan artifacts. Her jewelry background is immensely useful to her. You know, she knows how to handle materials. She's also been on digs in India, anthropology digs. This woman is absolutely great. When I – I was really curious to meet her parents. When she got married I met her parents and they turned out to be just plain people and she's just a star, this girl.

Some good guys and some really wonderful women in the program, and that continues like that, but the women I think – we're getting better guys now. For a long time we had really poor male students. Very few grad students who were male. Wonderful women in our grad program who came up from beginning students, like Susie Ganch and Yu Yen Chang, and just these terrific women. And they seem to get better every year. We've got some good guys now finally. There's at least one really good guy in our program right now.

MS. YAGER: Do you – let's see. Does political or social commentary figure into your work?

MR. FENSTER: That's a great question. If it does, it's very subtle and deeply hidden. Now I have strong political feelings and I have strong social feelings. But I don't consciously try to express any of those feelings in the work. I don't use imagery. I've often thought of working that way but it is uncomfortable for me. It is not a comfortable way for me to work. I tried it at Cranbrook and I didn't feel good about it.

You know, I've had discussions with people, especially over this functional thing, where we had an argument about, you know, function being art, blah, blah, blah. I said, "I'm not going to argue with you about that. It's just so old hat." I said, "Why don't you look at my slides or look at the work, and then if you still want to argue with me about it, argue with me." And they invariably come back and they say, "You're right, I don't want to argue about this," and they drop it, you know. And I don't know exactly what that means, but it's sort of the same thing with the social commentary part.

I – this is what I believe. I believe that the fact that in an age of machine work and mass production, the fact that I do these things lovingly by hand is my social commentary, you know. It's my attempt to place a value on doing this work, you know. And I don't do it as therapy or anything. I do it because I – I enjoy doing it and I do it basically – I'm not trying to make a big social statement about it, but I am doing it and there are easier ways to make money, you know. I do it because it brings me a kind of pleasure that nothing else brings me.

So it's a comment on the value of hand work and I hate the idea that people have lost touch with

their own ability to create things and solve their own problems. I talk about this in school occasionally, and they're really out of touch with – as I said earlier in this discussion, the hardest thing to do is to convince people that they have the ability to take care of themselves and to make the things they need, and to solve their own problems. And they – it changes their whole attitude toward their own lives. It's an amazing experience, you know. And I see people at the end of the semester who are so excited, they say things like, "Oh, I would never have believed that I could do these things before this course," you know. Their – their estimate of themselves has undergone a revolutionary change. They see themselves in a different way.

MS. YAGER: You know, with all this sort of reduction of craft courses and as people get more and more removed from all these kinds of things, is this a – a national concern, that we won't know how to do anything?

MR. FENSTER: I think that people are feeling increasingly helpless about their lives. They can't take care of their own cars any more. People used to tinker. You can't tinker with these computer cars the way you could before. And like I do the repairs on my house and I can take care of almost everything. I have to call somebody in occasionally for my furnace, but I haven't had to do that for five or six years now, mostly because I burn wood, and that's about the lowest technology you can get, which is why I burn wood. Yes, I think it's a big concern. And I think it's a big concern primarily about the – your sort of self-respect, you know. If you can't take care of your problems and you feel increasingly dependent on experts around you, where does your satisfaction in life come from, you know? Making money? I mean, it's not where mine comes from, you know.

I mean, I feel really good. I'm out there cutting wood when you came this morning, and that wood represents my ability to take care of myself. If my electricity goes off, if my – everything fails here, I can still stay warm and cozy. I can provide my own light. I have kerosene lamps, you know.

MS. YAGER: These are survival skills.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. They're survival skills, and I think the way this world is going, we may eventually have to depend a lot more on that – on those survival skills than we do now. I hate to think of that.

MS. YAGER: Paul Mergen, my teacher in Kalamazoo, he was saying that when he does workshops that his father was the champion fire-starter in Wisconsin. And so he teaches metalsmiths how to start a fire, because what's a metalsmith without fire?

MR. FENSTER: That's right. Interesting. I like that.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, and you know, kind of returning people to the fundamental – fundamental things, fundamental elements.

MR. FENSTER: I think that's a great way to teach. When Don Reitz used to teach his clay workshops – he was a potter here, we were hired together, he in clay, me in metal. He used to have people dig their clay out of a hillside and then they'd process it and they'd make their pots, and he said, that's – "That's the way to do it. That's where it comes from."

MS. YAGER: That's the way it was done for thousands of years.

MR. FENSTER: Yeah. It starts off as dirt and ends up as a beautiful vessel, you know, and that's great. When I was in Japan I visited this community in the mountains called Hita City, which is a place that Bernard Leach worked for a year, and they have a stream running through this little town. I think there are 10 families in that town and they're all potters, and they go back generations and generations. And they have two huge Anagama wood fire kilns. They're about 200 feet long. They climb the hillside. They do two firings a year and they fire for six days at a time, and then they have – that's the pottery production for the year.

And I – I had seen a film years ago about this little town, and I didn't know that was the town until I started walking around. But there's a stream that runs through the town and they harnessed the

power of that stream by having it – they divert the water so it fills a log, which is on a pivot, and one end of the log is carved out so the water fills up one end of the log, and when it fills up, the logs tilts up and the other end there's a big wooden pole and it crashes down on the clay. And so they say that's the heartbeat of this town. And you hear this boom, boom, boom as the clay is being wedged basically by the stream. You know, they don't have to do the hand wedging until maybe later on. And I – I thought, boy, talk about human ingenuity, you know. Taking some of the labor out of the work. I just loved it. It was one of the highlights of my trip to Japan the first time.

MS. YAGER: Technological developments. Do you seize them? I think – this is one of the questions. Let's see, how can I explain it. I think some people are, you know, certain technological developments will change their work or re-direct it, mutate it. Do you get interested in that?

MR. FENSTER: I'm interested in it, but I can't see that it's affected me very much. I mean, I'm using age-old techniques of using a hammer and using heat and that's – it's all low tech stuff. When I was in Japan there was a man joining pewter using a water torch, you know, which has a very tiny, high-intensity flame where you can fuse the pewter together and make it look like it was solder. I was really tempted and I looked into buying one of those torches, and I'm still interested in that. But the pewter is such a low tech material that I can do everything he did using a different kind of torch, like a mini-torch, and just work a little differently.

We were really surprised at each other. We were both self-taught, you know. I taught myself essentially how to work with pewter. When he was working, I kept asking my guide and student, Hiroko Yamada. I said, "Ask him where he learned to work this way because we both work the same way." We use the same kinds of techniques. The forms are different, but we have the same attitude towards the metal. She asked him, and he said he was self-taught. I thought I could have been watching myself, the way he cuts the pewter, hammers the pewter. It was so – like looking in a mirror.

And then we showed each other slides, and he was amazed. He said, "How long have you been doing this?" And I said, you know, whatever it was, 30 years. And he said, "It's just really interesting." I feel the same way. He didn't speak any English so we had to use Hiroko as a translator. I want to go back. I want to see Mr. Sekine again. It was a good experience.

But I don't – I haven't been affected by high tech solutions to problems. That's as close as I've ever gotten, was that water torch. You know, and I'll do metal-spinning when it's appropriate, when I can save some time and effort. Absolutely. I don't believe in work for work's sake. Actually, that's a good question, you know. I'll use anything that's available to me, that will make the work easier and make the piece better. But most of the stuff that's available doesn't make the piece better, and if you're only going to do one unique piece at a time, you're not going to save much by tooling up for metal spinning when you could do it by hand almost as fast.

MS. YAGER: You know, when you talked about being self-taught, one of the questions was, is there a difference between university-trained artists and those who have learned outside of academia. And it's interesting because in some ways you are academia, and yet you were self-taught. How different are the next generation of people coming out of these university programs versus self-starters.

MR. FENSTER: Well, I don't know about other programs, but I think the emphasis, the points of emphasis that I always put on is sort of creative problem-solving. I teach them as much as I can about handling tools and processes and the nature of the material, and – and I say, "Well, how could you do this, you know? Tell me how you could solve the problem." They'll give me one way, and I'll say, "Give me another way. Give me a third way," you know. So you know all these different ways and now you have a choice, and that's what the university background gives you, is it exposes you to more possibilities. You know, it exposes you to sources of information, to other artists, to lots of visual information that you wouldn't get otherwise.

And I think sometimes people come to us and they say, "I want to go to graduate school," and I say, "Why?" And they say, "Well, I need more stimulation." And I say, "The graduate school is a long

and arduous process and you already have your own business, so it's not like – you want the stimulation. You're not really interested in a degree." And they say, "Yes." I say, "Why don't you take workshops? Why don't you take classes? Why do you have to go for the degree? It's not going to mean anything in the long run to you. You have – you've had your own business for years. Much as I'd love to have you as a student because, you know, you're a real professional, I don't see that this is going to benefit you." We've had good talks with people like that. And they say, "Okay, you know, is it okay if I sign up for a class?" And I say, "I'd love to have you."

MS. YAGER: What do you see as the place of universities in the American craft movement, and specifically artists in metal?

MR. FENSTER: Well, it's an engine. It's a stimulating engine, you know, that kind of pushes people all the time to try new things and presents all kinds of opportunities and puts people in contact with what's happening in the world beyond their own small world of contacts. You know, we bring people in from the outside, we have slides, we have books, we have videos. We're throwing stuff at people constantly and some of them just lap it up and just – they can't get enough.

This girl Rujen, this Chinese girl from Taiwan that I talked about, I made a mistake in accepting her. The slides I was looking at I thought were metal and they were visually interesting to me. Turned out they were all paper and she had no metal experience at all. And when she came in, she was petrified, scared to death, crying. She's a tough girl but she cried a lot in the beginning. But she worked hard and within a year she had mastered the skills, turned out to be a superb craftsperson, this very high skill level, did beautiful work. Her craftsmanship is exquisite on her pieces, and I couldn't be more proud of a student than I am of her, you know. She had – she turned herself from a person that had no metal background to somebody who had great skills and wonderful, constructive, creative ideas.

And she was at this Taiwan workshop that I did at Taiman College, and it was great, you know. She helped me connect with the other students. She translated for me and she worked alongside the other students. And she turned into one of the best students we've had in years. Lisa – Lisa was amazed. Lisa said, "I don't think she can get her show ready in time." And I said, "Trust me, this girl is really unusual." And she put up a beautiful show and Lisa was very proud, you know, and felt good about it, and we both felt the same way, that she was – that we really found somebody who was very special.

MS. YAGER: Where does American craft and metal rank on an international scale?

MR. FENSTER: From what I can see, and I've looked at a whole bunch of jewelry from Europe recently, and maybe it's the fact I'm older, I'm maybe a little old-fashioned, but I think the American work is more exciting and more substantive. The stuff I'm looking at often seems kind of trivial and – and insubstantial, you know, to me. I mean, you know, when the trend came out of Holland and Europe about minimal jewelry where they would press things into themselves, I got a kick out of that because I had done that as a joke with my students and it took off like crazy. It was Valentine's day, so I made a heart, you know, and I pressed it hard enough into my arm so I had a contusion. Then the heart stayed in there all day long as a bruise, and the students started making shapes and pushing it into themselves. And then this is an international art trend. I thought it was really interesting.

But I think that – I hear the English complain about the Americans because we can use any materials we want because we don't have to hallmark our pieces. And they never – leave out the fact that they don't have to hallmark their pieces either. It's – they don't have to. If they want to sell them, it really helps to have a hallmark on the piece, but they can certainly put their names on their pieces without putting the quality thing, stamp on it, or you know, what it's made of. So when I listen to this stuff, to me it just sounds like nonsense.

But as I say, from what I've seen, and I picked up several foreign books on jewelry, I like what I see here more. One of the things that happens, we have a lot of foreign students in the country now who

are making a strong impression. I see so many Asian students doing great work here, really beautiful, interesting work, that I'm not seeing coming from overseas. So that's – you know, that's an impression off the top of my head, you know, like an anecdotal thing from looking at books and magazines.

MS. YAGER: Where do you see things heading in the next 10 years?

MR. FENSTER: I'm a metal worker, not a seer.

MS. YAGER: This is your chance. [Laughs.]

MR. FENSTER: I think things are just going to get better. People are – I think the SNAG organization has done a remarkable job through the magazine, through *Metalsmith*, through its annual meetings, through its workshops, through its library, through its videos, through the slides in raising the level of metal work being done at a very, very quick rate. So now the kind of amateurishness that you would see years ago, you don't see that much any more. I mean, the work that's being done is much – at a much better level. So I can only think – here's a safe statement: I can only think that it will get better as time goes on. And I do think that. I've seen it – you know, I've seen the quality just get better so quickly. It's a wonderful experience to see that.

I was one of the 34, 35 founding members of SNAG. I was not one of the key people. Seppa was, and what's his name from New Paltz [State University of New York at New Paltz], Kurt Matzdorf was. But you know, I was on the first membership committee and I was involved in some of the early votes. And you know, I think that the organization has done an amazingly good job. For a volunteer organization, you know, they were really surprisingly effective. So I'm very proud of being involved with that.

MS. YAGER: I've noticed that you have memberships or affiliations in nine different groups – American Craft Council, American Pewter Guild, SNAG – Society of North American Goldsmiths, Society of American Silversmiths, Artist Blacksmiths Association North America [ABANA], and the Pewter Collectors of America.

MR. FENSTER: Yeah. I dropped the American Pewter Guild. They were a do-nothing organization, but the Pewter Collectors Club of America is a terrific organization. And so I get information from all these people. I get historical information about American pewter and international pewter. They do research. Part of the organization's function is to assign people to do research. They pay – they have these fellows that do research in a particular area and they have many meetings, regional meetings and national meetings. And I've gone to several national meetings and a couple of regional meetings. Not lately because I haven't had the time, but they're – they're terrific. They're wonderful. They're very educational. They can open up a museum like no one else I ever saw. They get into every museum, even the – in Chicago, the Art Institute, which is – it's very hard to get – to get into that and have them take out their stuff and let you see it. They don't let you touch it. But every other museum they let us handle the pieces. Not the Art Institute. We went to the Spertus Museum of Judaica in Chicago, and they handed pieces around and we had a really good session examining these pieces of pewter that they were – you know, was in the collection.

So I find, you know, the Blacksmiths, they have a monthly – or a bimonthly publication that I get, and I read it carefully. I read it for the ads. There are often interesting things for sale. And I – I read the articles on blacksmithing technique. I also, you know, signed up for monthly blacksmithing publications that come month by month and it makes a big book after you've been in there for about three years, and they're excellent. And I learn a lot about handling metal and solving problems because that's what blacksmiths do. I like to keep those affiliations strong.

Society of American Silversmiths is a good organization that Jeff Herman founded, and I think they're a very good group. And they hold, you know, exhibitions and they try to – this is like a one-man organization that Jeff did on his own and he's made it work, so I think he's done a fine job.

MS. YAGER: So are these – so these give you a sense of community and – as well as knowledge?

MR. FENSTER: Yes, I guess so. I guess that's true, but I also – I'm always scanning these publications for opportunities for students, you know. I want to see if there's anything valuable. I sometimes get book titles. Like there in the blacksmithing organization there were a couple of books on repousse. There's hardly anything on repousse in the, you know, in SNAG. There's Marshall Lewis's book and there was a really good book on repousse that was listed. I sent off and got it and I lent it out and it was never returned, it was so good. So I have to get another one now.

MS. YAGER: And have you attended some of these gatherings? I know you've gone to SNAG conferences. Have you attended any of these other sort of conferences, ABANA, or –

MR. FENSTER: Not for a while, but I went to the blacksmith's – the first blacksmith's thing that Brent [Kington] – that Brent set up down in Carbondale [Illinois, 1970]. That was a lot of fun. We were all there. Stanley [Lechtzin] was there, Michael – Mike Jerry was there, I took a group from here, and we had a really good time and it was great. You network with everybody. And I went to others. I went to one in Brockport – or Rochester, I guess, New York, and I found it good, valuable experiences.

You know, if you look at – if you just look at things from one point of view, you get stilted, you know. That's one of the reasons I like watching glass people work and ceramic people work, is that we're all doing the same thing. We're all handling form. And I like the ease and the naturalness and the – that's what pewter is like. You get this feedback as you're working with it, and you can – excuse me, you can respond right away. Silver there's a gap. You've got to set things up. But with the pewter you can respond instantly. You've got the pewter in your hands, I hold it when I solder it, you know, the way a potter does. I have it in my hands, you know. The heat – I've got a pair of gloves on usually, not all the time.

MS. YAGER: Does it transfer heat? It doesn't transfer the heat very well?

MR. FENSTER: No, it's a really poor heat conductor. When it gets hot enough to transfer heat through your glove, you should cool it down, but you don't have to heat the whole piece. You just heat the area. So I mean, there is this direct relationship with clay, this direct feedback. Very interesting, you know, for me.

Glass especially. I haven't really plumbed glass for what I can get out of it, but when I watch people make these, they kind of fuse all these glass rods together to make pictures like, you know, the little points, the dots, and then blow them into, you know, Lincoln's head or whatever they're doing. I could see doing something like that with different metals and then forging them out, you know. It would be another way of doing macramé, except instead of layering it you put it together with rods. Eventually. Eventually.

MS. YAGER: And local crafts organizations or guilds. Have you participated with, for instance, the Midwest Designer Craftsman?

MR. FENSTER: No, but I used to belong to the Wisconsin Designer Craftsmen. And I don't know what happened with that. I just kind of – I guess when – I won an award every single year I was here and I didn't think that was fair, so I think I dropped out. It was silly. And then the organization somehow – it wasn't – it didn't have the Milwaukee Arts Center as a showplace any more and it just kind of fell back. I just let it go. It's my fault. They still exist and they're still active, but I haven't participated.

MS. YAGER: Do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition?

MR. FENSTER: Yes, I do. I do. So I have that on two scores. I'm Jewish and I'm a metalsmith, so I can go anywhere and find a level of acceptance from either one of those areas, or both.

MS. YAGER: And now you've found someone even in Japan who works like you.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. But it's true, as a metalsmith you can travel and introduce yourself, the way potters can. I mean, people – Don Reitz used to live five miles from here down the road, and he

always had people visiting from Australia or New Zealand or God knows where, some place he'd been, and people would feel free to stop and stay with him. And he was really open like that. And very often there would be too many people, so they'd stay here, which was great fun. There were often New Zealanders or Australians, and my wife loved it, you know. I'd come home one afternoon and she'd say, Fred, "A few people dropped in from New Zealand and they'll be staying with us for a time. Is that all right?" And I'd say, "Yes, of course, it's okay." It was very funny. And that's the kind of community, that international community of working craftspeople, you know, artists, ceramic people, metal people. Sure, it's fine. Glass people do that all the time with each other.

MS. YAGER: Do you think of yourself as part of a particularly American tradition?

MR. FENSTER: I guess I do because a lot of the kinds of forms that I use – I'm very influenced by early American pewter, which was really simple, straightforward, basic, to the point, functional, you know, and I think that's been a definite influence in my life, is early American pewter. I look at it, I have books full of it, I'm always looking at the historical stuff. Yes, that's a good question.

MS. YAGER: Now you talked a little bit about your travels. It sounds like you've done a lot of travel. Can you talk about how that has been an impact on your life and on your work? And some countries that you've gone to.

MR. FENSTER: Well, I haven't traveled that much. I mean, I've done a lot of workshops and been exposed to a lot of different attitudes and so on, but when I traveled overseas, there hasn't been all that much. We would go to New Zealand every winter break and to Australia, and usually we hit the museums and I would – New Zealand was very rich because I loved learning about Maori culture and I spent a lot of time in the museums over there learning about how they carve jade and how they quarry jade. This was a communal culture that was very close in feeling to the Northwest culture of our country, Northwest Indian culture. And I – I gained a lot from that, you know. I – I thought about what I saw. I spent a great deal of time in the museums just learning how they actually split slabs of greenstone or jade in the quarries and then cut it up. I mean, these are people without metal tools, you know. They're using wedges and – and stone chisels initially. Not like they had power saws, diamond saws or anything. They didn't have any of that.

And I got – we visited the woodcarving school of Rotorua in New Zealand, and I thought this was going to be a hokey tourist kind of thing. Instead the school was extremely well run and the carvers were wonderful, and they weren't making tourist stuff. They were making beautifully carved pieces in a kind of traditional style, but they were modernizing it and the work was excellent. It was really fine. They not only were teaching woodcarving but they were teaching traditional Maori weaving techniques using flax. When you travel around New Zealand, these giant flax plants everywhere, they're just growing right out there. And the Maori areas, the reserves, they live in a very traditional way.

Rotorua is a thermal area, so you can cook in a hole in the ground. You know, steam is escaping. Sometimes it's kind of funny because there's a cemetery there where steam is whiffing out among the graves, so those poor people in the graves, they've been cooking for a long time. And you know, they have these muddy areas that bubble and you can take mud baths that are hot. But the fact is that the Maoris use that in their daily lives to – to cook and to do other things. I guess they're healthful as well, you know, these mud baths. At least that's what they say.

So I loved learning about the whole Maori culture and the whole – and the aboriginal culture. I didn't do as much in Australia as I did in New Zealand, but the aboriginal culture is fascinating to me. And I don't know enough about it, you know. I just – I intend to – I still have relatives in New Zealand. My wife's brother lives there and I want to go and visit and stay there. They came here about four years ago, five years ago, and they stayed with me for about three weeks, and I'm going to get them back. Yes, I really want to spend some time there. It is. It's a very, very wonderful experience to – to see people carrying on their lives in a totally different way.

MS. YAGER: What was the first major trip you took? How old were you?

MR. FENSTER: I think that probably the biggest trip I took was after I married Valmai. We went to New Zealand to meet her parents. I don't remember going overseas before that. I had been to Canada to do a workshop up there in Toronto, but that wasn't – when I lived here I used to drive up to Canada on a weekend sometime, spend a weekend doing museums there.

My wife had a connection in Canada. She had a school chum that was the headmistress in a very fancy girls school up there and we would go up and live in very posh circumstances for a weekend, or short vacation. That was a lot of fun, and we'd go to the theater and we'd go out to eat and it was a nice experience. Toronto is a lovely city, one of the few big cities at which I feel very much at ease. It has a good subway system, and it has all these ethnic enclaves that are really fun to visit, you know. It's not touristy. Or at least it wasn't years ago.

MS. YAGER: It has a real Midwestern feel, Toronto.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I mean, when I went up there I thought, well, I could live in – I don't like big cities but I could live here because it doesn't have that feeling to it.

MS. YAGER: I wanted to ask you about collecting, what sort of things you collect, and why.

MR. FENSTER: Well, I guess I collect things that are useful in my teaching as examples, you know. And I collect things that are aesthetically appealing. But only functional things that I could use. I mean, I don't buy a thing purely on the basis of aesthetics, but the things that I do buy I – the aesthetics definitely are strong components.

[Interruption for phone call.]

MS. YAGER: All right. Let's see. We were talking about collecting.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Like I buy – if I buy a tool, I really want to be able to use it. But if I buy a tool I also want to have a lot of pleasure looking at it and handling it. So I buy tools very carefully.

MS. YAGER: Your studio walls are covered with tools.

MR. FENSTER: Covered with tools. Some of them are antique tools. They all work, you know, they all work. As I say, I buy – there are some kinds of superior tools, like the best snips I ever used are Lever snips, and – the red-handled Lever snips. And there are a lot of inferior copies of that particular design, but nobody made it like the Lever snips people, and they don't make it any more. So whenever I see a pair of those I get really excited, and I have three pairs that I own, and the rest I give away to my favorite students, you know. A lot of the stuff that I buy is for students. I just give it to them as a mark of approbation, you know.

I buy one pound or one and a half pound forging hammers, and like I had this little tiny Chinese girl, Janice Ho, in my – who sat in on my class last term. And she really learned to forge well. She was doing these chokers and she was very excited about it. I said, "Janice, I am going to find you a really nice small forging hammer." She's a little wisp of a thing, and I gave her the hammer, and she thanked me. And then later in the summer I got a package that was her favorite musical disk, you know, saying that she was really grateful for my giving her permission to sit in on a class and that she really appreciated the hammer, it meant a lot to her. That was nice. I didn't mean it as a trade, but it turned out to be a really good trade because I like the music and she likes the hammer. You know, it represents a nice time for her.

MS. YAGER: Well, and hammers are an interesting gift because they last pretty much your lifetime, unless you lose it, you know. So it's – it's a long-term reminder of a time.

MR. FENSTER: Exactly. Well, one of the jokes that I always have, in my workshops I have a mallet that I made a long time ago, and the face of the mallet is in the shape of a heart, you know. I just sanded it so it's a little heart-shaped. And it was Valentine's Day and at that time – it was after my wife died, I was involved with this woman Ruth in Washington, in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

And I brought this mallet home as her Valentine's Day gift. And it was the only time in our whole relationship that she didn't get it. And I said, "Okay, you don't appreciate it. I understand that. So I'm going to take this mallet on every workshop I do and I'm going to tell people how I made this as a symbol of my feeling for you, that my heart literally beats with love for you, and I'm going to tell the story. And that will be payback," and she said she was so embarrassed that she didn't get it. I made her a set of salt and pepper shakers, that each part was like an off-center heart. She didn't even have the package open before she saw one part of it and she said, "Oh, you did a heart." And I said, "Yes, I did a heart," and I made her a vase and just really schmaltzy stuff.

But that was a – that was a mallet that was loaded with meaning and she didn't catch on. And I did. I take the mallet out and I tell people this was – I gave this to an old girlfriend and she didn't appreciate it, so I use it and I beat. I beat. This heart beats with every blow, you know. It was really funny. She's still embarrassed. I kid her about it. We're still in contact.

MS. YAGER: Some of the – you collect antique pewter and –

MR. FENSTER: Flatware, yes.

MS. YAGER: Flatware.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I'm not – I mean, when I see a piece, I'll get it. First of all, it's very inexpensive. It's cheap. And I'm – and it's beautiful. One of the things I do when I collect these is I restore them very often. Like one of the reasons I buy tools is I fix them and I get them working. I sharpen the shears, I put them back into working condition. I just did that last night I – I had these wood handling tongs that I take my flasks out of the burn-out kiln with. They're so useful. I bought a pair for 75 cents this past Sunday, and it needed all new rivets and parts so, you know, I spent a half an hour last night fixing it up. And it's restored, you know. It's going to last indefinitely, and I, you know, I like to put tools back in working condition.

And the same thing, when I buy, you know, flatware that's mangled or something and, you know, I can put it back into condition rather than junk it. People are always giving me stuff that went down the garbage disposal. "Here Fred, you can melt this up and make jewelry out of it." And it's usually got a really nice handle that's very decorative. And so I say, "Well, it's just scarred up. I can hammer the thing back into shape and, you know, I'll give it back to you." "No, no, keep it." So I have a whole bunch of pieces I have to fix up now that one of my colleagues gave me as payment for something I did for – I fixed a pair of candlesticks for him that he had dropped and one of them got out of whack. And I fixed it. It took me like 20 minutes or something. And he was overcome with gratitude and felt he had to give me all this mangled flatware that I'm going to fix up again. So I'm going to thank him ruefully when I see him again. He's retired. This is Walter Hamady. He's a wonderful man, and he established a very strong papermaking, handmade paper and printing program here as one of the stronger facets of the print area of the art department.

He retired some years ago, and Walter is of Arabic descent and I'm Jewish, and people in the department were always surprised that we became friends. I thought, what a silly thing. Why wouldn't we be friends, you know. So we josh each other about that. He's a Druze actually, Walter. We trade barbs, you know, once in a while.

MS. YAGER: All right. One of the questions I had, these are just sort of, you know, the issue of tithing, of philanthropy, planting seeds.

MR. FENSTER: Well, you mean in terms of metal? One of the things I'm going to do this year as I'm retiring is I'm setting up a – a fund for a graduate student in metal, you know, a scholarship fund. So when Valmai died she set up a fund in the library school for students from her part –

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Fred Fenster in the artist's home and studio in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Today is August 10, 2004. This is for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disk number six, session number two.

Fred, just before that tape ended we were talking about the issues of philanthropy and tithing and planting of seeds, and you were starting to talk about that.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. Well, I'm going to retire in May of this coming year and as I do that I'm going to set up a fund, scholarship fund for a metal student in our graduate program. We don't have one at this point, and so I think we really need some money to help graduate students out. We don't have money for out-of-state people.

I also give a good deal of money to Penland and I give to the scholarship auction and I give to the auction that I do in the sessions, so I give to Haystack every year. I give separately in a fund to Penland outside of this – all the other things that I do. So yes, I really believe that the experience that people get in these places is a life-changing, life-affirming experience. I think it changed my life and it was very healthy for me, so I want to make sure that people have a chance at it.

And I also finagled my students in as assistants. I say I want to bring my own assistant, and that gives a student two weeks that would cost them \$2,000 otherwise. So I just did that at Penland with one of my grad students, and I'm doing it with another one who's coming down to Arrowmont with me to do the ring workshop. And I do it at Haystack when I can. In fact I did it with Yu Yen Chang and we had a wonderful time together. Yes, I do believe in that, you know, and this is the field that I've chosen to work in and this is what I do.

MS. YAGER: You talked – I remember at one point you said something about that you were finally able to buy some work of students.

MR. FENSTER: Yes, I do that. Sometimes students give me work, you know. They just do it. But if I like something I will ask, you know, what it costs. In many cases they, because it's me they won't charge me enough and so I have to – I'll say, "What! That's ridiculous." And they'll say, "Oh, I'll give it to you for less." And I say, "No, you'll give it to me for more. We're going to double the price because if you don't value yourself, why should other people value you? You have to be realistic about what you're doing." You know, I love to get a bargain, but at the same time I want to be fair.

Yes, so a lot of the stuff that's over there I bought, you know. When – the scored and folding pieces, I'll commission somebody to do it and I'll say, "Figure out what you feel is a fair price and I'll pay you for it, whatever you decide is fair." And most of the time it's too low so I'll push it up. Sometimes I double it. Eric Olson, he wanted to give me the thing and I said, "You're not going to give it to me. We're going to double the price. And it's still going to be a bargain at double what you're asking me."

MS. YAGER: Yes. When I was a student I had just a general studies professor and he said, "I heard you were an artist," and asked me to bring some of my work. And he bought a piece and I was sort of stunned, pleasantly stunned. And it was sort of the first vote of confidence that someone had given me. I thought it was a pretty powerful statement.

The issue of pricing is a big one. How do you struggle – I'm saying struggle, but is it for you?

MR. FENSTER: I struggle, yes. It's a struggle. I – for years I tried to, you know, listen to people about formulas and I gave all that up. I just decide what I want to get for the piece and at the same time I keep an eye on what things are selling for so I have a general idea and that I'm not being absolutely ridiculous. And people tell me my prices are low, but on the other hand I'm efficient, I work quickly, and I don't have a swelled head about the work. So generally I just decide what I want to get for a piece. If I get it, I figure it was too low, my asking price was too low, so I'll push the next one up.

In fact, I started out making these Kiddush cups, they were like \$1,500, and I thought, well, that sold fast. Okay, \$2,500. Next one sold right away. And I thought, okay, \$3,000 for the next one. And that one was \$3,000 and it didn't sell, so I think I'm in the right ballpark now, you know. It shouldn't sell that quickly.

MS. YAGER: My father used to say, "If it doesn't sell, double the price." So maybe it's six.  
[Laughs.]

MR. FENSTER: Well, maybe. Yeah. People are really weird about prices. It's not so much about value. They often have a fixed idea on what a piece is worth as determined by the price, and it's not its real worth. It's just what somebody thinks it's worth. Yeah, your father had a good notion there.

There is a real story about a guy who ran a hamburger place and a chain moved in near him, and he was tempted to cut his prices in half. And he decided, I'm not selling well anyway. I'll double them. And when he doubled the prices, he had to turn away business because they figured the hamburgers were really special. It's the same hamburger. He doubled. He went from \$3 to \$6 for a hamburger.

MS. YAGER: There's also this level of – these different levels of prices. In one of the interviews I remember reading that you had given, you spoke about a duck decoy that had sold for, I think, six digits.

MR. FENSTER: Oh, yeah. I remember that it sold for something like a quarter of a million dollars. And what happened was, I had that summer grant and I used the grant money to go to Delaware and visit – there's a du Pont Museum there on early American art. I can't remember the name of it. It's like the one in Williamsburg.

MS. YAGER: Winterthur [Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, Winterthur, Delaware].

MR. FENSTER: Winterthur. That's right. Winterthur. And the – the curator or the director of the Elvehjem Art Museum was doing a lecture series there on decorative arts. And he said, "Why don't you come when I'm there. I'll introduce you to the director and you can go through the pewter stuff and handle everything." And I said, "Great, I'll do that." So I drove out there and I – you know, I sat through the slide lectures, and I realized for the first time that duck decoys were a hot selling item in America and the prices they were getting was phenomenal. And of course it wasn't for a duck decoy. It was for an aesthetic object, again a rare aesthetic object. And the rarity made it more valuable, but basically if it was rare and it was ugly, nobody would look at it. So it was the – the excellence of the object that spoke to people, as we were talking about it before.

I found that really interesting. Yeah, and I think – I think what determines price is quality and rarity and the fact that people who have money are really interested in that kind of object. I mean, I would never pay that kind of money for a duck decoy. I don't know if I would pay that kind of money for anything because I probably would put the money towards a more humanitarian end, you know. Put it into cancer research or something like that. I give a lot of money for that every year, too.

MS. YAGER: Sometimes I wish that that level of support went to living artists instead of, you know, a hundred years later.

MR. FENSTER: That's the rarity factor, you know, the fact that this man made a fixed number of objects and there are hardly any available, and so the person who buys it gets a really unique and, you know, special object. I think a lot of that is sort of prestige value, you know. I have money and I can afford to buy this thing, you know.

That's right. I had forgotten about that Winterthur experience. That was really a good experience. I had an interesting little run of experiences there. They introduced me to the conservator at Winterthur, and I've always been a repairman, and the difference between a repairman and a conservator is a white lab coat. So if I put on a white lab coat I'm a conservator. But this guy scared the hell out of me. I've been fixing messed-up pieces of silver and pewter for years, never had any problems. And he starts telling me about all these disasters where the metal turns into powder, you just touch it and it falls apart. I never had any of those experiences. But on the other hand, this guy wasn't a metalsmith, you know. He was a conservator who really didn't understand how to form the metal, although he knew how to fix it in a limited sense.

And I listened very carefully to everything he told me, and he – he made me afraid to touch certain kinds of things, you know. I fixed everything that ever came before me, you know, and I did it

successfully, and I thought, you know, maybe you've been riding this bubble for a long time and you're going to pick up something and it's going to be a disaster.

MS. YAGER: [Laughs.] Turns into dust!

MR. FENSTER: You're going to be in a hole for the rest of your life with a pile of silver dust in front of you. But pewter does get a disease. It's called pewter pest, and it does powder, you know. It does turn into powder. It usually happens when the piece is buried. Never had that happen.

That was a really good experience. I handled medieval candlesticks from Europe, huge cast candlesticks that were made in sections and I had never seen a pair of those up close before. Only in books. And they just – just opened the place up to me. I could touch everything there. Handle everything there. It was a really good experience. The same kind of experience I had with the Pewter Collectors Club, you know. That's what the museums do. They pass out white gloves and they give us 14th century pewter artifacts. That's pretty exciting.

MS. YAGER: These are – these are some of the reasons that I'm in that jewelry society because they'll pass pieces around and you get to hold a 1500's gold and emerald pin, and –

MR. FENSTER: I know. That's really exciting.

MS. YAGER: – no photograph, or even just seeing it on the table but not being able to touch it.

MR. FENSTER: Doesn't do it the same justice. Absolutely. Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

MS. YAGER: Seeing the back, seeing the parts the photographers never seem to do for me.

MR. FENSTER: The SNAG meeting in New York that we went to, it was a Rockefeller gold museum. It was pre-Columbian artifacts, I think. Boy, was that a good experience. And it was very interesting. Albert Paley was in the group. He knew so much about the objects. He knew so much about them. I was shocked at how intuitive he was in sort of understanding how the thing was made and the processes. I was near him and I watched him. And he was just wonderful at explaining things, even though he was not a curator, not a historian. He just knew from all of his experience and his – and he does, you know, browse a lot, read a lot. Yes.

MS. YAGER: Let's see what else we have here. So you're retiring in May. You just turned 70.

MR. FENSTER: I'll turn 70 in December.

MS. YAGER: Oh. Sorry. So –

MR. FENSTER: Don't rush it. Don't rush it. It's coming soon enough.

MS. YAGER: So you're still 69.

MR. FENSTER: Until December 9th, yes.

MS. YAGER: So what's on the shopping list now? What's on your agenda, what kind of things have you been waiting to do that you haven't had time for?

MR. FENSTER: I'm hoping to do more exacting and involved silver pieces. You know, I think I can do pretty much what I want with the pewter, and that's like – that's like sort of relief, you know. It's easy to work with and very expressive material. And I think there are lots of things that I haven't tried because I tend to want a block of time and not have to go to school or not have to go to work after the weekend. I want a block of time where I can just – I like to shut the world out. When I'm downstairs, I mean, I shut everything out but the music, the classical music that I play. And you know, the phone doesn't ring, I'm not distracted by anything. So I'm hoping that I can get to much more complicated silver pieces.

Part of it scares me, you know. I had the same fear I had when I had that time off in Washington, where I wasn't doing commissions for anybody but I was just trying to see what was inside me and what I would come up with where there wasn't an exterior – any exterior motivation. I just wanted

to see what I – but I have years and years of making sketches of all different kinds, and I also have areas that I want to explore. Like one of the things that's always been interesting to me is exploring sheet metal work for new forms, you know. Like the forms they use in ducting in buildings are so amazing, and nobody's ever really, to my knowledge, explored those for hollowware, you know. I'm going to stay in this – in this sort of traditional format of doing hollowware, doing flatware, doing vessels, doing functional pieces, but I want to see where I can take these things, you know. If I can take them to new places.

There's a book on coppersmithing by Fuller, which is the most comprehensive book on metalsmithing I've ever seen, where he shows you how to make everything – industrial vats and, you know, it's widely available now but they've done a reprint of it. And I had one of the original copies of it. I want to really go through that book. I've recently been buying all kinds of books on sheet metal work, to learn how to lay out new forms and see if I can come up with, you know, the kinds of things that I put off doing for a while.

I mean, these forms, they're daunting to me. They – the layouts are so complicated, it's all sort of geometrical layouts with just a lot of lines and a lot of plotting to get the shape, and I – I want to see if I can learn to understand that better. I'm pretty good at, you know, laying things out. But there's a lot of stuff I haven't touched because I haven't understood how. So I want to go there.

And somehow I don't – I don't see focusing on jewelry that much. I think it's going to be on hollowware, silver and pewter, maybe some copper, more copper pots for the kitchen. I'll see. You know, the whole idea of retirement scares me a little bit because it's given structure to my life, and without that I have to provide my own structure, and I tend to be a hermit, you know. I tend to withdraw from everything and everybody. And I can be happy if I'm working well, and if I'm not working well, I'm going to be miserable. So I have to make sure I balance my life by taking classes.

I belong to a very good book club which keeps me reading wonderful books every month. We meet every month. That's great. And then I have my friend Susan, who pushes me into taking these really uncomfortable trips, which I end up loving. We did a trip to Alaska with the Sierra Club. And it – we went to the Tongass rainforest and it rained the whole time we were there, every day. And we were always wet, got into a soaked tent and soaked clothing and wet sleeping bag, and we did that, you know, most of the time we were there, and it was – I loved it. Food was terrible. And I just loved it. It was the best time. It's one of those things you say, "Wow, it's over. What a relief." But I really had fun. I did. I really had fun.

MS. YAGER: How long of a trip was it?

MR. FENSTER: It was about 10 days, 10, 11 days. What was fun about it was in Alaska you don't travel by bus. You travel by ferry, you know. And so if you have a car, you put your car on a ferry. And this group, there were 10 of us. We had a van and we put the van, or vans – we had two vans for a while – put the vans on the ferry and that's how you get from place to place. Either fly or you take the ferry. And the ferry is wonderful. You see whales, and all kinds of sea creatures, and there are lectures on the ferry. The ferries have good cafeterias, they – you can sleep outside under these heat lamps, you know. You can disembark whenever you stop somewhere and just see the harbor area. It was a great trip, and one of the places we're going back is Alaska. I think we're going to make it rougher this time. Susie wanted to do the Klondike trail, which is –

MS. YAGER: Make it snow. [Laughs.] Instead of rain you'll go during the winter.

MR. FENSTER: Well, I don't – well, we might. But she wanted to do the Klondike trail, which is a seven-day hiking trip where you're climbing straight up, you know. This is the gold – the gold trail, where people went from the United States into Canada. And the Canadians were so tired of Americans sort of dying on them and going broke and having accidents that they require each person to come in with a ton of food and gear. So to – this thing was like a vertical hike on ice steps, and you either hire porters to bring your stuff up – I mean, 2,000 pounds of gear, you know. You have to make that trip over and over again. And they did it, by the tens of thousands.

We went there. We were at the foot of the thing, and we talked to people who had made the trek, and my feeling was that if they could do it, I could do it. You know, I think I'm in better shape than most of the people I saw. And Susie would say, "You want to do this trip, Fred?" And I said, "You're going to punk out on this trip. You're not going to be able to do it. It's just a really – I mean, look at these people that are coming back. They're exhausted." She said, "You think we could try?" And I said, "Let me think about it." But the fact is that I'm – I have been thinking about it and I'm really curious to see if I could do it or not. I think I can do it. There were kids that did it.

You camp on the trail, you know, and it's – like it's very rough, and we saw a lot of pictures of it where animals were dying like crazy. They had mules backpacking this stuff up there. We had a lot of preparation for seeing what was going on. You have to register, you know, so if you don't come back or you don't end up at the other end, they're going to come and find you, so – I mean, you know, you could break a leg or something and you'd have to have somebody come after you. Who knows, you know.

The only thing wrong with me physically is my knees are bad and I have arthritis in my knees, which is kind of painful at times, but otherwise I think they'll be okay.

MS. YAGER: What haven't we discussed that's important to you?

MR. FENSTER: Listen, I've talked more in these two days than I've talked in probably half a year.

MS. YAGER: That's what everybody says. [Laughs.]

MR. FENSTER: Like I, you know, I lead a very solitary life up here. I go in once or twice a week to visit Susie and that's – you know, and then I don't see anybody usually. I read, you know. I work downstairs, I prepare firewood, I work on the house, which needs a lot of work. I have to do a lot of maintenance before winter sets in to keep my windows from completely falling apart. And then next summer I'll start replacing them.

MS. YAGER: What's it like here in the winter?

MR. FENSTER: The winters recently have been mild. About the last three years we've had hardly any snow, and then right before that – four years ago we had a really bad winter with more snow than anybody can remember, and I don't have gutters on my roof, and so the snow slides off, but people who have gutters, the snow packs up and then it backs up underneath the roof and the roof starts getting wet and it starts dripping into the house, which is why I don't have gutters. So my friend Susan has gutters and it snowed and it froze, it snowed and it froze, and there was like two feet of snow on the roof.

So we went there and literally had to chop the snow off, and spent the whole day chopping and shoveling and chopping and shoveling. Really hard work. Luckily her roof is pretty flat, so it wasn't like I was standing in a dangerous spot, but she had severe leakage inside, you know. I didn't have any problem there. As I say, I don't have gutters, so the snow just slides down.

MS. YAGER: You know, Sun Prairie, I was sort of struck by that this was the home town of –

MR. FENSTER: Georgia O'Keeffe.

MS. YAGER: Georgia O'Keeffe.

MR. FENSTER: They give her no recognition except for a street. There's a street named O'Keeffe Avenue.

MS. YAGER: I feel like there's – you know, when I was driving here and you just – you're driving on this two-lane highway and it's just open – openness with gentle, rolling hills, and three-quarters of the view is the sky. And in some ways Santa Fe is almost a counterpart to that.

MR. FENSTER: Yes. I've been out to where she lived –

MS. YAGER: Abiquiu.

MR. FENSTER: Abiquiu. Yes, I've been out there. I love the hills, these razorback hills. Susie and I went hiking out there. It was a lot of fun.

MS. YAGER: The – I'm interested a little bit in why there is such a level of creativity that's in this area.

MR. FENSTER: I don't know that there is. I think she was a farm girl, she just happened to – I think one of the things about Georgia O'Keeffe is about color, you know, intense color, that she loved the flowers out there. I mean, the topography is different out there. They have high mountains, they have – the mountains are very colorful. And then she got into these beautiful, sort of sexual flower forms that are really terrific.

She never had much recognition here. I remember when they were voting on naming places for her. They wanted to do a park. And people were just not interested. They just – they don't even know who she is, and they don't care. But I thought they were going to preserve the farm, which is on 19 east of the town itself, but I think that fell through. She's gotten next to no recognition in town, except for the naming a road after her.

I don't know of anybody else who's noted for creativity out here.

MS. YAGER: Lots of metalsmiths have come from this area.

MR. FENSTER: But that's connected with the university, you know. I mean, the metal program, before I came, under Vierthaler was a good program. As I say, Fike came out of it, von Neumann came out of it and a lot of other people came out of it who taught, who went into teaching. And I think that he established a good program that was – functioned really well for a while. I think it got better when I came, and it got much better after Vierthaler left and Eleanor came. That was a real step up when she came. We were a very good functioning unit. You know, we were much different – you know, we bring something totally different, each one of us. Her interests were photo etching, surface decoration, and mine were forming and forging. So I thought they complemented each other really well. People got a wide range of techniques and influence that way.

And Eleanor – you know, I'm sort of relaxed about the professional side of things. I don't document my work well. She's meticulous about that, and she gave that to the students. She had them start keeping beautiful resumes. I think that was necessary. It was not the kind of thing that I was going to do as well as she did, you know, so that was a really valuable addition to our program.

MS. YAGER: Support for the arts. You know, the Wustum Museum, the Racine Art Museum, the Kohler Art Center, the – you know, Milwaukee Art Center, St. Paul is, you know, sort of this – I feel like there is –

MR. FENSTER: Yes. There's a lot of support.

MS. YAGER: – a lot of very early support that continues now.

MR. FENSTER: Did you read the newspaper lately? The local paper, the –

MS. YAGER: This morning I did.

MR. FENSTER: Okay. They're putting up an art center in downtown Madison [Overture Center for the Arts]. It's up. They had a – they had a world-famous architect [Cesar Pelli] design the thing. Madison's a very contentious town, so there's been a lot of controversy about it. And [Jerry] Frautschi and his wife – Pleasant Rowland, her name is – they're both zillionaires, and he gave I think initially a \$100 million gift to start the thing off, and then he doubled it. That's one man doing this. His wife has also contributed heavily. She – she heads the American Doll Company [Pleasant Company] that make all these dolls. That's Pleasant Rowland. That's Frautschi's wife. Money comes to money. So the Kohler – the Kohler boy marries the Vollrath girl. You know, Vollrath Stainless Steel, they make all this kitchenware? Kitchen bowls. That's up in Sheboygan, in that area. So naturally Kohler's going to marry Vollrath, you know? So that's two parts of an empire.

But yeah, there is money here, and fortunately the people who have money are – have put it into art. And the kinds of – you get a lot of carping about that. “Why doesn’t he put the money into social services, or why doesn’t he do this, you know.” There’s always somebody who’s going to take exception. This art center is supposed to open in September. We’ll see if it’s fully operational.

MS. YAGER: I know that the – there was a pilot program in craft that the WPA started and Wisconsin was one of the – one of the forerunners of that. There were some things that came out of here very early.

MR. FENSTER: Well, Ruth Kohler has the artist-in-residence program in the factory, which is wonderful. It’s absolutely wonderful. And she set up this gorgeous little museum. It’s a gem of a museum in Sheboygan, where nobody goes, and that’s – it’s like a summer home area for people in Milwaukee who want to escape the heat and get into a more countrified setting. It’s really nice up there. And it’s like – because she has these wonderful shows, and it’s like a one-person operation. The factory, you know, the thing is just fabulous. They bring in a resident – an artist in to be a resident for six months or a year, and they have the full run of all the casting facilities, all the ceramic facilities, and they do – I mean, they’ve got numerous films on this. It’s great. And the work that comes out is usually very exciting. So yes, that’s interesting.

I mean, Ruth Kohler is a very, very well educated, sensitive woman and she’s been the driving force behind the museum, and I assume that she’s been influential in the factory. I go up there every once in a while just to visit the factory. They do – it’s fascinating to watch them enamel sinks. They enamel them like they’re pieces of jewelry.

MS. YAGER: I’ve seen them doing bathtubs on TV.

MR. FENSTER: It’s unbelievable. It’s exciting. I went up there with my friend Susan. Her father was in the metalwork business in Chicago and I thought – it was in July. It was like – it was close to 100 degrees. Inside the building, it was over 100 degrees, and they had these giant fans going. And all the enamellists were big guys who weighed in the range of 230 to 250, and while he was giving us a lecture on this stuff – we had our own little private lecture thing because the guy who was a liaison between the factory and the artist was one of my former students, and he said that smaller guys don’t last in the heat. They poop out, you know, that they become exhausted, they lose their strength and they just keel over.

And these are the guys who are – who have a giant fork and they’re lifting the sink and the thing is on rollers, it’s on wheels, and they have to maneuver it through the opening in the – in the kiln, very precisely. And then they have to watch it so they get it at the right moment when the enamel fuses and it doesn’t burn or over-fire. And it was – I loved it. I loved it. And Susie, she’s a trooper. She’s sweating away, we’re both dripping sweat, and I said, “Is that okay?” She said, “Yes. I love to go to places like this. You’re forgetting my dad ran a metal factory.” I said, “Okay, good. You’re asking for more of it, then.”

She came down to – to Williamsburg with me, to the Rockefeller Museum of American Craft down there [The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum]. She sat through these boring pewter lectures that I, you know, I’m interested, and they had a lecture at breakfast, at lunch, at dinner, in the afternoon. It was like nonstop pewter for five days. And she’s making friends with all these snooty British pewter guys that, you know. She said, “Oh, Fred, I’d like you to meet so and so, you know. He wrote that book that you admire so much,” and you know, I couldn’t say two words of it. Susie, they’re old buddies already, you know. So she was great. She was great. It was very funny.

She has this gift for getting people to open up to her. Everybody talks to her, you know. It’s a lot of fun.

Yes, any other questions?

MS. YAGER: I think we’re just about done. I really want to thank you personally and on behalf of the Archives [Smithsonian Archives of American Art] for agreeing to do this.

MR. FENSTER: You're very welcome.

MS. YAGER: You've made a significant contribution in the field. Looks like you've got much more to go.

MR. FENSTER: Yes.

MS. YAGER: So congratulations! And thank you very much.

[END.]