

Interview transcript of Wilton Lee, California Historical Society, September 20, 2022.

[This version has been lightly edited for clarity. The unedited transcript is in the records of the CFM at the California Historical Society.]

Frances Kaplan (00:00:10):

This recording is taking place on the afternoon of September 20th, 2022 at J. Miller Flowers on Piedmont Avenue in Oakland. My name is Frances Kaplan. I'm the director of Library and Collections for the California Historical Society. And I will be conducting the interview today with Al Bersch, Metadata and Systems Librarian for the California Historical Society. The interview subjects today are Valerie L... Am I pronouncing that-

Valerie Lee (00:00:36):

Valerie Lee

Frances Kaplan (00:00:37):

Lee. I'm sorry. Valerie Lee and Robbin Lee

Valerie Lee (00:00:41):

We're both Lee. And it's an interesting story, because our father was a dentist in Oakland on 19th Street and under... He was on the ninth floor and on the first floor, there was a flower shop and he would purchase flowers there in Oakland and bring them to my mother. And then that shop they needed, it was owned by this gentleman and he needed a partner. So my father and mother purchased that. That was down in Oakland. And then this one on Piedmont Avenue became available and they moved here. And so the running joke in our family is, some people get away with buying their wives a dozen roses. And my dad used to say, "But I had to buy my wife the whole damn shop."

Frances Kaplan (00:02:16):

So the store was located there and that's what happened. It relocated?

Valerie Lee (00:02:20):

No, it was another shop and then J. Miller became available.

Frances Kaplan (00:02:24):

So they moved out?

Valerie Lee (00:02:25):

Right.

Frances Kaplan (00:02:26):

Okay.

Robbin Lee (00:02:27):

So originally my mom was a partner with someone. It was originally a partnership with someone else and that didn't work out, so after three years we bought that person out. And so now it's owned by our family.

Frances Kaplan (00:02:39):

And it's fully owned by your family?

Robbin Lee (00:02:40):

Yes.

Frances Kaplan (00:02:41):

So she had three years to learn the trade, or how did she become familiar with it?

Valerie Lee (00:02:47):

Yes, and there were five kids in our family. So prior to owning the shop, she hadn't worked. Yes-

Robbin Lee (00:02:59):

But she always used to arrange flowers at home.

Valerie Lee (00:03:01):

And she grew flowers. She gardened, so that was always a big love of hers.

Robbin Lee (00:03:06):

And so the name itself, J. Miller Flowers, was we purchased it from a man named John Miller. The shop was named after him. John Miller actually stayed on after he sold the shop and helped teach us and design with us and-

Valerie Lee (00:03:20):

For a number of years. And he would go to the flower market and he knew all those people. And we would go to the flower market in San Francisco. And I just remember everyone was so kind, it was a big family over there and a lot of them were Japanese owned and Chinese owned, and our mother spoke Chinese, Cantonese and Mandarin. So she was able to talk to them, which was nice.

Frances Kaplan (00:03:47):

Do you have any recollections of how she was of first accepted going in there, or because she was going in with John Miller, did that help sort of pave the way or-

Valerie Lee (00:03:58):

I think that helped, however, her personality, she was very much of a dynamo, so she would just go in, she knew what she wanted and they would hold flowers for her and she would just go select things. So I think that was helpful. But for her being really just this sort of unique person, and it's almost as if we don't even realize how strong and powerful she was until we kind of reassess things now and seeing how people are treated.

Frances Kaplan (00:04:27):

Well, and she did that back then with five children and a husband who was also, I presume working full-time.

Valerie Lee (00:04:34):

He was a dentist, so he was working full time, but she was very active in our schools in the community. They were on the board of the Oakland Symphony, the Oakland Ballet. So they gave a lot back to their community, but I think that's also what helped the business thrive, because it's all that community based.

Frances Kaplan (00:04:52):

Would you say that was her major customer base, local community at that time?

Valerie Lee (00:04:57):

Oh yes. Yes.

Frances Kaplan (00:04:59):

And do you remember at all the flowers that would be sort of sold in the store? Do you have a recollection?

Valerie Lee (00:05:06):

Oh, they weren't as fancy and as upscale as they are now, they were primarily carnations, Chrysanthemums, very standard things.

Frances Kaplan (00:05:16):

And then how long did your mother have the store for?

Valerie Lee (00:05:19):

Oh, well she purchased it in 1970. And so right now we're celebrating, we call it 53... We're celebrating 53 blooming years. That's on our tagline.

Frances Kaplan (00:05:30):

And until she passed away, she was active-

Valerie Lee (00:05:32):

Yes.

Frances Kaplan (00:05:33):

In the store?

Valerie Lee (00:05:33):

Mm-hmm.

Frances Kaplan (00:05:35):

So was it assumed you would take over? Both of you, how many years have you been involved in the flower market? How did that transition work?

Valerie Lee (00:05:43):

Yeah, Robbin, why don't you-

Robbin Lee (00:05:44):

We both went to college. I graduated in college in 1982 and I've been in here full time since '82. And even when we were in school, high school, college, we would always come down. We'd help after school, we'd help on holidays.

Valerie Lee (00:06:03):

And our friends would come in. They thought it was the most magical thing to be in a flower shop.

Robbin Lee (00:06:10):

And so we were here pretty much grew up with a business, because I was 10 when she purchased the shop. So this is my place to go too. And we had someone else go to market for a while and then probably around '85, '86, I started doing the flower market. So I took over that job. And then my mom used to come over where she would go over on off days. She'd like to go like midday and have all her little contacts over there.

Frances Kaplan (00:06:40):

Did you study at college, anything to do with flora culture, or did you learn on the job?

Robbin Lee (00:06:44):

Learned on the job. I took business classes and communication classes in college, but my mom also went to the-

Valerie Lee (00:06:53):

San Francisco City College and took classes.

Robbin Lee (00:06:56):

San Francisco City College, a program there.

Valerie Lee (00:06:57):

And Steve, what's his last name?

Robbin Lee (00:07:00):

Brown.

Valerie Lee (00:07:00):

Steve Brown, have you met him? He'd be a great one to interview too, because he is in charge of that entire program. And then he gives a certification for that and it's very popular. We have this event pedal

it forward, a lot of his students participate in that and we have this annual crab feed with all the merchants.

Frances Kaplan (00:07:24):

Someone told us about the crab feed.

Valerie Lee (00:07:26):

Yes, but they all come all the growers. We're very involved. I'm usually the MC of that and his students come and we haven't done it for the last couple of years because of COVID. So hopefully this next year they'll do it, but they always honor someone from the flower market, that's been there 30, 40 years. You'll see pictures in some of the stalls there of when they were honored by the... What's the title? Master Florist Association.

Robbin Lee (00:07:56):

Yeah, the hall of fame.

Valerie Lee (00:07:57):

And that Wilton Lee, I know you interviewed him.

Frances Kaplan (00:08:00):

Yes.

Valerie Lee (00:08:00):

He is very involved with that. And Robin has been on the board and that usually they have maybe 150 people for a huge crab feed in Oakland. It's really a lot of fun. All the growers donate things. There's huge raffle. They give out salamis, people go home with arm loads of plants and flowers. It's crazy.

Frances Kaplan (00:08:23):

And you said the students come are involved in that as well?

Valerie Lee (00:08:23):

Yeah, they come. They come and volunteer.

Frances Kaplan (00:08:24):

I'm really curious about what you see in this next generation of people who are interested in [floriculture] coming up.

Valerie Lee (00:08:32):

Yeah. That's really challenging, because we've reached out to a lot of the schools to say, "Do you have students? Do they want to come intern?" It's challenging to find them. And so we're very lucky here that we've found designers locally who have a passion for this and you've met many of them down today.

Frances Kaplan (00:08:52):

And then Valerie, tell us about your sort of transition.

Valerie Lee (00:08:56):

So I attended the University of Pacific in Stockton. I was a communications major and I worked at Levi Strauss in San Francisco, in corporate communications for several years after and at Channel 5 News. I had various and I did some traveling and then I started to help with weddings and then came back here. What was interesting in one of your questions you mentioned, "Is this your thought? Is this where you thought you'd end up?" I didn't at all. I mean, I didn't really know where I would end up, but it wasn't my vision at all to be here, which is interesting.

Valerie Lee (00:09:34):

And so to work side by side and we've really grown our business, as you can see, and we do classes and a lot of community outreach, we support this Turkey Trot, the Oakland Ballet, I mean many organizations. We work with East Bay Regional Parks, the Oakland Fukuoka Sisters City Association. So we help them with fundraisers. And even the Spanish Immersion Preschool next door and our Piedmont Avenue Merchants Association, we've been active with them for 25 years. But as I would mentioned earlier, it's one of those businesses, it's really built on community based word of mouth, things like that.

Frances Kaplan (00:10:15):

What was your mother's reaction when you both then... It's clear you're involved in the long term and that you're going to be here. She must have been thrilled.

Valerie Lee (00:10:27):

Oh, I think she loved it. And my kids they're 27 and 30. They work in San Francisco, but they're in and out and helping us, because we're open seven days a week. We love it when they come in and they're friends and they have their friends come in and order flowers for their weddings or whatever. It's really nice.

Frances Kaplan (00:10:44):

We talked about it a bit off the record, but on the record, can you tell me who are your main clients? What's the main sort of crux of your business?

Valerie Lee (00:10:54):

Okay. Well we're one block away from many of these memorial parks. IE, Chapel of the Chimes, that's been here over a hundred years, that's been designed by Julia Morgan who did San Simeon and then the Mountain View Cemetery, which is over a 100 years as well. That's designed by Frederick Olmsted who designed Central Park and Boston Commons. And there are people buried there from the Civil War. That's a great tour. If you've ever done either of those, that they're really magical. And so our main clients they're from there, but also from the community, Piedmont, Berkeley, all the Hills, we do a lot of weddings, anniversaries, memorial-

Robbin Lee (00:11:38):

And there's a lot of local hospitals that are nearby-

Valerie Lee (00:11:40):

Corporate events.

Robbin Lee (00:11:41):

Downtown Oakland.

Valerie Lee (00:11:43):

Yes. And so we'll do wedding work and bring it up to Napa down the central valley. They'll pick it up and bring it to Tahoe. So wherever there's an event, if we can accommodate them, we will certainly provide the flowers.

Frances Kaplan (00:11:59):

That's a very wide range [inaudible 00:12:02]-

Robbin Lee (00:12:00):

For all occasions.

Frances Kaplan (00:12:03):

For all occasions. How does that impact the day to day business of selecting flowers and planning ahead and-

Valerie Lee (00:12:11):

Yeah, we have master calendars all over and list. And also we work a lot with the local high schools. There's probably about 10 or 15 around here, all their graduation lays. We provide, we have ribbon lays that are made in Hawaii that are brought over in the school colors, bouquets at graduation time, backdrops for the-

Frances Kaplan (00:12:31):

Stage.

Valerie Lee (00:12:38):

Stage. Right.

Robbin Lee (00:12:39):

We try to get all the dates ahead of time, also for the high school events. We'll know when the prom is four months in advance. And so we know to order the flowers, because everyone wants the small roses for the wristlets or the gardenias or orchids or-

Valerie Lee (00:12:54):

Yes. So it's proms, graduations, any event, teacher appreciation. They have fundraisers at the schools. We try to work with them. And then that Oakland Fukuoka Sister City Association that I mentioned about, they just celebrated their 60th anniversary this year. And the last couple years we've done a wreath fundraiser for them. So we designed the wreaths here. They send it out on their email and they pick them up here or deliver. And we deliver to 75 cities daily, all over the Bay Area, South Bay.

Robbin Lee (00:13:27):

And there's different events that-

Valerie Lee (00:13:27):

Contra Costa.

Robbin Lee (00:13:28):

Mountain View used to have a Memorial day ceremony every year up at the cemetery. So we donated a big red, white and blue wreath for that.

Frances Kaplan (00:13:37):

So you must have an incredible amount of stock moving through your store.

Valerie Lee (00:13:43):

Yes. Well you see all the flowers, not only in the ice box, but everything that came in today, then we have another grower delivering some things tomorrow morning and then once or twice a week, Robbin will go to market. Whereas prior to COVID, she would go Monday, Wednesday, Friday. But now since we've been able to pivot and these growers will deliver directly to us, they want to get rid of their perishable merchandise. So that's, been a change and that's been very effective and appreciated by us, because it's less times going to the market and excellent quality, because it's straight from the fields.

Frances Kaplan (00:14:23):

And then you've developed relationships with them, so you have the kind of things you want.

Robbin Lee (00:14:28):

Yeah, and great contacts over there. In fact, most of them are on my phone. So I'm able to order ahead. As soon as I know what I need, I can order ahead and they'll hold it for me. So I don't have to go at the crack of dawn like three or four in the morning, because it's hard to work all day after that. So I'm able to go at 5:00 or 6:00, which makes a difference.

Valerie Lee (00:14:47):

This one grower we also have in Watsonville down near Santa Cruz, Kitayama Brothers, were able to order via computer by 11:00 AM. They cut everything in the fields. It comes through our door the next day at noon on this big truck. And it's so fresh and the quality is excellent.

Frances Kaplan (00:15:10):

What other growers are you working with or do you know of, that you have connections within the Bay Area?

Robbin Lee (00:15:16):

We have Neve Brothers up in Petaluma. We have Torchio, they're down in Santa Cruz, Watsonville. Repetto Nursery, Half Moon Bay. Figone Nurseries, Half Moon Bay.

Valerie Lee (00:15:28):

And Rocket Farms is in Half Moon Bay. So there's a lot on the Central Coast that are within an hour or so. So if they have several drop offs throughout and they can organize it, it really is worth their time. We're not the only ones they deliver to.

Frances Kaplan (00:15:43):

The ones that you mentioned, I think a lot of them are actually multi generation [families].

Valerie Lee (00:15:47):

They all are and they have stalls at San Francisco. In fact, tell them about your pumpkins, where they came from. This is interesting.

Robbin Lee (00:15:54):

Oh, they actually from one of our flower growers as well. So Dave Repetto grows pumpkins as well. So he delivers up here for us whenever we need delivery.

Valerie Lee (00:16:04):

So he was here two days ago with a [inaudible 00:16:06], with these giant bins, as big as this table full of pumpkins and his quality is excellent. They're really just nice plump, deep color.

Frances Kaplan (00:16:15):

So the people you're working with now are people that your mother was probably working with, the generation before-

Robbin Lee (00:16:21):

Yes. A lot of people have retired over there, like Ron [inaudible 00:16:25], Carmen. Carmen, when he first started, he was in the market at the time. But when he first started, he used to deliver to my mom from Watsonville. He'd come up once or twice a week and he grew Chrysanthemums and carnations and he wasn't established in the market yet, but he was trying to build his clientele.

Frances Kaplan (00:16:45):

One of the things we really hear a lot in the interviews is just the incredible hard work and the connections and the social connections that you make, which everybody puts as a highlight of it. Can you talk a little bit about that, because it's not an easy industry to necessarily go into.

Valerie Lee (00:17:06):

No, it's so labor intensive and it's so unique. It's so different from every other business really. And a flower shop really is a manufacturer. We are getting raw materials and having someone clean and process them and hydrate them. That takes a day. And then we have a designer design them. Then we have a driver deliver them. And in addition to that, it's one of us or our bookkeeper taking the order. So the flowers go through about six different levels just in our shop before they get to the end home, which is pretty interesting.

Robbin Lee (00:17:46):

And this service and everything is very important nowadays, because obviously you can get flowers at a grocery store. Whereas when we first began in 1970, you could not buy flowers in a grocery store. They weren't there.

Valerie Lee (00:18:00):

And all the big box stores.

Robbin Lee (00:18:02):

You had to go to a flower shop to get flowers. And now, so it's a little bit more competitive. So you have to really quality service and courtesy and to really make sure your customer comes back.

Valerie Lee (00:18:18):

And I think our customers, when you are asking what makes them unique, they're looking for something that's made designed. We do have customers that are kind of cash carry, just pick up and run. But for the most part, they want us to design the two dozen roses with orchids coming out, or compact with high end flowers, something they know that we can do, that probably Safeway, Trader Joe's, Costco, they're not going to do that.

Robbin Lee (00:18:45):

And now with the internet, everybody is reading your Yelp reviews in order to choose a Florist. So we have lots of people who are out of town, but their relatives live in town. They're trying to find a local florist and they go to the Yelp reviews, and because our Yelp reviews are so good, they tell us that immediately. That's one of the first things they say. "I found you on Yelp. You have great reviews. I have a relative, I want -

Valerie Lee (00:19:13):

So if you just Google best flower shop Oakland, I believe we pull up maybe the top one, two, or three, but read them. We're very proud. We have like 154 and then whenever you get a bad review, the whole shop feels just terrible and you can't get those off. That's what's so interesting about the whole thing.

Frances Kaplan (00:19:32):

And we all know it's so hard, because we all know how sometimes the reviews are [inaudible 00:19:35], to do with parking, or to do with something completely different.

Robbin Lee (00:19:39):

Yes, something completely different.

Frances Kaplan (00:19:40):

So that's an interesting thing too, is that the time that you have been working the community has changed as well. How has that impacted the choices of arrangements that people want, or the flowers that people are looking for? And I know that with the flower market too, it's gone from having perhaps a 100 varieties 20 years ago, to now way more than that. So have you seen it from your mom's time, where you said it was mainly carnations and roses?

Robbin Lee (00:20:10):

Oh, definitely.

Frances Kaplan (00:20:11):

What are these periods that have you have seen?

Valerie Lee (00:20:15):

I think people have just much better refined taste in flowers. And especially in this area of the Bay Area, they like the lilies, fuchsias, peonies, anything that's coming into season, that's very garden-y and delicate, long lasting and different. I think they really appreciate that. And I know our customers, because we have a lot of people that are in garden clubs that come for classes, or we go out and speak to them, that they know we're super passionate about what we do and that's conveyed. And that's our biggest selling point too, is we love what we do.

Robbin Lee (00:21:00):

And that's the other reason why we choose to go to market over sending somebody else, is because I can see the flowers firsthand. Some I have ordered, because I have reputations with these people. I know the quality of their flowers, other ones I pick and choose, because of the quality. And that's the beauty of the flowers. We know what's really fresh. We know what's available. And so when people call is this available? We can say yes or no. Or we have that in or we can get it for you, but you pay attention to detail, and I think that people like that.

Valerie Lee (00:21:35):

And it's a product that is so delicate and perishable, no one wants a sunflower with crushed petals, or a dahlia where half of it is missing. So all of ours have to be grown really well and healthy and just open at the exact right moment and then put in our cooler, so that we can utilize it for say the party on Saturday night. We want it to be at their optimum on Saturday. So we'll use things that are much tighter today, because it's only this day and she has to buy them today, which is only Tuesday.

Robbin Lee (00:22:11):

And you have to really plan ahead. When I'm going to market today, I've already looked at the week's orders till the following week. So I know if there's a service on Saturday and I need my Gladiolus open, I need to buy them today, leave them out, let them open naturally, so they're going to be in perfect-

Valerie Lee (00:22:29):

Because if you buy them at the market and then they're wrapping them in newspaper, when you open them, they're all crushed, all the flowers.

Robbin Lee (00:22:35):

But they're also super tight.

Valerie Lee (00:22:37):

So we want them to open here at our shop at a certain degree and then put them in the ice box, because anytime it's exposed to the air, it just keeps opening. You can take a tight gladiola and put it on your dining room table, in three hours, it's open as much as you'd like it to open...

Frances Kaplan (00:22:56):

all these hints -

Valerie Lee (00:22:59):

Yeah. But when we give our classes, they love all that little stuff. We show them how to clean and process the flowers.

Frances Kaplan (00:23:06):

Even how to choose the right flower. So I'm really curious when you go to the flower market, do they always have in stock, everything that you need, between all the different florists?

Robbin Lee (00:23:17):

No. I wish.

Frances Kaplan (00:23:17):

Talk to me a little bit about your process when you're actually there?

Robbin Lee (00:23:19):

For example, we were looking for a certain colored Dahlia today for a party she's having this weekend.

Valerie Lee (00:23:25):

That orange one I showed you.

Robbin Lee (00:23:27):

Yeah. But I was actually looking for one shade lighter and I walk through every stall and I found one bunch at one stall.

Valerie Lee (00:23:37):

And she's texting me in the morning-

Robbin Lee (00:23:38):

Yeah. Pictures.

Valerie Lee (00:23:39):

I wake up say-

Robbin Lee (00:23:40):

"Will this work? Will this work?"

Valerie Lee (00:23:41):

6:00 or 6:30, when I know she's on the road, "How is marky?" I call it. "What's up?" And then she probably sent me six different pictures this morning. "Do you want this? I just found this. Do you want that?" But I've already shown the client the sample, which I'll show you. And she's happy with that. So just do that. Do you know what I mean? We don't want to just keep adding, she said fine. But there's often so much just great stuff at the market.

Robbin Lee (00:24:06):

But everybody has something different and there's different people who specialize in different things. For example, Figone, he specializes in dahlias. And so, you can go and look at him, but he doesn't have the exact ones you're looking for. And luckily Dave Reppeto happened to come in, Val, at 9:30 and or nine o'clock, came in a little early this morning and he had the picture of the orange ones I sent you, were still on Dave's truck. And so I said, "Will this color work?" So then I bought 10 bunches for the party.

Valerie Lee (00:24:45):

And so she's asking, do you want [inaudible 00:24:46]. Well, we never did it.

Frances Kaplan (00:24:47):

Right.

Valerie Lee (00:24:47):

So in the morning, we're just bantering back and forth.

Robbin Lee (00:24:52):

I know, will this work, will this work? I send her a picture of two different color mums, because the spider mums that she had in mind weren't available. So it's like, will this color work or this color work? And I text my growers last night, told him what I needed and he was nice enough. He saved me five bunches of each one to let me choose when I got there.

Valerie Lee (00:25:18):

But in my sample that I made for the client, I used this butterscotch one.

Robbin Lee (00:25:21):

Right. So then I said, "Well wait, let me text my sister, see what she has in mind." And so it keeps going back and forth. And so I'm like in the store going, I'm waiting for an answer. I'll let you know in a minute.

Frances Kaplan (00:25:31):

But this is why your connection to the grower is so important.

Valerie Lee (00:25:34):

Exactly.

Robbin Lee (00:25:34):

Oh yeah.

Valerie Lee (00:25:36):

And our clients know we do this and that's another thing. What other shops do this? Or have the manpower to even banter back and forth and the bandwidth and the time.

Robbin Lee (00:25:45):

Because, I have all their cell phone numbers. I mean they've given me all their personal cell phone numbers. So I'm like texting back and forth. He's like, "Do you want to email?" I'm like, "No, I'm not an email person. I just need to text you, once I think of it."

Frances Kaplan (00:25:56):

Has it gotten more difficult, because the consumer sees so many pictures and there's so many varieties now that there's more importation from other countries. And our expectation is we can get things here year round-

Valerie Lee (00:26:11):

That's a great point, because a lot of our brides, they're finding things on Pinterest and all these things that are out of season, or they're making all these in Europe or Princess Kate carried that. We are lucky, however, that the Bay Area has an abundance. It's not as if we're in Mississippi or something. So we are-

Robbin Lee (00:26:38):

And it's nice that we have access to the San Francisco Flower Market, because that's one of the larger markets in this area. And for us, it's 20 minutes on a good day to get over there. I don't know what will happen once-

Valerie Lee (00:26:50):

Only in the morning.

Robbin Lee (00:26:51):

Yeah. I don't know what will happen once they move, or if they're going to... I'm sure you know all about that.

Frances Kaplan (00:26:57):

How old were you when you first started going there? Do you remember?

Robbin Lee (00:27:02):

When I first started going to the [flower market]?

Frances Kaplan (00:27:02):

The flower market with your mother.

Robbin Lee (00:27:02):

Oh, we have to go with mom. We were 10 or 11.

Valerie Lee (00:27:04):

Yeah. We were 9 or 10.

Frances Kaplan (00:27:06):

And what were your first impressions?

Valerie Lee (00:27:09):

Oh, it was super fun, because you're getting the cart. It's like you're going through Disneyland, just throwing things on your cart and lots of fun. And everyone was just so nice and kind. That's what I remember.

Frances Kaplan (00:27:20):

Did you ever go to the cafe?

Valerie Lee (00:27:22):

Always.

Robbin Lee (00:27:23):

In fact, that was in the deal.

Valerie Lee (00:27:25):

Yeah. When I go with my garden club, that's part of it. Are you familiar with Bouquet to Arts?

Frances Kaplan (00:27:32):

Yes.

Valerie Lee (00:27:33):

Okay. So we've been doing-

Frances Kaplan (00:27:37):

You should explain it for the recording...

Valerie Lee (00:27:40):

Okay. Bouquet to Arts, it's a huge flower extravaganza at the de Young Museum in San Francisco in Golden Gate Park.

Robbin Lee (00:27:48):

One of the big fundraisers.

Valerie Lee (00:27:49):

Yeah. Huge fundraiser, supports the art at the Legion of Honor and the de Young. We've been exhibitors for... This was our 23rd consecutive year. There's posters in our shop about it and we're working on a line of greeting cards with those images, with a friend of ours. And that's a huge draw. They have about 40,000 people per week going through that museum. They select 125 exhibitors throughout Northern California. They can be from anywhere in the US to exhibit their work. You go in and select an art piece and then you create something to compliment it. And it can be a painting, a statue, ceramics, blank wall, whatever. But we love that show. A lot of our friends support it. We're huge supporters of the arts in the Bay Area.

Frances Kaplan (00:28:45):

They did it this year?

Robbin Lee (00:28:46):

Yes.

Frances Kaplan (00:28:47):

What was your inspirational art piece?

Valerie Lee (00:28:50):

Oh, I had a painting of... I'll show it to you. It was a beach scene that was all peach colors from Manchester Beach in Massachusetts. And what's interesting, a good friend of ours, she grew up going to that beach. So when she saw the image, she said, "That's my beach."

Frances Kaplan (00:29:09):

Oh, that's wonderful.

Valerie Lee (00:29:10):

Yes. So you'll see, it's all peach tones and there's some waves lapping up, but I used all these peach colored items. So when you stand back, the peach roses and hypericum berries and deep purple, black succulent, just blend in. That's what I want to do. I believe she's showing a picture, but that'd be great if you could include that, because that is one of our most favorite events, all the garden clubs attend. Do you have-

Robbin Lee (00:29:40):

I'll show her this year, but this is from another year.

Valerie Lee (00:29:46):

Oh, that's Rhapsody. That's a San Francisco painter and abstract, very famous painter.

Robbin Lee (00:29:54):

And actually they love this one so much that the following year we were on the poster for Bouquets to Art.

Valerie Lee (00:30:02):

Oh, that little flyer that I gave you, it's on there too.

Frances Kaplan (00:30:04):

Oh, wonderful.

Robbin Lee (00:30:06):

And this is another year we had with the fish, Val.

Valerie Lee (00:30:22):

If you go to our Instagram and Facebook pages, you'll see, this was years ago. This is when Hillary Clinton was running for president. And that's why I wanted the flag thinking a banner year where... And she lost, but it was this very small American flag. And then I recreated that with flowers.

Robbin Lee ([00:30:44](#)):

You could see how large this painting was. It was like an entire wall.

Valerie Lee ([00:30:58](#)):

But again, you can do whatever you wish, but we tend to, when you see ours, we throw ourselves into it. They're usually very large. We have two or three people going to help us set up.

Robbin Lee ([00:31:11](#)):

And then this is actually Valerie volunteers her time during Bouquets to Art week and goes to our arrangement and talks to all the different people.

Valerie Lee ([00:31:19](#)):

I love doing that.

Robbin Lee ([00:31:27](#)):

What flowers were used?

Valerie Lee ([00:31:30](#)):

And the trick is, because you set it up on... We design it here Sunday and Monday. And then we set up in the museum on Monday. But it has to last that Monday through Sunday. So I'm back and forth adding things, what has melted and they only give you one hour in the morning, one hour in the afternoon to replenish, because they want it to be pristine and perfect. If it's not, they'll pull it. If it's dripping water, they'll pull it. They'll email you come get it in two hours. And it's all the way-

Robbin Lee ([00:32:00](#)):

Yes.

Valerie Lee ([00:32:02](#)):

It's usually an hour and 15 minutes. But being over there it's magical, just because there's so many people who love the art. It's different. They didn't do it for a couple years, because of COVID, so they just started. But we have posters of all these when you're in the shop, you'll see. And so many of our customers, they attend the show and come in and say, "Oh, I saw your work," and all that. But again, it's all volunteer. You donate your time, your resources, the flowers. And often these cost thousands of dollars, because we're using high end, long lasting, often tropical flowers. You would never use roses, tulips, any of those, because they won't last. It's two days, they melt down.

Robbin Lee ([00:32:45](#)):

Yeah. And the show goes on for eight days. So I mean you have to maintain your arrangement for that amount of time.

Valerie Lee ([00:32:52](#)):

So next year, if you'd like to go be in touch and we can get you some tickets.

Frances Kaplan (00:32:55):

I'd love to.

Valerie Lee (00:32:56):

Yeah, it's fantastic. And you can even Google Bouquets to Arts. They have people walk through the docents and it's all put on by the Ladies Auxiliary in San Francisco, and I think every year... I didn't hear how much they raised, but it's substantial. It's their biggest fundraiser. They have a big gala, everything.

Frances Kaplan (00:33:19):

It's such a great idea.

Valerie Lee (00:33:21):

And it started in Boston, so a lot of different cities do it now. Which one are you showing them?

Robbin Lee (00:33:26):

That was this year, the beach scene.

Valerie Lee (00:33:28):

Oh yeah, Manchester Beach in Boston.

Al Bersch (00:33:33):

It's beautiful.

Valerie Lee (00:33:38):

You know what's interesting, when you're designing it and we're going to the market thinking what we might do? You never really know until you're in there making it. And then even I'm adding, finishing touches at the museum and then we get fabric to... We always like to embellish the base. Some people just put it on the stand.

Frances Kaplan (00:33:55):

So that brings me to, both of you, what are your favorite flowers? [inaudible 00:34:04].

Robbin Lee (00:34:03):

I have numerous ones.

Valerie Lee (00:34:06):

I love the spring flowers. Peonies, fuchsias, sweet peas.

Robbin Lee (00:34:11):

Sweet peas, tulips, ranunculus.

Valerie Lee (00:34:15):

Tuberose from Hawaii. I love those. And those pin cushion proteas that come in orange and yellow. I love to use those for the show, because again, those will last for a week.

Robbin Lee (00:34:26):

I love plumeria, but we can only get it when we're in Hawaii.

Valerie Lee (00:34:30):

So a lot of our customers, they do like the flowers that we like, the upscale seasonal ones. And we do even have customers that say no carnations, no chrysanthemum, especially for these weddings, when they're sending me to Pinterest, they want the really beautiful, delicate flowers.

Frances Kaplan (00:34:49):

Is that part of what you see as different fads though, going in and out of like, chrysanthemum are popular and then they present them as unpopular. And now we hear that chrysanthemum are coming back in popularity.

Valerie Lee (00:35:00):

And there are people that call and want carnations. And they're primarily 55, 65 and up now. But everyone in say my kid's generation, which is 20, 30s, they want hydrangeas and roses and spray roses and lush lisianthus type flowers.

Frances Kaplan (00:35:22):

What are some of the busiest time periods for you?

Valerie Lee (00:35:26):

Oh, every holiday.

Robbin Lee (00:35:28):

Mother's Day, Valentine's Day.

Valerie Lee (00:35:30):

And we're open seven days a week, 365 days. We now close two days, but we're open those days, because people are picking up center pieces. They're entertaining and they're visiting their loved ones in the cemetery. So those are hugely busy days for us.

Robbin Lee (00:35:49):

Like Christmas day, most people would think everyone is home with their family, but their family is up in the cemetery. So surprisingly we are busy all day and people are-

Valerie Lee (00:36:00):

They're just buying bouquets.

Robbin Lee (00:36:01):

They're buying bouquets to place in the cemetery.

Valerie Lee (00:36:03):

So we'll have-

Robbin Lee (00:36:04):

As part of the family-

Valerie Lee (00:36:05):

Reduced hours. And we're thankful, because a lot of our staff here, they can work a couple hours or they don't celebrate Christmas or whatever the situation is. So everyone kind of chips in to help as much as they can. Which again, we're grateful. It's a hard business with a lot of hours and people really have to be dedicated.

Al Bersch (00:36:30):

I have a question, but-

Frances Kaplan (00:36:31):

Yes. Go ahead.

Al Bersch (00:36:33):

It just came to mind, but when you were talking about being 9 and 10 and going to the market. Were there other kids your age then, that you would hang out with and did any of them end up getting into the business and working at the flower market?

Valerie Lee (00:36:48):

Yeah. Good question. We didn't follow up and we weren't friends with them and we would play it at the market. You'd kind of go around with your cart, get your things. And so we didn't really know any of the children.

Frances Kaplan (00:37:04):

Did you end up having friendships, or your mother, with any of the growers, or the people, other florist? Or you said it was sort of a community, but was your community more with the customers or more with the other [growers]?

Valerie Lee (00:37:18):

Well, I think with the Crab Feeds, we got to know them and at year meetings, but it's pretty much picking up there and then going about your business. We would never go have a meal at the cafe with another grower, because they're too busy. I think people there, as you see them running around like squirrels-

Robbin Lee (00:37:39):

Yeah, it's busy.

Valerie Lee (00:37:40):

And some of them get there at 2:00 in the morning, they set up and then they go take a nap in their car and then they open to the public after. We think we're busy, but we can close the door and lock it at 3:00, 4:00 or 5:00. They go back then they're checking in the fields. They have people cutting, wrapping, hydrating for the next day.

Frances Kaplan (00:38:02):

That brings me to the decision, which I think was, I'm not sure when. Was it the '90s? For the flower market to open to the public on certain days. And that I'm sure had an impact on florists such as yourselves. Can we talk about that a little bit. Do you know where the decision came from?

Robbin Lee (00:38:19):

The flower market itself.

Valerie Lee (00:38:21):

Well, and quite frankly, those growers have a lot of inventory there, so they're not going to sell everything and they need to move, it's perishable. So I can see on their end, get people in to purchase things for sure. But as a retailer, we'd much rather have them come here, of course.

Robbin Lee (00:38:43):

Yeah, because it didn't used to be open to the public.

Frances Kaplan (00:38:45):

And are there other times... other time periods, of course COVID is one strong example of, how did you guys switch during COVID to be able to continue the business?

Valerie Lee (00:39:09):

Yeah, it was a huge challenge. And we're considered an essential business, because we're providing flowers for memorial parks and those kept going. It's been a huge challenge. We had reduced staff. A lot of our staff caught COVID and they couldn't come back, because other people in their family caught it and they weren't feeling well. And so we've had to just take everything we knew and pivot. We still have everyone just wear a mask and if gloves, if they need to be. Thankfully we never caught COVID, but everyone is been vaccinated and taking precautions. And when they did have it, we would have them stay away for the required 5 or 10 days, whatever, isolate at home. So we've very strongly followed all the guidelines, but it's been a huge, huge challenge. And we've reduced our hours, therefore, because of that.

Robbin Lee (00:40:06):

And we redesigned the shop, because it used to be that the whole front of this store used to be covered with fresh flowers outside, and so-

Valerie Lee (00:40:16):

Onto the sidewalk.

Robbin Lee (00:40:17):

And every day we'd bring them out front, the stands... We'd have three stands of fresh flowers out front. So as soon as COVID hit, we moved the stands inside. We have everything displayed inside the store. We now keep the door locked. Most of the time, we only allow one or two people in at a time, so we can control the flow of people. And then some holidays we're going to have lines out front, because they'll just exchange as we go. But we kind of make sure that we have a salesperson to work with the customer, so they're not wandering.

Valerie Lee (00:40:53):

So with all the guidelines, we've just had to pivot almost each week, depending on the staff flow, the flowers and everything, but it's worked. And then that's the beauty of it. Everyone has had to pivot and adapt and we're just so grateful that we're able to stay open.

Frances Kaplan (00:41:10):

I know the flower market worked hard to get [essential business status]. The growers were considered essential business. The flower market had to work hard to get all the auxiliary, the truck drivers, and all of that [considered essential business]. And I believe they opened up a couple of weeks before Mother's Day, which must have been a big relief.

Robbin Lee (00:41:27):

So the time that they were closed, we were able to reach out to some of our growers. And that's when they started delivering to us more so, once or twice a week and we were able to still get our flowers.

Frances Kaplan (00:41:41):

And what about with customers? Did you find that during this time period, people were actually buying more flowers? Not having events, but more personal?

Valerie Lee (00:41:49):

Yes. Well, it was both sure. The events were reduced. The weddings were reduced, instead of doing a wedding for 150, they'd have small, we call micro weddings in their backyards with just 10 people. And so that worked. We had to pivot to that. And then since there weren't corporate events, people at home would order and they could do curbside pickup, which was a new item. We would run it out to them, or they could just come in. And then thankfully we had delivery still to the 75 cities. We have our own drivers and then we have a delivery service who picks up daily. So in that sense we are okay, but every week was different. It's like, "Okay, no one wants to see us. And then just call the customer. It's at their doorstep. Ring, the bell, don't talk to..." All those sorts of things.

Robbin Lee (00:42:41):

Like food delivery, you just place it there, ring the doorbell, do a follow up call. "We just delivered flowers to your home."

Valerie Lee (00:42:48):

But it worked and with flowers, everyone was still so happy to get them. They needed the lift and the boost, and so that's what we did. And we also incorporated another just program of ours. We thought every couple days, let's just make 10 mini bouquets and send them to customers. And just say, "Thinking of you, your friends at J. Miller Flowers." We did that people-

Robbin Lee (00:43:08):

We did that in the very beginning.

Valerie Lee (00:43:09):

In Walnut Creek, where I live. All my neighbors, all these customers, they would call back, send us notes. But again, that's just a little community outreach, but it came back to us tenfold and we just wanted to do something nice. Those sorts of things. It was just heartwarming. And I know. And relatively easy for us, because we'd make them, we'd wrap them and give him to the driver with his list. And when he was going in that direction-

Robbin Lee (00:43:36):

Yeah, in that direction, then we put through a good one.

Valerie Lee (00:43:39):

Or people we knew from Kaiser Hospital, just delivered 10 to them, let them give it to their staff.

Frances Kaplan (00:43:46):

Do you feel that this time, this last couple of years though, or maybe it's actually been a longer trajectory that your neighborhood florist is more at risk? How do you see the future of-

Valerie Lee (00:44:05):

At risk of closing or at risk of-

Frances Kaplan (00:44:06):

Just at risk of [becoming obsolete] with supermarkets, etc...

Valerie Lee (00:44:12):

What's interesting, at one time there are about five shops in our area-

Robbin Lee (00:44:18):

Along Piedmont Avenue.

Valerie Lee (00:44:19):

And two were larger than ours. They've all closed. No one in their family wanted to take over, or whatever the situation was and the others were small bucket shops. I think that what we have to our advantage is people know us and we're established, and thankfully we have a very solid business. So if your question is, do you envision us closing? I mean-

Frances Kaplan (00:44:46):

Oh, sorry. I didn't articulate that very well. I know that the number of florists, yes, have closed over the years. So in some ways my question was what do you attribute your success and strength to?

Valerie Lee (00:44:59):

Oh, okay. And I think it's the community outreach and providing excellent service.

Robbin Lee (00:45:06):

The reputation, established reputation.

Valerie Lee (00:45:09):

And really caring. Another key component is every year we have say three to five high school kids that we hire, either weekends after school, whenever they can work. We'll take them. If it's two hours, three hours and that's been excellent, because then we hear what events are happening in our high school. Their parents come in, their friends come in. The parents thank us for teaching their kid how to sweep.

Valerie Lee (00:45:34):

No one even knows how to sweep, which sounds silly, but it's so true. So I think even that is an added bonus. And every time they come in, we give them an alstroemeria, a sunflower. So they can just enjoy the flower. I mean, they don't even know what a carnation is when they come in, but we always say, "Gosh, you've done a great job. Go pick whatever color carnation you wish." And it's so simple, but a flower really speaks a lot of emotions.

Robbin Lee (00:46:16):

Well, that's what my mom always used to say is, the flower industry covers your whole lifeline, because you give flowers when someone has a baby, you give it for every birthday, anniversary and it goes all the way to events, weddings, and then all the way to funerals. So it's really a life long gift.

Valerie Lee (00:46:37):

It's their entire life. So if you operate it correctly, you could have a family as your customer for their entire life span and the different generations. And that's happened to us too, because we're in our mid 60s, but we're doing our friends' weddings, their baby parties. And they want us to do them exclusively, which is so-

Robbin Lee (00:46:59):

No, their friend kids' weddings.

Valerie Lee (00:47:02):

Yeah, right. Which we're so honored to do, because again, I think they can go anywhere. They don't need to J. Miller.

Robbin Lee (00:47:11):

And say, you did my wedding 30 years ago. And it's like-

Valerie Lee (00:47:16):

So I was just at this event, the Oakland Fukuoka with mayor Libby Schaaf, and she was speaking, and then I said a couple things. And then she came up to me after, because her kids used to go to the preschool right near the cemetery. And she said, "Valerie, you did the flowers for my wedding." I mean, how many years ago, which I didn't even remember. I said, "Oh, God, that's so nice."

Al Bersch (00:47:47):

Do you have customers that your mom [worked with]?

Valerie Lee (00:47:48):

Yes.

Robbin Lee (00:47:49):

Yeah, definitely. We have customers who even come back that they've moved away, but their loved ones are buried in the cemetery. So when they do come back in the area, they want to buy flowers to take them up. And they said, "I've been coming here for 40 years or 30 years." And I point to the picture... We have a picture of my mother on the wall downstairs. And so I point to the picture, I said, "Do you remember my mom?" And they're like, "Oh, yeah. We remember how she was always so nice and friendly."

Valerie Lee (00:48:19):

We actually have a guest book. We've had people writing or we're talking to them and they say, "Oh, you look like your mother." And I think, "Really?"

Frances Kaplan (00:48:25):

Speaking of your mother, she was in some ways a ground-breaker, owning a store solely on her own and doing it. Do you see female growers now? How much more diverse is the [industry]? It was always ethnically diverse with the Japanese growers, Italian growers, and Chinese American growers. But what about as far as businesses being owned by, or the representation in the flower market for women?

Valerie Lee (00:48:58):

Yes. I see that very much, because I'm on Instagram with a lot of different growers and women owned businesses and there's quite a lot.

Robbin Lee (00:49:08):

Yes.

Frances Kaplan (00:49:17):

George Koch said that in the beginning, he also did the city college class and he said he was like 19 or something. And he said it was lots of housewives. And he used that [term to mean] people who were doing it for interest, not because of a profession.

Valerie Lee (00:49:33):

Yeah, a little hobby.

Frances Kaplan (00:49:35):

How do you keep the inspiration for all of the different design work and what's happening? And do you yourselves have to keep looking out to what other people are looking at? Like you said, Pinterest or different flowers that now are in maybe. What keeps it fresh for you?

Robbin Lee (00:50:08):

I think just every day, going to the flower market and see what's available and see what's around. You kind of get inspired by what's on the market. And that's why it's always changing, always fun to create. Val loves to be creative. In fact, she has a monthly account she's going to be doing today, that she gets one every month. And it's just whatever flowers come in and whatever inspires her and just creates something. So that's, what keeps us interesting is, it's always different too. It's a very creative process and it's never the same. Everything is different. The customers are different. What you're making is different. So it's getting both sides of it.

Valerie Lee (00:50:53):

So we have corporate clients, they want a weekly arrangement and same thing. And a lot of people send their senior parents, a monthly arrangement just to keep their spirits up in a senior home. And so we'll know to use long lasting small teacup size arrangements there, versus a one sided in a corporate event that are long lasting. So it is, it's always different and varied, and you're working with nature and beauty. It's not as if we're selling old tires or something.

Robbin Lee (00:51:26):

And you're making people happy.

Valerie Lee (00:51:29):

That's the key. Everybody comes here, leaving here happy, either with flowers they know they're sending. It's a really joyful business, but it's a hard business. Don't get us wrong, but the end result, the product, what people end up with brings joy to them.

Valerie Lee (00:52:03):

But even as I was showing you everything in the shop and I give these tours often to people, because they think it's the front of the shop. But when they see the roses, then they see the ice box and just the alley, the pumpkins and everything that came in today, their eyes like saucers, like same thing. How do you deal and organize all this?

Frances Kaplan (00:52:22):

Well, I will never ever see an arrangement of flowers without now literally thinking of all the work that goes into what you do. You don't think about it before... going to the flower market...

Valerie Lee (00:52:49):

And every time I'm there, I always think, good God, what are they doing with all these flowers? What are they going to do with them? That's why as they invite the public in. But again, they're only buying one or two, whereas we go in, we'll buy 20 buckets of something. But sure, I can see them wanting to help us move anything out of here.

Frances Kaplan (00:53:12):

Right. Because again, you're working with something that even with refrigeration-

Valerie Lee (00:53:15):

Is perishable.

Robbin Lee (00:53:20):

I'd love to add one more point is, what I love about also this business is it's a true family business. Not only are Val and I there, but we have a designer who's been there 37 years and she was a family-

Valerie Lee (00:53:34):

Nope. 41.

Robbin Lee (00:53:37):

Oh, okay. So she-

Valerie Lee (00:53:38):

We'll show you pictures. She-

Robbin Lee (00:53:39):

She was from a family of eight children. I think we've hired five of her siblings.

Valerie Lee (00:53:44):

And our parents were great friends and worked in the symphony together.

Robbin Lee (00:53:48):

And now we've hired two of her nieces. What else?

Valerie Lee (00:53:54):

Well, my neighbor in San Francisco, my kids work here.

Robbin Lee (00:53:57):

The two [inaudible 00:53:58] designers that I have downstairs, their sisters, a lot of the high school kids, we've had their brother come in. So it's really nice that we have. Call them a family.

Valerie Lee (00:54:10):

You'll see pictures when you pull up on our Instagram, because occasionally I'll do the family shots.

Robbin Lee (00:54:17):

Yeah. We have a couple of those that look great.

Valerie Lee (00:54:17):

And people love those, but also it's the family. And then the grandmother will call or the aunt. "Thank you for hiring them and giving them this opportunity," because with COVID, we still had kids come in and all the pizza, ice cream places were closed. There was nowhere for a kid to go get a job, so we helped them out. And it's a great learning experience, how to sweep.

Robbin Lee (00:54:44):

Yeah.

Valerie Lee (00:54:44):

It sounds silly... How to wash the windows. They've never picked up Windex before.

Al Bersch (00:55:06):

Do you have an idea of who might take over the business when you're ready to retire?

Valerie Lee (00:55:12):

Oh, succession. No, we don't have anyone lined up. That's a great question though. But even though it's a needed, necessary discussion, because we have a lot of friends our age that are retiring, thinking and all this, and we all don't live forever and ever, but we all also like to say, "Knock on wood, as long as everything is going well." We have staff, we have clients who want our flowers. We're just going to keep charging on.

Valerie Lee (00:56:06):

Well, and that's the thing. All these articles you read about, people that are retiring, they retire, they die the next month. That type of, because I don't know if it's their body clock, they're used to it, then they become sedentary. But they said, you really need to wake up and have a passion, or a want, or someone who needs and wants to see you, just to wake up and it's like, is not a great feeling.

Valerie Lee (00:56:35):

But I think so much of it really is the staff. They're so nice. They bring in food, we share. We give them tickets to the Oakland Ballet. They can take their kids. They've never been to the ballet before. You know that type of thing? We care. I think that's what shows on both sides.

Valerie Lee (00:56:59):

And we always give them time. They want to go on vacation. They have a kid event... Always go do that. Our work we know will get done. And they're cognizant of that.

Robbin Lee (00:57:42):

Well, my mom used to say also, "The best people to hire are people who've worked in a restaurant,"

Frances Kaplan (01:00:33):

Thank you so much.