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Oral history interview with Billie Ruth
Sudduth, 2007 July 26-27

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Billie Ruth Sudduth on 2007 July 26-27. The interview took place at Sudduth's home and studio, and was conducted by Mija Riedel 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.

Billie Ruth Sudduth has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel, interviewing Billie Ruth Sudduth at the artist's home and studio in Bakersville, North Carolina, on July 26, 2007, for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art.

So, we thought we'd start at the beginning. You were born in Sewanee, Tennessee, 1945. What was the date?

BILLIE RUTH SUDDUTH: September 13.

MS. RIEDEL: And your parents?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, this, you know, we'll start from the get-go, a very interesting story. My whole life has been very interesting. I was the youngest of five children. And when I was one and a half years old, my natural mother died. And my father had five children and a very old mother who just couldn't take care of these five children, so she urged him to let the three younger ones be adopted.

And we were—although my ancestral family was very instrumental in starting the Episcopal Church in Sewanee, Tennessee—it's sort of the Episcopal center of the South—my mother was Catholic. And so we were born into a Catholic family, so to speak. And the priest in the area refused to let a non-Catholic family get these three young children. And he also wanted us to stay together. And you can imagine right after the war, people just didn't have the means to do that.

So he finally relented, and my next oldest brother was adopted by a family in middle Alabama; my sister was adopted by a family in Tennessee; and I was adopted by a family in Birmingham. And my being the youngest, I don't remember anything about my natural family. I grew up knowing that I was adopted, but didn't know much more than that.

MS. RIEDEL: That was unusual for the time, as a child, to be aware of that, no?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, but my parents, especially my father—my adopted father—I think they really wanted me to feel that I was picked, you know, that I was special. And my father was the oldest boy of six and my mother the youngest of nine, and so I had an extremely large family—aunts and uncles and cousins and people that probably bent over backwards to make me feel welcome into this family, although that was the only family I have any conscious awareness of.

And I was sort of the pet of the family, because as a little girl, I could charm the socks off a billy goat. My mother kept my hair in little blonde curls, and she doted on me, and really precious little feminine dresses. And where we started parting ways was when she discovered I didn't like to wear clothes. When I was about four, she found me in the backyard playing in the sprinkler buck naked. And that has sort of—I mean, I wear clothes now because it's expected, but minimal. I have never been into clothes. And yet, she would make them and crochet and knit and that's fine—and then I guess when I became a teenager, like all teenagers, I became clothes conscious. But as a young child, no.

And I had—I think—a very supportive adopted family. The older I got, the more I clashed with my adopted mother, because I started growing up. And her wish all her life was to be a mother and to be the mother of this girl. And you know, when I had friends or boyfriends or activities that took me out of the home, then I think that really distressed her, and I think she secretly had a fear that my original family would come and take me.

MS. RIEDEL: Did she have other children?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, I was it.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were it?

MS. SUDDUTH: I was it. And when I was 13, my dad—because I was already sometimes at odds with my mother—would drive me to piano lessons every month, three times a week. And he told me that my next oldest sister had contacted him and that she wanted to see me. And because my relationship with my adopted mother was not real good and I had just hit puberty, I decided no, that that would upset too much of the apple cart. And unbeknownst to me, for several years, he would have lunch with her from time to time. She was doing an internship at the medical center in Birmingham, and got to know her and learned of all my other siblings. And yet, he respected my wish to let it be.

And right before that, I think, they actually drove me to Sewanee so I could see where I was born and the house where I was when they got me. And I don't know what I was expecting, but it looked a little bit—because it was abandoned and overgrown by then—but it looked a little bit like the house from *Psycho* [1960]. I mean, you know, two story, a little coming apart; I mean, it was a little scary. And that might have had something to do with my wish not to meet this other family.

And so my rocky relationship with my mother continued until her death in 1994. But I had the balance of my father and then all of these other relatives that would listen to me and just try to explain my mother's behavior to me so that I would realize it wasn't me, and so a lot of nurturing on one side and a lot of complications on the other.

MS. RIEDEL: What were their names, Billie Ruth?

MS. SUDDUTH: Stewart, S-T-E-W-A-R-T.

MS. RIEDEL: And the first names?

MS. SUDDUTH: James Gilbert, and my mother was Hazel Winifred Viola Elliott Stewart. And they nicknamed her Billie because she, as a young child, was on a farm and was scared of the goats. And her next oldest sister was named Ruth. So the old maid aunt in this family is the one that picked Billie Ruth after the two younger sisters. And my original name was almost as bad, so I've since learned what that was; it was Dixie. So I don't think I would have wanted to go through life being called Dixie. I was named after Bing Crosby's wife, Dixie.

I'm very fortunate that I know a lot more than most adopted children do, without ever looking for it. I was sort of secure in my life in Birmingham, and I don't think I wanted anything to upset the apple cart at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: How did your sister find your father?

MS. SUDDUTH: I don't think they ever lost track of me. I don't think so. Well, she knew a relative of the natural family in Birmingham and had him do a little checking too, I think. But it was like, you know, they were watching me my whole life growing up. And I was Junior Miss Homewood—that was the area of Birmingham—in 1958. I think I was 13. And they came; she was there, saw me crowned. I didn't know it, but she saw that.

And backing up a little bit, I had a memory—and it's only been probably within the last couple years during some of these interviews that I recall as a young child having a metal loom and making hot pads, weaving hot pads, and loving to play with the designs in them and do more than just—you know the looms I'm talking about where you string the yarn from side to side and then you go the other way and you tie it off. And I was fascinated by that and would create beautiful patterns in them. And of course, all my aunts and uncles and relatives, you know, sort of doted on me, so they would buy them for a dime or 15 cents. And then, I would just buy more yarn.

But my adopted family—all the women were very, very creative. And that's a little bit typical of Southern women anyway, especially in the '40s and '50s. They made their own clothes. My grandmother quilted and tatted and rugged hook, and my mother knitted and crocheted, and aunts knitted. And I mean, I had beautiful sweaters and things that I was thrilled when I got to buy a store-bought sweater and cut it up the middle and put the grosgrain ribbon down it, so I would be stylish—what the other kids were wearing. And I slept under quilts my grandmother made. So I was exposed—none of them did baskets or weaving—but I was exposed to these women doing work with their hands.

And my grandmother said once—gosh, I was maybe 10 years old—if you learn to do something with your hands, you'll never go mad. That was her expression. And I adored this grandmother. It was my mother's mother.

MS. RIEDEL: What was her name, do you remember?

MS. SUDDUTH: Ada Bell Donaldson Elliott, very Scotch and Irish. And Stewart, I mean, how much more Scottish can you get than that? And they were just typical middle class; my father was from a very poor beginning. And he went to college and really, I mean, from the day they got me I think, you're going to college. I mean, I just always grew up knowing how much he valued education. And he planned for me to go to college.

And when I got to high school, I sort of was a social creature. I loved the boys; I dated the tackle on the football team. Back then even, my high school had sororities. And it was more important for me to be accepted and popular than to make good grades; so I was a mediocre student, but good enough to get into college.

MS. RIEDEL: How did your parents handle that?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well—and I was a cheerleader—and my mother hated it, because it took me away from home. She never ever once came to see me cheer. When there would be dances or proms, she would get very sick, and I would have to go across the street to a neighbor to get her to help fix my hair. And yet my father was always encouraging. And I think in retrospect that my mother was a very insecure woman and probably had some mental illness at various points in her life and I think died very unhappy.

But my way of dealing with her as I grew older was just avoid it, which was probably not the kindest thing to do. But I just chose not to go back to Birmingham. And I really cut myself off from a lot of the other relatives too that I liked. But I used the excuse of young children, busy lives, career, and so forth.

Let's see. And she wanted more than anything for me to learn to play the piano. And my father did too; he was very musically inclined. And I'm sure that was my one great disappointment to him is that I had no musical talent. I mean, they gave me piano lessons for seven years. And it was all mechanical on my part; I can read music, but I just can't really play the piano for enjoyment.

And the assistant director of the Metropolitan Opera collects my work; and he saw me at a show one time and I was telling him about my lack of ability to play the piano; and I said, I guess I don't have any rhythm. And he looked at my baskets and he said, honey, you got rhythm. So see, I make music with the baskets; you see it but you don't hear it. So I'm sure that that had some impact on my creating some of the patterns I do.

And on that same trip to Sewanee when I was a young teenager—I was 12—we went through Cherokee, did all the touristy things in the mountains. And I fondly remember buying a small Cherokee basket. So I bought my first basket when I was 12 years old.

And I grew up in a home—we didn't have silver tea services and whatever—and I can remember they were very inexpensive baskets. But you always had a big Sunday dinner in the South—but the bread being served in baskets with a napkin over it and a basket of fruit on the dining room table, and my mother's knitting basket. And so, I grew up with baskets everywhere. And she even put them on the wall, and these were very cheap, probably, imports. But baskets were all over my house as a young child. And I always liked them.

And then, she had things on the walls that I didn't like. She did a lot of needlepoint, and there were—and cross-stitch—and there were sayings like, let me live in the house by the side of the road and be a friend to man. Or I don't remember—make new friends, but keep the old; one is silver, and the other gold. And it was just—you know—there were no real paintings or pictures; there were all of these sayings, almost like some of them were affirmations that she had needle-pointed and whatever.

And my grandmother gave me one to make when I was 11. And I finished it when I was 23. I mean, that's how I took to needle and thread. And I didn't like sewing; they had me take home ec in high school. And I just, hemming a dress was torture.

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing about the patterns spoke to you or the textile, the fabrics, nothing?

MS. SUDDUTH: I just hated it. I didn't like the sewing machine. I wanted to make things I wanted to make. And in high school, I remember I had to make a pair of raglan pajamas—raglan-sleeved pajamas. And pajamas aren't really easy to make. And they had snaps and stuff. And then, I made a pretty cute skirt. But I never could master putting a zipper in, I don't know. And until we moved up here though, 14 years ago, I always had a sewing machine. And I would make dust ruffles and curtains and things, and did things on a sewing machine quilting, little things to make. But I never did like sewing.

And I never really liked cooking. I was too busy. I played tennis as a teenager, and swam, and had a bicycle that I rode all over my side of the mountain, you know, before I learned to drive. And I was just sort of outdoors and not very domestic.

And then, let's see, I went off to college. And that was fabulous, being away from home, although my dad called me every morning. I was 100 miles away. But back then, they had something like a Watt's line. And he would call me every morning. And he called me Rupee-dupe, okay? "You up, Rupee-dupe?" Because I was in a dorm and you'd have to run halfway down the hall to get the phone. And I think he missed me terribly. I mean, he truly, truly did. In fact, he was trying to find a job in Montgomery so he could move to where I was in school.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was where?

MS. SUDDUTH: Nineteen sixty-three.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was in Huntington?

MS. SUDDUTH: Huntingdon, Huntingdon College. It's a small, Methodist, liberal arts college. And my first year there, my grandmother died. And my second year there, my dad died. And they were two very, very important people to me. And I just knew my life would be very difficult if my grandmother and dad died and left me in the clutches of my mother. And sure enough, things really got difficult. She wanted me to quit college and move back to Birmingham.

MS. RIEDEL: And how far away were you?

MS. SUDDUTH: A hundred miles.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, Huntingdon was in what city?

MS. SUDDUTH: Montgomery, Alabama, south of Birmingham. And I loved college, had the same roommate for almost all four years. And started out in college like I ended in high school—mediocre—but then when my father died and my mother threatening to make me come home that she wouldn't pay for it, for some reason, the dean of students, or the dean of men or students, took a special interest in me. And I think I'd always blown the lids off of standardized tests, and especially math, and yet I struggled with math in high school because I didn't like it. But he said, look, you know, if you could make good grades, we can get you all sorts of scholarships. And he said, you know, we have some funding. Let's see how you do the rest of the semester.

And then, by time my junior year started, my mother didn't have to pay a penny. She had no hold on bringing me home. And gosh, I had UDC—United Daughters of the Confederacy—Daughters of the American Revolution, had to trace my ancestry back to prove that I had somebody in the Civil War. And I think I came up with Jeb Stewart, but I don't know if that's true. And then, the United Conference of the Methodist Church, and then somebody that was a very good friend of my father, whom I will probably never know who it was, made up the difference, because no one wanted to see me have to give up my education. I mean, it was pretty well known in my little community and in the church how difficult my mother was.

So, you know, I stayed two more years. And by the time I graduated, I was on the dean's list.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were studying psychology?

MS. SUDDUTH: Psychology and sociology.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, how did you arrive at that?

MS. SUDDUTH: That was the first course in college I ever made the highest grade in the class on a test. I thought, hey. But I started out—my father wanted me to study business, because back then, a woman that can do bookkeeping and typing will always have employment. So he signed me up—I took accounting; and gosh, I don't know. Accounting was just painful. I mean, it was really hard. And as an elective, I think I took a sociology course.

And as an undergraduate, you know, you have to take Western Civ and a language. I took languages because I was avoiding math. But I had Latin in high school, four years of it by the time I get to Huntingdon. I was so ingrained with Latin that I had trouble with French, because I kept trying to come up with a neuter gender in French. And the teacher spoke only in French. And the ironic thing of that is my natural mother was French.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MS. SUDDUTH: But anyway, I then got into—and then it was a Methodist school, so I had to take religion and philosophy and Old and New Testament religion. And fortunately, growing up in a Methodist church, they were fairly progressive. And it was super to be sitting in a college class and the professor who was also a Methodist minister dispelling half of the miracles of the Bible, you know, by common sense like the Red Sea being the Reed Sea and all of that. And I remember it being very spooky one time in class, because we were studying Exodus. And up in the music department on the next floor up, they were playing Exodus in the class. And I thought, that's strange. And I was into every activity imaginable in college.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you using your hands in any particular way?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, in fact, I learned to crochet in college. And I crocheted ponchos and afghans and learned to play bridge. And that was sort of what you did in college.

MS. RIEDEL: So crocheting was more interesting to you than sewing?

MS. SUDDUTH: Oh yeah. And I kept crocheting for maybe a number of years, I don't know. And then, let's see, I was well liked in college; I loved college; I loved my professors. I was just real happy. It was a small school and a big fish in a little pond rather than a little fish in a big pond. And I was away from home, and I think I adapted quite well.

And I want to say right before Baccalaureate Sunday and graduation, I'm over in the student union and checked my mail. And my roommate was with me, and she said, I turned white as a ghost. And I'd gotten this letter in the mail. And it was from my next oldest sister saying that they had kept up with me all these years. And now that I'm graduated from college, you know, perhaps I would like to meet the rest of my family, that they had respected my wishes all those years and stayed out of my life. And if I said no, they would never bother me again.

But by that time, I was like, to hell with my mother; let's go. And a guy that graduated the year before me was in Great Lakes, Illinois at boot camp, and he was home on leave. And this is a really nice guy. And my college had an 11:00 curfew, even on weekends. And I got permission from the dean to be out, and asked if he would drive me. It was about 60 miles away where my brother was home from National Guard camp, my next oldest brother. And it was his anniversary. So we drive down there and barge in on his anniversary, his first anniversary, and meet him.

MS. RIEDEL: Did he know you were coming?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. But I sort of interfered, I think, a little bit with some of the things they had planned. But walked in and the first thing he said was, you were Catholic and our dad became an alcoholic. And I thought, oh cool. But we talked. And I learned a lot about him. And he was in Alabama in law school; not anymore, he had since married.

And then, I had Baccalaureate Sunday and I slept all through it because I'd been up all the night before meeting this brother. And then, the next day, my mother and my cousin who I was close to and my aunt came for graduation. And I told my cousin about this letter and where I'd been. And he said, well, I'll go with you to tell your mother. And she had a fit, like those bastards, you know, why won't they just leave her alone. And I was 21 years old. And I said, well, mother, I'm going to go visit them. If you want to come, great; if not, I'm going.

Well, so we drove to Savannah, Georgia and met the sister who had written the letter. And she had gotten, of all uncanny things, a Master's degree in social work from Tulane, was married, and had a little boy. And then, we drove to Knoxville and met my oldest brother who was editor of the Knoxville newspaper. He had graduated with a degree in journalism from UT [University of Tennessee, Knoxville]. And then, we went to Chattanooga and met with my sister, my oldest sister. And she had majored in accounting and was an accountant.

And so, in retrospect, all four of us—and I had just finished college and was heading to graduate school—all five of us had gotten college educations and did well, even though my oldest brother didn't do well with the old maid aunt that was raising him, so he wound up in an orphanage. So he probably had it the worst of all of us. But in spite of that, you know, he married a wonderful gal and he got his master's in journalism and editor of a paper and was on the Pulitzer Prize in journalism for photography, and well, well respected in his field, and da-dee-da-dee-da.

MS. RIEDEL: How did your mother handle all that?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, she liked the brother, but the sister that started the ball rolling, she never did have any use for. And then, I got a full scholarship to the University of Alabama [Tuscaloosa] for graduate school. There again, my mother didn't have to pay a penny.

And somehow or another, I found out that I was eligible for some VA money, because my dad—my adopted dad—had been injured in World War II. And it was only good as long as I was in school until I was 22. Well, I don't think I was 22 for another year. So anyway, I sort of got the stipend; and I also got a stipend—it was a mental health stipend—of \$250 a month living expenses, tuition, room and board paid for. And I got a job as a dorm counselor so I wouldn't have to spend my money on room and board. So that was just like some mad money.

Let's see, there was something I was going to go back to. High school, college—I'll think of it later.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it basket related?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, no, unfortunately, no. But the reason I went onto graduate school, because I didn't want to go home.

MS. RIEDEL: And the parallel—was there any thought about your doing a master's in social work because of your sister?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, well, I just thought it was sort of the blood is thicker than water kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: And you'd come to that decision completely independently.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right, and then further down the road, when I married, my husband ran everything in mental health. I had to either travel four counties away or do something different. And that's when I went back to school in psychology. And probably five years later, she did. So we both have master's in social work and school psychology.

But graduate school was great, even though I worked my butt off and did not do anything creative. I spent two years in the library writing theses. The one interesting thing—well, I'm leaving out an awful lot about my life. I was in Birmingham at the height of the Civil Rights Movement; and I was in Montgomery during the Selma to Montgomery march. And we were told not to leave campus; it was too dangerous. And I didn't really take up the Civil Rights cause, but I wanted to see all the movie stars that were in town. So my suite mates and I got in her convertible and went out to the city of St. Jude, because Rock Hudson and Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Sammie Davis, Jr., and all these people were going to be there.

And as we were approaching the campus of the city of St. Jude where they had the big rally, who was in the National Guard, but our dean of men, okay? So we got caught and had to go back to campus where we did not get to leave for six weeks. I guess that was the most trouble I was ever in, in college. And skate boarding on the third floor of the dorm.

MS. RIEDEL: Skate boarding?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, the skate boards had just come out. And I was always—in fact, I won the best athletic award my freshman year in college. I was much more—you know, tennis, and biking and skate boarding and whatever. And this was my senior year, and it sounded like a freight train down on the first floor. And the house mother, dorm counselor, whatever, caught me. Maybe that was my junior year. And you know, read me the riot act, so I behaved and skate boarded outside after that.

But they had to contact her as a reference for me to be a dorm counselor at the University of Alabama. And she gave me a terrible recommendation, said that she's mischievous; she rode skate boards in the dorm. She tends to socialize too much. And so the dean of women at Alabama called me in and told me about the recommendation. And she said, and those are exactly the reasons we'll hire you. [They laugh.]

So I did that, loved Alabama. I'd always wanted to go there. And my father, very wisely, wanted me to go to a small school first. I think he thought I'd never make it at a big university. But I settled in and, except for one B, made straight As in graduate school. And the B was from my husband-to-be.

MS. RIEDEL: Was your professor?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, I did an internship in his agency. [Laughs.] And me and another guy who did the exact same thing; and Jerry got an A and I got a B. I think he just couldn't—I don't know why.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll have to ask him later.

MS. SUDDUTH: And he's embarrassed for me to even tell that story. The faculty at Alabama, most of them had come from Syracuse, and they were very, very progressive. And this was in 1968.

MS. RIEDEL: Syracuse, New York?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, it was a fairly new school of social work, and they really wanted to get it accredited right off the bat. And so I think we probably worked harder than subsequent classes because we had to meet all these criteria. But I can remember—this was in 1968—having to research a paper on the pollution of water. I mean, that was 40 years ago.

And deep into the Civil Rights movement by then, and the first time I'd ever been in school with blacks. And one of the girls that was in my class, I just adored. And without even thinking, took her home with me to spend the weekend, and my mother about had a fit—more because she was afraid, you know, than not liking the person, because there was still a little bit of the attitude in that if you had black friends, they came after dark so they wouldn't be seen. And at Alabama, it was a very progressive school. It didn't belong in the state.

MS. RIEDEL: Everything was integrated—dorms, classes, yeah.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, even though George Wallace had tried to prevent it. And for my master's thesis—very uncanny—the computer drew out three names of lawyers, because we each had to interview different people regarding attitudes. And the computer drew George Wallace and his brother for me. This was out of every lawyer

in Alabama. And it was very nice; he was a very charismatic kind of guy.

But Alabama was just sort of typical South in terms of their political beliefs and with Doug and me both pursuing careers in mental health, and some of the attitudes back then were mental health people were Communist. I mean, it was just a lot of very narrow belief systems in Alabama at that time.

So the first opportunity we got, we headed out of there. And he was a Duke [University, Durham, NC] graduate, and North Carolina seemed a good place. And we moved.

MS. RIEDEL: And that would be what in the early -

MS. SUDDUTH: Nineteen seventy. I graduated, got out of graduate school in '69, and we moved in '70.

MS. RIEDEL: And you started working as a school psychologist?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, in Durham—and this was basically my first job out of graduate school—I was hired as the only social worker in the department of medicine at Duke Hospital. And they wanted me to help develop a social work program where they treat the whole body and not just the diseased organ. And I taught residents and interns the importance—well, part of my job was to help them consider the family and the treatment, and that it's not just the diseased kidney; but it's the family, the whole emotional aspect of their recovery. And that was a very fabulous job.

And I got pregnant while I was working at Duke. And my office was in the same building with all the interns. So I think I had the healthiest pregnancy imaginable, because if they saw me eating a hot dog, they would take it away, and they would not allow me to park anywhere near my office. I would park at least a mile—you know, walking and exercising. And there would be fruit at my desk. And I dare say, it was a very easy pregnancy and childbirth. Even though I didn't have my kid there; I didn't want all of them delivering him, so I went to a private group.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was his name? Your child?

MS. SUDDUTH: The oldest one is Mark Kendrick Sudduth. And then, like all mothers, I wasn't ready to go back to work after I had him. So I took a leave of absence, and then they issued me an ultimatum—you've got to come back or we've got to get somebody else. And I said, not ready yet. So I stayed home with him until he was almost a year old, and then was made an offer I couldn't refuse to be a psychiatric social worker at an inpatient hospital facility, working part-time.

MS. RIEDEL: Where was that?

MS. SUDDUTH: John Umstead Hospital in Butner, North Carolina. It's about 15 miles outside of Durham. And it was pretty good, because I had four days—like Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday—at home. And then, I worked Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. And what I discovered about working part-time is you do a fulltime job in half the time.

And then, my husband got an offer to move to New Bern, and that's on the coast of North Carolina, to run four mental health programs—I mean, four county mental health programs. And they were all small—not geographic—people counties, but not a lot of resources. So there was no way I could work in social work. And with my very strong undergraduate degree in psychology, I went back to East Carolina [University, Greenville, NC] and picked up the coursework I needed, got certified, and spent the rest of my career mainly as a school psychologist. And that was the perfect job to raise children, because I had the same hours in school as they did.

Had our second child in New Bern, William Christopher Sudduth. And it was sort of in New Bern that I started creating with my hands. The job was very demanding as a psychologist, because I mainly worked with either troubled children or children who were having difficulty learning or who were handicapped in some way. And so, as a relief, I continued bridge; I continued tennis. But then, I started making handmade Christmas ornaments, because they were relevant; you could do something with them—put them on a tree or something.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were making them out of?

MS. SUDDUTH: Felt, and then I started quilting them. And then, I'd put sequins—I made some out of clothes pins. I mean, I just loved doing that.

And then, I think one of the more traumatic things that happened to me—my younger son was three, so I had still young children—is that I developed some kind of rare blood disorder. And it took them—well, they actually did bone marrows and dug in, saying they thought it was maybe liver cancer or some kind of undiagnosed leukemia or something. So they did every imaginable test in the book. And as they couldn't find out what it was, I was getting weaker and weaker and weaker.

And finally, one of the doctors there had trained—he was a hematologist trained at the University of Virginia [Charlottesville]. And he either sent or took my blood work up there. And they finally diagnosed what it was, because I was becoming just more and more anemic by the hour. And it was a folic acid deficiency, which my body just did not utilize folic acid.

And so, they started—and they didn't want to transfuse me—and in retrospect, man, am I glad, because that was sort of at the beginning of AIDS, and them not testing blood yet that well. But I never was transfused even though I couldn't lift my head off the pillow, because they said it would mask symptoms and we'd never find out. Just hang on a day longer or something. And then it started out I had to get daily injections, and then it went to pills; and now it's just the pills and I'm basically fine.

MS. RIEDEL: How old were you when this happened?

MS. SUDDUTH: Thirty-two, and the reason that's significant—I mean, they really thought I was going to die. And I didn't; and obviously, I've thrived. And a lady my age had a son my son's age, and she developed—I think it was lupus—and she died. I mean, it was—you know—and for about a year, I had this sense that she died and I didn't. What's going on here? Why am I still around? You know, there is more to life than just surviving.

And my boss was a friend, and she said, Billie Ruth, do something for you. Just have fun over the summer, because I was—you know—the perfect mother—not perfect, but you know, scouts, and little theater, and basketball, soccer. My husband was extremely busy in his career. So I really had more of the responsibility for the kids, although he is a great father and he did coach their soccer. But I was always doing something with the kids and cooking and cleaning and all that and working. And I still tried to play a little tennis, but I couldn't. I did when I could, and bridge when I could.

But she said, take advantage of the summer and do something that is just Billie Ruth. And she knew I loved baskets, because I had sort of started really collecting by then. I got one on our honeymoon and then anytime we went anywhere, I would get a basket, like in Charleston or something.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were some of the first ones you were collecting?

MS. SUDDUTH: Still mainly Cherokee and then sweet grass, because they were in the area, and the Choctaw from Alabama. And then, in 1983, I took a four Monday-night mini-course on how to make an Appalachian egg baskets. And that was the only thing really going on during the summer except the kids swimming and stuff. But these were at night. And they were old enough to stay home by themselves, I think, because Doug was still—and then Doug got really involved in theater there. So we were a very busy family.

But I was there 15 minutes, and it was like an epiphany. The rhythm of it, the therapeutic nature of it, the creativity, I mean, I just could not get enough of it. And it was at a time in my life that I really needed a stress-buster. And man, you know, did it do that and then some.

MS. RIEDEL: So it just turned off one side of your brain and turned on another?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah. And I did the four Monday nights and that was all she knew how to teach. So then, I went to K-Mart and bought a lot of cheap imports and tore them up in what I thought would be how they were made in reverse, so I could learn some of these other techniques. And I started out very—I won't say compulsive—but very—keeping records of things, because I did a four-inch egg basket and then an eight-inch, and then a 10-inch, but realized I hadn't done a three-inch. So I kept track of which ones I did, so that I wouldn't duplicate it, that I would move onto something else. And I would say for the first, maybe, four or five months, everything I did were rib construction, which is a very Appalachian tradition.

And typical of most people, I guess, that start out just creating, wanting to show it off, that fall I took a few to school and was showing them in the teacher's lounge. Look what I did this summer. And the first thing that popped up, "How much would you charge to make me one like that?" And I was really pretty good at it, even early, early off.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were making egg baskets?

MS. SUDDUTH: Egg baskets mainly, and then I went to market-type baskets, and things with handles that weren't ribbed; they were plated.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you harvesting your own materials?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, no, I went through a phase where I would harvest honeysuckle and wisteria vine and grapevine, and then I learned to split oak, and then I learned to pound ash. But I would always come back to this European cut reed, because I could manipulate it so much easier. And the primary thing about my baskets, I

think, are the color. And it was very important for me to have something that not only would it take dye, but that I would feel okay dyeing—because you work so hard on the ash and oak that you're not going to want to stick it in a dye pot and dye it black, because the wood itself is too pretty, the grain in it.

MS. RIEDEL: And so you could—the teacher had made you aware of this material and shown you where you could get it and how to dye it, or had you figured that all out for yourself?

MS. SUDDUTH: I don't even remember how I found out where to get it. Oh, there was a bait-and-tackle shop in New Bern that had some reed. I don't know why. And then a craft store opened up not too long after that—a small one—that mainly was painting and Tole painting and all that kind of stuff. But she started carrying reed because enough people had learned to do these Appalachian baskets that they wanted supplies.

In that picture, up there, all those are primarily Appalachian-type baskets. There is potato baskets and egg baskets and butterfly-shaped baskets. I mean, I did every conceivable thing imaginable, ribbed-shaped.

MS. RIEDEL: And all based on old Appalachian designs.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, and fortunately, there were books that had pictures of baskets from the 18th century that I could look at. But really, there was only one book available back then, and it was written by John Rice Irwin, and it was *Baskets and Basket Makers of the Southern Appalachians* [Exton, PA: Schiffer Publishers, 1982]; there again, rib baskets. But rib baskets are really more difficult than most baskets.

And I even tried coiling. Remember when rag baskets became—I even tried that. Well, coiling was too much like sewing, as is—like sweet grass. I mean, you're sewing the palmetto leaf, and I just don't like sewing. I don't like lashing a rim at the top. But every basket except for the one I came up with the Penland Pottery [Penland, NC], no rim to lash. But everything else is lashed. And I've gotten now where I weave it so tight that it's hard to have a place left to get into lash; it's tedious.

And then I started doing plaiting, which is over-under. And I would do market baskets and square baskets and rectangular baskets. And then, I got into color. And I remember dyeing baskets with red dye and dyeing them yellow and then painting daisies on them, and strawberries, and just sort of finding this creativity in me that had never surfaced before.

MS. RIEDEL: Was the decoration at this point primarily surface embellishment that you put on afterwards?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah. And then I would get into weaving—oh, one of the most beautiful baskets I ever made was made out of wisteria and cherry branches. And I stripped the bark off the wisteria and it was a beautiful white. And I formed rims and an egg basket frame to it, and then wove it with reed. And then dyed it a pale peach; and it was just—I've got slides; it was a beautiful piece.

MS. RIEDEL: When was that?

MS. SUDDUTH: Oh, 1985. And I did one where I peeled the bark, and then I used the bark to weave the basket. And I called it *Inside-Out* [1985], because one weaver was inside the bark and the other was the outside. Still egg basket frame, so to speak. And then, the cherry branches, I just twined all the way up and then put cherry branches down in it. And it was just sort of a wall piece. And I did all that kind of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: This was all during the early '80s.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. And then Martha Wetherby who was a Shaker basket maker came to my house, and I hosted her for a workshop. So I pounded ash and used a mold, early Shaker types. And that was the first time I ever saw a cat head, even though it was very subtle, because you had to get the mold out of the basket. So you had the little feet, and the sides go straight up and down. And I wanted to learn to do that out of reed, so I finally did.

And then, the next sort of progression—oh, then we moved West. We moved to Las Vegas for three years. And my husband -

MS. RIEDEL: This was '85, '86?

MS. SUDDUTH: Eighty-six. My husband wanted to get inpatient psychiatric hospital experience. And he went out to get this hospital JCAH [Join Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals] accredited. And I knew enough of moving stresses that you don't stay home in a new town or you'll never learn to meet anybody. So I went to work for the Clark County School District as a school psychologist. And there were 70 of us, which was great, because in New Bern, I was the only one for a few years and then there was another one. And it was a real camaraderie in terms of support systems in my profession. And I took courses through Fresno Pacific University [Fresno, CA] and UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] and really kept furthering my career.

MS. RIEDEL: All this time you're doing both school psychology and basketry?

MS. SUDDUTH: And baskets, yeah. And so, I got really brave one day and juried for, I think it was called KNPR Craftworks [Market, Las Vegas Arts Festival]. But it was an outdoor craft show that the public radio station sponsored, real high class. And I got in and then the arts organizations there were having juried art competitions. And I was probably one of the few people that had ever entered a basket. And in the three years we were there, mine got in all three years. And then, the same thing happened a little bit like happened in New Bern. "How much would you charge to make me one?" And I was doing Appalachian type egg baskets with Southwestern colors. And they were just a great hit.

And then, I don't know if you've ever heard of Boulder City Arts Festival. It's a big arts festival right out of Vegas. And I did that a couple years and sold like crazy, all the while being a school psychologist. And one of the other psychologists I worked with sort of became my mentor. He was a papermaker and artist. And he wanted me to teach some basketry. So I just sort of advertised on the bulletin board at school and did it in my home. And gosh, I think while I was there probably in the three years, I probably taught 200 people. And the funny thing, that's when the Math in a Basket concept evolved, because the school district wanted to use it as a continuing education course. But I had to tie it into the curriculum.

MS. RIEDEL: How did the whole idea even come about, Math in a Basket?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, I was already figuring out in baskets simple things like, if I'm going to build something that is six inches high, and I'm going to do it with quarter inch and half inch elements; how many rows is it going to take to get there? So you're adding fractions. And then, I would have to figure out a circumference of a circle, or like if I were doing a square, each side. And then, teaching it, you know you want your corners at right angles to each other. And then, what is the difference between a square and a rectangle.

And the more I started brainstorming, writing a little prospectus for getting CEU [Continuing Education Unit] credits for teachers, the more things I came up with. And then, it really grew when I got back to North Carolina. I'll tell you about that later. But it flew; I mean, they loved it, the curriculum development people. And I went to their handbooks of what kids in grades, say, three, four, five should learn, and figured out that grades five, six, and seven would be better for this, because way back in New Bern, I had done it with Head Start children. And it was a disaster; they just didn't have the motor skills or the eye-hand coordination. And the only way I got through to them was bringing in my younger son who would talk their language and he really made that one work.

MS. RIEDEL: So he came in and translated for you, and they could actually build the baskets, based on what he said?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, these four and five—yeah, yeah. And then I taught classes in New Bern, the whole four years before we moved west. I had tons of students there and they loved it. And most of the time, I was still working as a school psychologist by day, and then teaching almost every night of the week.

MS. RIEDEL: And the students were how old?

MS. SUDDUTH: Oh, they were teachers, nurses, professionals.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so you were working in schools during the day, and teaching adults by night?

MS. SUDDUTH: And in Vegas, I had a CIA agent one time that the government paid to come do it, because he needed to learn to relax.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, I mean, I got a check from the U.S. government, you know? And he was a cool guy, but just tense, and whatever, he took to it. And while in Vegas, I was asked to donate a basket to an auction to raise money for the Children's Museum of Southern Nevada [Las Vegas]. And I did, and as a result—I didn't know this was going to happen—was invited to the gala, which was at Caesar's Palace at that time.

And probably the most black-tie affair I would ever be invited to, because they flew the entertainment in from New York. I don't remember who they were. And they gave—the table things were Liz Taylor's perfume when it first came out. And the dinner, I thought, hey man, it's going to be a special dinner. Well, it started out with nasturiums in the salad; and that was the first time I'd ever eaten flowers—they were good. I don't know; it was just, you know, an unbelievable event. And the artists that donated, of course, we sat in the back. But it was still fun to see how that part—Steve Wynn was there. I don't remember some of the people. You know, a lot of the Nevada gaming people.

And the funny thing, living in Las Vegas, the school system is run by Mormons. I guess it still is. But it's a very family-oriented, traditional values school system. And they firmly believe that, as my grandmother did—learn to do something with your hands and you'll never go mad, and an idle mind is the devil's workshop. And they had programs every weekend for children—hiking in Death Valley, going to the Grand Canyon, skiing in Brian Head, Utah, or up at Park City. I mean, just amazing what these children got to do. The education was average, but the other things that the school system provided were just phenomenal.

And we came back to North Carolina because we wanted our children to be educated in North Carolina for college—University of North Carolina and Duke, places that have a much better academic—

MS. RIEDEL: Got you. Now, where did the funding for Math in A Basket come from? Did that start in Nevada or did that start in North Carolina?

MS. SUDDUTH: It started in Nevada. And all I had print-wise was just like handouts. But I was paid. The school system paid me to do it. The teachers earn credits and they pay for all the materials. And we started constructing things that were mathematically built. And then, when I moved back to North Carolina, one of my mentors was an art historian at the university, and his wife was a learning disabilities teacher in the middle school.

MS. RIEDEL: What was his name, Billie Ruth?

MS. SUDDUTH: John Meyers. And Sally Meyers, his wife, was a learning disabilities teacher in the middle school. And she wanted me to teach—I mean, I right off the bat, hit Wilmington, and I started displaying baskets and doing craft shows. And it was obvious by that time that the baskets, there was something to them. And they bought a piece.

And somehow or another, we got to talking, and I told Sally about this Math in a Basket thing I'd done in Vegas. Well, she and I sat down almost for a whole weekend really brainstorming, polishing it up. And she had the North Carolina curriculum guide, and we added a lot to it. And it was still just in handout form, but we did it in her school with her students. That was the first time I'd done it with students. In Vegas, I'd done it with the teachers so they could go back with their students. [Telephone rings.]

MS. RIEDEL: Pause that.

[END MD 01 TR 01.]

MS. SUDDUTH: In Wilmington.

MS. RIEDEL: We're back. We're in Wilmington.

MS. SUDDUTH: Let me get some water.

MS. RIEDEL: Sally Meyers, the weekend.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, this was like in 1989. And so she wrote a grant, an Eisenhower Grant to get funding to pay me to like do a residency at her school—Math in a Basket, and they got funding for it. And it was amazing. It was hard work, but the children who were emotionally disturbed developed a much more positive self-concept. The students who were the gifted ones screwed up. The learning disabled students got it because it was a tactile thing, a way to learn math. The retarded students—now they call them mentally challenged—loved going to the gifted saying this is how you do it, because they responded to the repetitive nature of it, where the really bright students would zoom ahead and their minds were going faster than their hands, and they would invariably, some of them, make a mistake.

And I was there, I think, a week. And it was just a tremendous success. And I think I did it two or three other times at some other schools. And other school districts got wind of it. So somehow or another, I wound up in Winston-Salem with the head of their art program and teachers and somebody from Whiteville, the other part. Anyway, we all converged at a hotel and brainstormed it even more. And that's where it became a booklet in terms of the vocabulary and meeting their curriculum guide. And then, I did a residency in—[telephone rings].

[END MD 01 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: All right, Winston-Salem.

MS. SUDDUTH: I was invited to do a residency in Winston-Salem. But before that, I wanted to refine the program, so several teachers met with me. And it's sort of like we holed up in a hotel room for a long weekend and really put this thing together as the form it's in now. And they got all sorts of grants to teach it, and I've done it in several places all over North Carolina.

And I think the epitome of Math in a Basket—several years ago, a lady from Long Beach, California bought the handbook from me—\$12.00, okay? Well, the next thing I know, I get a phone call, and they're going to be in Washington, D.C., meeting with the U.S. Department of Education to discuss a \$750,000 grant to implement Math in a Basket in their school system. And would I be a consultant with them and do they have my permission to use it? And I said, well, absolutely. The whole point is to help children learn math. If you're doing it for profit, no; but something like this, absolutely.

And so, we met face to face in D.C., and talked a little bit more about what they would be doing with it. And they actually wanted me to come to Long Beach for two or three times to teach some people, the weavers to weave the basket, and somebody else, the math that we were dealing with and da, dee, da, dee, da. And I couldn't go, so one of the gals that had been my student assistant at Penland a couple of times and helped me put this together, she is an ex-Catholic nun. But she is the one that had taken it back to her home school district and really blossomed with it. So I sent Theresa—Theresa Wuebbles.

MS. RIEDEL: Wugles?

MS. SUDDUTH: Wuebbles—W-U-E-B-B-L-E-S. And she is as her name sounds. [Riedel laughs.] She is a great gal. But she did a phenomenal job, and she's been once a year for the last three years. And then, another gal that did an apprenticeship with—she did one with me—I sent one year. So it's gone from east to west, and they have actually documented results where math scores improve something like 25 percent. I mean they had the way just to really test the hypothesis that I intuitively felt all along.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you explain the program in brief?

MS. SUDDUTH: Math in a Basket?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, how long it lasts for, what exactly the students do?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, they actually made it last for three years, because they track the students year after year after year. And basically, you're teaching vocabulary that is math vocabulary—like right angles, perpendicular, parallel, on and on—but you're also teaching art terminology, which is sometimes related to math, like symmetry and form and things like that. But what really got mixed in the equation was the basket that I developed to have them teach as the "math basket" was Fibonacci personified.

Now, I'll have to really back up to tell you about Fibonacci, but it led to them doing research into Ancient Greece and why the golden ratio was even significant way back then. And others that had used it—artists, architects, engineers—bringing in things that had the golden ratio in it, so a real exposure to nature.

MS. RIEDEL: How did the sequence of your discovery of Fibonacci and the Math in a Basket work?

MS. SUDDUTH: Almost about the same time, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, because you were doing baskets and there were certain ones that just really resonated with you and with everyone in general.

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, by that time –

MS. RIEDEL: This was early '80s?

MS. SUDDUTH: Later '80s. It was mid- to late '80s. I was doing twill work, meaning going over and under more than one element at a time. I got bored with over, under, over, under, over, under. Got tired of painting daises—decided I really wasn't a painter, obviously, since now all I do is polka dots. But I just started playing with different groups of numbers.

Like a very standard basket weave pattern is over two, under two, which is a herring bone. And then, I had a sofa when we were first married that was a houndstooth twill, so I figured out a way to do that kind of basket, where it looked like the little houndstooth in black and white. And then, I started playing with a Japanese twill, which is over two, under one. And then a variation of that is over three, under two. And then I thought, that's a little too big. So let's see—that Japanese—I mean, that three-two twill is, oh yeah, it's in that *Colonial Homes* magazine.

And then, I just happened upon one, one, two, three twill. And the first one I did was like, it was just a single spiral all the way up, kept repeating, one, one, two, three. And I was at a craft show someplace, and someone said, well, that's the first four numbers in the Fibonacci sequence. And I said, the what? I mean, I vaguely remember something like that in high school math, and then, no.

So I started researching Fibonacci. And this was before the computer was readily available. And how I

researched it was talking to university math teachers and just learning everything I could about Fibonacci. And most anything available was in a college math book. And I even bought a handbook of mathematics, which the only thing I understood in it was the index. [Riedel laughs.] I mean, it was so complicated. But it had all these sequences of numbers in it.

And I really got into Fibonacci, the beauty of the weave, the natural proportions, just how it just sort of came together. So then, I started playing with creating designs with it, just not the single spiral that went up.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you just briefly describe the pattern, too, for anybody who is not familiar with it?

MS. SUDDUTH: Okay, well, I'll tell you more. Fibonacci was a mathematician in the 13th century who figured out throughout all of nature, spirals have the same ratios to each other. And the reason that is significant at all is that the distance between the numbers in his ratio approximates the golden mean, the golden ratio, this divine proportion. And the reason that's significant in the art world is that the Greeks held it to the highest aesthetics since ancient times.

And the proportion is 1 to 1.618. And the numbers in the sequence that he discovered occurred—like in a chamber nautilus as it spirals out from the center or a pine cone as it spirals or a sunflower—now they think even like DNA; it's just the very essence of our makeup. But the numbers are 1, 1—and if you remember that you got it made because each new number is the sum of the two preceding numbers. So one plus one is two; two plus one is three; three plus two is five; five plus three is eight. And if you divided the five into the eight or the next number, the eight into the 13, you would come up with the golden ratio.

And I started playing with doing the numbers—not only horizontally, but trying it vertically as well. And the first one I did was called a Fibonacci Three, because I made the pattern zig and zag and zig three times. And then, I did Fibonacci Five. And that's the most perfect of the Fibonacci pieces, because the weave is one, one, two, three, and then I spiral it five times to the right, and then eight to the left, 13 right, 21 left, 34—these are the rows. So as you look at it, theoretically or mathematically, the proportions between one spiral to the other is this golden mean or the golden ratio.

And then, I advanced it even more where I would do Fibonacci Eight where I would zig-zag it eight times. And then I learned over the years that the Fibonacci Five are logarithmic spirals because they get bigger as I do them, where the eight, the 21, are Archimedes spirals because they're identical to each other. But in the Fibonacci Five, with the logarithmic spirals, then fractals occur in that. And it's just all of these mathematical things that were happening in my baskets. And so, I picked the proportions of the Fibonacci sequence—the three by five, or the five by eight, or something—for the students, so that they would wind up—even though it was a rectangular basket—very pleasing proportions. And then visually, they would create the vertical pattern where it would be the Fibonacci sequence. And any way they wanted to do it where there'd be threes and twos and ones—no fours, no sixes, but just do it so everything about it was Fibonacci—the height, the width, the depth, the pattern. So that was a whole new word for these fifth graders.

And it led to just a tremendous amount of discovery in art and architecture, bridges, engineers, and then, of course, language, and then, obviously mathematics. And then, I introduced color to them and so they became chemists. And I'd said that my next book would be Chemistry in a Basket, because of all the things I've been known to put in my dye pots over the years. And it's a tangible thing they make and it obviously taps into their creative spirit and it just gives them a sense of satisfaction that they've made something with their hands and there are no nails, no glue, no staples, it's just all how they weave these pieces together. And then we started playing with embellishments and I taught them how to do Algonquin curls on them, where they would use their finger as a mold and they would, you know, weave a curl that was on the basket.

And then things like kisses. Again, an embellishment. I'd originally done a wine basket where I put Xs on the outside and we did little Xs on theirs and I called them kisses. Oh, just, you know, tying little tiny pinecones to it to illustrate that the pinecone is a Fibonacci sequence of numbers.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was experiential learning of math because they were seeing and hearing and actually doing.

MS. SUDDUTH: And then dying them, you know, we would gather—well, I asked them each to bring in a pack of Kool-Aid because I had to use safe dyes and then I brought in walnuts and we crushed them and made dye. And then we experimented, had some of them bring in onions where we used onion skin and some of them saved teabags and then getting coffee from the teachers' lounge and all different ways of dyeing. One thing that I've done over the years—I haven't done it in schools, but like my husband this morning poured out wine that had turned to vinegar and vinegar is a great mordant for the basket material. And I had wished I had had a red dye going because I would have put it in there; dyed one one time with old burgundy wine and it was the most beautiful mauve color you could imagine.

So that's the beginning of Fibonacci. And then as time went on, people would look at some of the Fibonacci

patterns and ask me if I had studied with Native Americans or if I had Native American blood in me and that offended me just a little bit because I really think what I've done with these are just sort of my own thing that I hadn't copied. You know, in the early days it's really hard to do an egg basket that hadn't been done for hundreds of years, but I was very proud of the fact that this was something I had created myself. And -

MS. RIEDEL: Had you tried early on to copy some of the Cherokee baskets or the Choctaw? You never tried to copy those?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, no, I never wanted to do that. I just -

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. What about -

MS. SUDDUTH: I felt like we had taken enough from them as white people. I mean, I truly just—you know, that is their culture. I would equate that with me making sweet grass baskets. You know, I'm not Afro American, I'm not Native American, and I have no business making what they're making because that's a part of their culture and I wanted to create something that was a part of my culture. And I think I abandoned the split oak and egg baskets because that was preserving a tradition and I wanted to create a tradition, so to speak, do my own thing with it.

[END MD 01 TR 03.]

MS. SUDDUTH: To back up just a little bit, I was playing with Fibonacci and it caused two, I think, important events in my life. First, I applied for and received an emerging artist grant from the arts council in North Carolina and it was a smaller amount of money, but I used it to photo-document all my work, because I felt like it was really important—I don't know why, but to, you know, know what I made and to have it photographed and I spent money on good photography, not—Doug took a few early off, my husband, and when the carpet was the backdrop, I said, uh-uh—[Riedel laughs]—we've got to get a little better than this. But then, by that time, you know, juried shows were wanting the slides and a couple of in-state magazines and interest and whatever.

So and I stayed with that same photographer until we moved up here and we sort of grew up together. She really learned how to capture 3-D objects. And I've said my whole career—and when people ask, you know, what's the secret of your success, and that is that I have found photographers than can make my work look better than it really is. They capture the essence of it, the light, the whole positioning of the piece, that they really make my work shine. And that's important when somebody is evaluating what you do just based on a picture.

MS. RIEDEL: Especially because your work is so three-dimensional.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. And capturing a 3-D object on a two-dimensional slide is something else. So that was my first grant. And then as people—as I became more visible showing my work, and by this time I had totally quit being a school psychologist—when we came back from Las Vegas, I said adios, that's it.

MS. RIEDEL: That's right.

MS. SUDDUTH: —not going to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: Somebody suggested that when you return, don't return to school.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right, yeah. Yeah, my buddy out there that was a psychologist said, you know, go for it, you've got talent, you're young, don't wait till you're retired to explore it. So when we got back to Wilmington -

MS. RIEDEL: That's '89, '90?

MS. SUDDUTH: Eighty-nine, the year my older son started college. I tell my family, well, guess what, I'm not going to work. And I mean, I had a very nice professional income and we were a two-income family with two sons approaching college. And Doug sort of looked at me and the amazing thing about our marriage, 39 years coming up, is that we've each supported each other's crazy schemes and fortunately most of them have worked out, so I did not go back to work as a school psychologist. But having the degrees and the certifications and everything I had, I could moonlight every now and then, sort of like being a waitress while you're learning to be an actor. And I could contract with different school systems and, you know, do as little or as much as I wanted, but still have my own time.

And so then after that first emerging artist grant, I applied for a North Carolina Visual Arts grant. And the purpose of that was to study Native American baskets to determine if they used Fibonacci in their baskets, if so, how and why, and to just see what the commonalities were between my type of weaving and theirs, and then also to continue documenting my work. There were three phases to it; I don't remember what they were. But the biggie was studying their baskets.

And we had a dear, dear friend who's deceased that was a native of Mississippi and he personally knew the chief of the Choctaw Nation, so he arranged for me to have a private sitting with Chief Philip Martin—and he still is their chief—and also to get deep into the reservation and meet Choctaw basket makers. And some of the people I met with could not even speak English; I mean, they spoke Choctaw. And they were very shy and very skeptical of me and wouldn't even talk about their baskets. And I went and got some of mine out of the car and it was like it was this language between us that what I did was different from them, but I did it the same way, you know, the over and the under. And I found that indeed the Choctaw weavers will use the numbers, but I have yet to find any culture that uses it in sequence like I have, with the one, one, two, three, five. Theirs are more in bands of threes or twos, a little bit like the Math in a Basket basket.

And then Chief Martin had me in his office and he showed me a closet that's about a fifth the size of this room filled with Choctaw baskets, gorgeous pieces, I mean, to die for. And he gives them to visiting dignitaries. I wasn't a visiting dignitary—[they laugh]—so I didn't get one, but I did buy a few from the ladies that I had met. And it was just profound because there was a language barrier, a cultural barrier, but there was this universal language of baskets.

And then I went to Cherokee and Cherokee is much more—and see, we were living in Wilmington at the time—much more organized. They have the Qualla Arts Cooperative where they actually market their work and it was much easier to get interviews with some of the people there. And they are sort of, justifiably so, upset with some of the basket makers, especially in North Carolina and Tennessee, that have written books on how to make a Choctaw diagonal basket or this or that. But they were very open with me and warm and even told me a little bit about how to use henna and madder and bloodroot and things for dyes, because they wanted to know the dyes I used and, you know, I assured them I would never cut rivercane and make cane baskets and I won't.

And so it was wonderful. And then I had to write all this up and -

MS. RIEDEL: How long did this go on for?

MS. SUDDUTH: A year.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and so you went multiple times to different -

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, I went twice to each place. And—but also -

MS. RIEDEL: Were these reservations or -

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah, the Qualla Boundary and Cherokee and the Pearl River reservation in Mississippi.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: And Doug wants me to, you know, write a grant to—[laughs]—study the Zulu baskets or something, but that's another story I'll tell you about. But the thing I did, because I thought it was worthy of publication, publishing my research. I spent an awful lot of time—by then there were books on basketry, especially the Native American work and historical pieces. And I have bought every book that's ever been published that I could get my hands on and since then I've donated most of them to the university special collections library. But, you know -

MS. RIEDEL: Which university?

MS. SUDDUTH: The University of North Carolina, Wilmington.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: And then how-to books I've given to the Southern Highland Craft Guild, so that future basket makers can have it easier than I did in terms of learning techniques. But I wrote a paper on Fibonacci numbers and their use in basketry and I specifically talked about my work, the Cherokee, and the Choctaws', and then a little bit about the history of their baskets and mine and then Fibonacci numbers. And one of my early mentors was head of the art history department at Northwestern who later went to Penn State—oh, University of Pennsylvania—and became the James Farquhar Professor of Art at the University of Pennsylvania. His name is Larry Silver and I met him when he was on a sabbatical at University of North Carolina and he started collecting my work.

Well, I sent him the paper. I mean, it had—I mean, it was a professional paper and I was extremely proud of it because, if for no other reason, it documented to me how they're similar and how they're different. And he refined it, sort of edited it, and we had it published in I think *Fiberarts* magazine. So I've got the long edition and the shortened edition. And that was sort of scholarly research and I'm really glad I did it.

And then my last wonderful fellowship was two years ago. North Carolina really supports their artists in so many ways, in spite of all these budget cuts. And this was a major fellowship and I got it to pursue chaos theory, fractals, and sacred geometry, because the very obvious thing about my baskets is how orderly they are. And I wanted to see if I could branch out and create chaos. And so I started and I have met with MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge] physicists and NASA engineers and there again math teachers and hours on the computer studying [Benoît] Mandelbrot, who's the head of chaos theory, and buying books on chaos and Gleick's [?] book and all this kind of stuff and more books on Fibonacci. So these are the only books I've kept. Everything else I've given away. But I'm still learning. I kept a few basket books that are special to me. But more things, designs, and nature, *The Power of Limits* [György Doczi. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1981], which is an architectural book.

And one of the things that Mandelbrot illustrated was he had a yellow bucket of paint—I'm skipping over a lot of years here, but -

MS. RIEDEL: We'll go back.

MS. SUDDUTH: Okay, he had a yellow bucket of paint and he put a little bit of red in it and then a little bit of blue and then a little bit of purple and a little bit of green. And as he stirred it up in these patterns dispersed out, that was symbolic of chaos. And what he did on a computer since you, you know, have unlimited infinity, he showed how after time, the pattern repeated itself, so there's really no chaos in terms of no pattern anywhere in it, according to him. I mean, that's sort of the dummy version of chaos theory. And then he also, you know, did a lot of other visual things. And so I dyed it, I made a beautiful cat's head basket, beautiful shape, and I dyed it yellow. And rather than—I was going to dip it in three colors of paint and as it dripped down, that would illustrate chaos. Well, the basket turned out so pretty that I just didn't want to ruin it—[Riedel laughs]—dip it in a bucket of paint.

So what I did was paint it red, yellow, blue, green polka dots randomly on the basket, where a pattern ultimately evolved, but I'm about the only person that would know that just looking at it, because it looks like it was just spattered on there. But, you know, very purposeful. And then the front of that book, the Math in a Basket exhibition catalogue, that's a Fibonacci piece that I threw the numbers into chaos as I wove vertically, so that there's no sequence to it, no golden ratio, no anything except horizontally it's the first four numbers, but vertically the numbers but in no order. So that one is Fibonacci and chaos.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It's interesting, though, somehow they all seem to have an order, no matter how chaotic they are, they all seem extremely orderly.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. The only time I was not able to do orderly baskets, we were en route to New York on 9/11 [September 11, 2001], I had an—was at an exhibit at the American Craft Museum and was going to do a book signing on my book, *Baskets: A Book for Makers and Collectors* [Madison, WI: Handbooks Press, 1999], and was going to teach teachers Math in a Basket so they could take it back into the schools. And we—you'll appreciate this—decided that we would drive the parkway, we would leave early enough to drive the parkway. Well, we got to Harrisonburg, Virginia -

MS. RIEDEL: That's the Blue Ridge Parkway, yeah.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, right. And, well, we got off the parkway near Harrisonburg and spent the night after being in the car for probably 14 hours, dodging turkey and deer on the road, and got up the next morning and all hell had broken loose in New York. That was September 11. And the Metropolitan Opera guy was taking me out—it was my birthday two days later—we were going to Windows on the World for breakfast and he had us in a hotel that was right near the Met [Metropolitan Opera] and he was really taking care of us, you know, in a normal world. And the more we looked at The Today Show, the more—before knowing how really bad it was, although the towers had fallen, I told Doug, I said, ain't no way I'm—I'm not going to New York, they're not going to let us in New York. And then they were warning people about, you know, interstate highways and trucks blowing up.

So I tell Doug, let's get back on the parkway and go home. And we entered the parkway on Skyline Drive and the Forest Service was there saying that enter at your own risk, they're not going to be any Forest Service people available, we've all been asked to go to Washington. And it took us two days to get home and the only thing we had was the car radio, the public broadcasting. So it was two or three days later before we got home that we even could see the images.

But I—I've always found my weaving soothing. You know, if I was stressed or an issue or a problem, I would weave and it would just calm me. And when I'm—it's just my—you know, it's what I love to do. And I came home and I made a Fibonacci piece that was probably the worst piece I've ever made in my life. It was tight, it had no form to it, the dyes were running, and I doubt if it was Fibonacci. And I just tore it up. I don't know why.

So then I started twining, which sort of doesn't have any rules to it. And the one I did was that one on the right. I

called it a squashy basket because I was twining it and I used -

MS. RIEDEL: The black and the red?

MS. SUDDUTH: The one on the right with the mushroom on it.

MS. RIEDEL: On the wall?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, right, and that sign that says Billie Ruth Sudduth pans out a new line of baskets.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: But I started it like an onion basket, just open weave, and then when I finished it, I was still—my younger son was in Tunisia riding on camels with Muslims out in the desert and it was days before anybody got up with anybody and we have nephews in New York and everything was just—and I couldn't get in touch with the American Craft Museum or the Met guy because phones were—but we got home and finally, everybody got together and they postponed the exhibit so I was glad I said I'm not coming.

But you know, I just wanted to weave and I did this basket and then I just crumpled it and distorted it sort of like the one you saw back there, but it was an open weave, and left the studio and told Doug I'll never be able to weave again. It's just—the world is too different now, it doesn't matter. And I came down the next morning and the basket had popped back—[Riedel laughs]—I mean, it wasn't, you know, it was still distorted and had my handprints all in it and whatever, but it refused to give up. And I had a whole bunch of mushrooms because I used to use them as an embellishment on an open-weave basket with raffia and I found one that was like a cap and I put it on top because the last time we'd been attacked the way they resolved it in the end was the bomb and the mushroom cloud. So it was very symbolic and I call them my squashy baskets and they are probably the most asymmetrical -

MS. RIEDEL: Disorderly.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah. And I did those probably for about three months; it was all I could do.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUDDUTH: And then, you know, people saw them and they loved them. [Laughs.] I mean, it just—I certainly didn't pound them out, you know, thinking that anybody would ever want one, but I would just sort of line up in there and it was a reminder of, you know, how everybody experienced that particular day.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And was there anything that came out of those that you've then taken forward or were they pretty much an isolated series?

MS. SUDDUTH: I think it was pretty much isolated, but it was just a way for me to deal with whatever my emotions were about it, to not feel compelled to create something orderly, which I just couldn't do. So that's skipping the whole move to Penland. [Laughs.]

[END MD 01 TR 04.]

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk a little bit about—because you're primarily self-taught -

MS. SUDDUTH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: —pretty much completely self-taught, which is different than many of the artists that I talk with -

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, I think my whole career has been not the ordinary. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right. You started collecting baskets when you were 12.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: You collected a basket on your honeymoon.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And from the beginning, you collected primarily Native American—Cherokee and Choctaw baskets.

MS. SUDDUTH: And contemporary baskets. As I became more recognized as a basket maker, I had the exposure to other well-thought-of basket makers and I love their work and most of the things I've collected have been things that either I wouldn't do or I couldn't do. An example would be the sweet grass baskets and the pine

needle baskets which are coiled and stitched. Well, that's too much like hemming a dress and I don't want to do that kind of basket. And then some of the ones I have are beautiful replications of early baskets, the Maine baskets that are done with ash, and some of the Shaker baskets that are done with ash, and then several split oak egg baskets that I have.

And the thing I love about those baskets are that they are natural materials—well, all of them are natural materials, but the form—they're very classical forms that they carry on a culture and that they're very symbolic of a time that's gone by—because baskets were used to haul eggs and tobacco and produce and hens, whatever, much like we use our paper and plastic bags now. So the only reason they're still being made is to carry on or to make sure that that tradition doesn't die out.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The basket-making tradition.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right, right, of using those specific materials and doing those specific forms. And most of the ones like that are just the wood; there's no dye or anything to them, and as the wood ages, it takes on this patina that is much prettier 10 or 15 years down the road than when they're new. And they're virtually indestructible. Ed Rossbach wrote something one time that he allowed me to use in my book, that even though baskets don't survive, the techniques do, and they're one of the more destructible of all the craft mediums because fire can get them, he mentioned insects. So you're not going to find pieces of basket like you'll find shards of pottery, so the only way that they're going to survive is if people collect them and preserve them and continue to make them.

And each culture sort of has their own basket anyway. And in the last few years, I've been very fortunate that the craft council from South Africa has visited me and were fascinated by my work and because of the time we spent together, they began sending me baskets from South Africa every other month. And some of them are antiques and some are newer and some are Zulu. And the thing that's so interesting about them—one of the antique ones they sent me I liked the best, it's really tightly coiled and it was used to hold grain. The Zulu baskets are amazing with the patterns that they weave in them and the color. There's one they sent made out of grass and leather that's lidded and it's probably the most unusual basket I have ever seen. I'm not sure what its use was, but very brightly colored and a very pleasing form.

Most of them have wonderful forms to them and some of the contemporary basket makers I have, I have some made out of paper that are woven on a diagonal, I have a beaded basket that's really beautiful that has a pattern in it and multicolored, several split oaks, sweet grass baskets, one made of—I've got some made out of different barks, willow bark or birch bark –

MS. RIEDEL: Why do you collect what you collect? Other than it's something that's pleasing to you that you wouldn't make, is there anything in particular?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, I just love baskets. I like the vessel form. It doesn't—and I mainly have collected them to be seen. I don't think I have anything in any of my baskets and that's an offshoot of my not wanting my baskets to be perceived as a container. But I just—you know, the forms, some of them are very symmetrical, some of them are twisted and turned and a part of it, too, is knowing some of the people that made them. And it's like they're a part of my environment now, people that I respect. It's really great waking up in the morning and one of the first things I see is Leon Niehues's basket by the clock and it's just, you know, perfection. And I know Leon and it feels sort of like his spirit is in that basket.

MS. RIEDEL: You have such unusual baskets. Why does the Zulu strike you as so unusual compared to everything else?

MS. SUDDUTH: The material they use, it's some kind of grass, and the way they do the patterns in them, I mean, you know and I'm not sure they're at all educated or mathematical and yet they've got these very, you know, intricate triangles and different things that are woven into their basket visually that are just totally amazing and then some of them have lids that fit perfectly. I just find them fascinating in terms of the pattern.

MS. RIEDEL: And the patterns are completely different from anything that you've seen otherwise.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right, right, right. And a different material.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And do you take anything from that and try to apply it to your own baskets or just admire it?

MS. SUDDUTH: I think more just admiring it, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You talked at the beginning about all the different baskets that you acquired and dismantled in order to learn how to construct your own. Are there things, for example, that the Appalachian baskets taught

you and things that the Cherokee baskets taught?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, I think it was more the imports. I would never tear up a Cherokee or an Appalachian basket, never. And I would never repair one because the materials are just too different now than back then. But the main thing I learned by tearing them up, some like round bottoms or double bottoms, how they started it, where did they start, and then how to finish baskets, alternatives to lashing rims. From the beginning, I didn't like rims. But once you learn to make an Appalachian egg basket, you can make just about any kind of ribbed basket. I mean, it's—the technique's the same, the thing that varies is length of ribs, how many ribs you use, and then the very intricate weaving of the handles and things.

MS. RIEDEL: There's the winnowing basket from Vietnam.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, and see that's—I think the other thing that I love about the baskets is that it sort of shows cultural influences because I remember when a basket maker from Japan was at the Sackler [The Arthur M. Sackler and Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC] and how very Shaker his baskets looked and the Vietnamese basket I have reminds very much of Shaker baskets, even though the material is different. And then I have samples of like JoAnne Russo, some contemporary basket makers who are well established, Rob Dobson, who you wouldn't even think it was a basket because it's made out of old woodworking tools and bark, and Anne Hall Richards, made out of paper and stitched and sewn—Kari Lonings, twine, they're all different techniques, color, pattern.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you consider any of them to have been influences on your own work?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, because except for Kari, I think I've been doing it as long as they have, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] This might be a perfect time to segue into Penland.

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, I think backing up to my basket collection, probably one of the most painful experiences I ever had with my basket collection when we left the West Coast and moved back to North Carolina, I had nine—I call them crates, but they were those 20x20x30 double wall boxes filled with baskets, some were early baskets that I had purchased over the years from older people in Appalachia that are no longer here, some where Cherokee and Choctaw baskets. Michael Davis, who is a well-thought-of contemporary basket maker, I had a piece of his that I got probably in 1970 and being out West, I had collected some Navajo baskets and some Havasupai and a few other tribes. And the first basket I ever made that won an award.

Fortunately, I do not know why, I brought my first basket back in the car. Otherwise, it would have been lost. But there were nine cartons of them, I don't know, just many, many, many, many baskets. And they were lost in the move. We had the things put in storage for about two or three months and they never came out of storage. So I had to literally start over in the late '80s collecting.

MS. RIEDEL: And you lost dozens, hundreds.

MS. SUDDUTH: Treasures, oh yes, yeah. Yeah. And the funny thing, back then, it's really hard to prove to an insurance company the value of something. And you don't save sales receipts, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MS. SUDDUTH: But that hurt. I mean, that—maybe that's why now I'm still collecting baskets, but I've added pottery to it—[laughs]—because it's a vessel for them and plus there aren't many basket makers that do this full time and there are tons of potters that are so good and I like—I think the commonality with a basket maker, we are totally responsible for the shape of that, unless you weave over a mold and I sort of think that's cheating, because you're—like the Nantuckets—unless you're preserving the tradition, but otherwise you know what it's going to look like, so that's not fun. But just, you know, the shape, are they going to be very sensual and low centers of gravity, are they going to be curvy, are they going to be straight up and down, are they going to be symmetrical or round or whatever?

And I think that that's what I find so exciting about baskets is that it's totally what I do with my hands that make it the way it is. And I think it's closely related to pottery because the potter has their hands on that clay, you know, they are totally responsible for whatever shape it takes and the same way with most basket makers. And whereas glass, you never get to touch the material itself, or metal, unless you're a jeweler or something, but I mean talking about the heat. And it is just something about knowing that your hands were the only real tool, you know, that—I think with basketry much more so than pottery, you know, that we don't need much more than our hands and a pair of scissors and a packing tool and water.

MS. RIEDEL: How much does the form change when you're actually working on the basket? Or have you pretty much planned it out ahead of time? Do things evolve as you go?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, I've got to know ahead of time how big it's going to be because it's like a wallpaper, you don't want to run out halfway through a room because dye lots are different, but I pretty much know what I want to do when I start and because I use Fibonacci, I don't draw them out, there's no design, there's no sketches, it's all in my—you know, if you know one, one, you've got it, because everything moves from there.

The shape is another whole story. I start upside down weaving. But after a certain point, they take on a life of their own, you know, they respond, I think, to my hands and my mood, but at a certain point, I have to go where the basket takes me, it's beyond me. And sometimes I don't like where it takes me and sometimes I'm just thrilled with it. And it's very unpredictable; no two ever turn out quite alike.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this the shape you're talking about?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, the shape.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, and it has nothing to do with the pattern or the color, because that's all set up ahead of time.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right, yeah, that's pretty predictable, but the shape is the thing that's always a variable.

MS. RIEDEL: And a surprise even to you.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. And especially like the one on the top shelf that, you know -

MS. RIEDEL: That's a Fibonacci Five.

MS. SUDDUTH: I couldn't do that one any better, you know, I mean, it's just—and what was different about my making that one than, you know, something I made some other time?

MS. RIEDEL: And what, in particular, is so successful to you about this shape?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, the pattern really shows up, you really see the Fibonacci sequence occurring. It's symmetrical no matter which way you turn it, it's balanced. The—I call it the hips—are all the same, all four sides, it sets level on all four feet. It's very difficult like with a chair. Four-legged chairs are a lot harder than three-legged chairs, and the same thing with a basket like that to have it level, balanced on all four feet. So you're creating the pattern, you're controlling the shape, you're trying to keep it symmetrical, and keep it balanced, so there's a lot of things to—and I'm on automatic with a pattern after this many years. I mean, I don't have to do counting every single time.

MS. RIEDEL: And when you look at it, you can see how much lower the center of gravity is on that basket than on some of the others.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. But I really like that. [Laughs.] Maybe it's because it's become more of a self portrait. [They laugh.]

[END MD 01 TR 05.]

MS. RIEDEL: So we were talking about the evolution of the different types of baskets that you've made over the years, from the simpler ones—the market baskets—well, you didn't start out with the simple basket.

MS. SUDDUTH: No, I still say that an Appalachian egg basket is one of the more difficult baskets, and when I began teaching basketry, I remember one student one time threw hers on the floor and stomped on it, it was so difficult. [They laugh.] But most people start out with an egg basket, but I think it's because—or in the South, I should say—because it's such, you know, the standard of baskets from long ago.

MS. RIEDEL: The form is unique. It looks exquisite.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, and we're in the South and that's, you know, what you think of as a Southern basket. But basically, I wanted to learn the techniques and how to do different kind of baskets, and could I do them, and some were much more challenging than others. And then I think—

MS. RIEDEL: Which were some of the most challenging?

MS. SUDDUTH: Things that are woven on the diagonal. I can remember having a red checkered tablecloth to do a diagonal weave, and I would have to line the stakes or spokes according to the square on the tablecloth caddy-corner to the table cloth, so I could do it, because I don't think diagonally. I'm very linear—[laughs]—or circular or whatever. But I think, you know, a lot of artists go through various phases looking for their voice, what is their style, what is uniquely their own, and I think as you develop and grow as an artist, you don't want to copy what

other people are doing. You want the work to be uniquely identified with you. I think that's what a lot of artists aspire to.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and so you tried to grow your language by—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah. What felt right for me, what was fun for me, what I could do, maybe, that nobody else could do.

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

MS. SUDDUTH: Although it didn't—you know, that wasn't my intention to start with.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you talk about the Penland basket?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, the first one I ever did—we lived in Las Vegas, and I did it with turquoise and terra cotta. And from a distance, it looked like pottery, but also, the connection with clay that I mentioned earlier—potters will center the clay on a wheel and then quickly pull it up, you know, with the clay or the hands are wet, and form the shape. And I would weave a circle of reed, round reed, very wet, and then quickly pull it up to form the shape. So in a way, it was the same way you would form a pot, I formed the basket. And then living in the heart of pottery, I wanted to name something in tribute to all the potters that were connected with Penland School [of Crafts, Penland, NC], so I called it the Penland Pottery basket. And sometimes, the black, if you look at them from a distance, it looks leather. You know, but they look sort of like a pot.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and they're so different than everything else—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: They're so open.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. And they're really—and that's my own design, relatively simple for me to make, although no two turn out alike. Some are wide, some are narrow—it's just amazing how each basket is its own self.

MS. RIEDEL: How about the Signature basket? When did you make the first one?

MS. SUDDUTH: Oh, years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Something that evolved over time.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. I think I probably made my first one when I was learning twill, and any basket maker will tell you that if you can weave continuously rather than having to stop and start each individual row, that sometimes you can have better control over the shape and it'll go a little quicker. Usually, market baskets and that type, each row is done separately, even creating twills each row is done separately, and I wanted to do a continuous twill. And on the first ones I did, the only thing that the twill would be one time or one row, when I had to make a mistake purposefully to keep it a continuous twill. So I call that a step-up twill, and when I started putting overlays on it, then it turned into a rather nice basket.

So a lot of times, you know, the mistakes teach you. I'm fairly well known for painting polka dots on baskets, especially red baskets with white polka dots and black baskets with white or red polka dots. And the painting began really as a desperate effort to save a basket that had been—there's no other way to say it—a dog hiked its leg all over it in an outdoor show, and since I used crushed walnut-hull dye, I think the dog thought it was a tree. And I mean it was a large dog, so there was a lot of urine on that basket, and I threw it in the swimming pool because I figured the chlorine in the pool would sanitize the basket. Well, it also took every bit of the color out of it, okay, and it was a beautiful—it was still a rib basket, I think, but the color—it had a nice pattern to it or something. I don't know.

So then, I thought, well, you know, it's sort of bleached. So I dyed it black, and nothing showed up, so I painted polka dots on it so you could follow the pattern. And it all was because of a dog. And now, you know, I purposefully make these—I mean that's one of the most popular things I make are my Illusions basket. But I probably never would have thought of that had it not been for me trying to figure out a way to salvage that particular piece.

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about the Penland basket. I wonder if this is an appropriate time, then, to talk about Penland and your long term affiliation with the school—what you've taught there, how it's helped your teaching philosophy evolve—

MS. SUDDUTH: Okay. The first time I ever set foot on campus at Penland was to teach. Most people the first time

they come is to take a class, but I guess in keeping with my, you know, being self-taught—and back when I first started making baskets, nobody was teaching it, there weren't books on it and stuff, but we came up here in August of '93 and I was tremendously well received by not only—my students were fantastic—but the faculty, the staff, the housing was cool, and we were living in Wilmington, North Carolina, humid, and we were up here, cool, except the katydids kept us awake all night. We had to get used to the sounds. Their food was fabulous.

And just people being so excited about totally immersing in whatever it is they were pursuing, because here to forward, I always taught, you know, like three hours at night for ongoing sessions, or maybe a weekend at a basket convention where I'd have somebody six hours for two days. So this was the first time I really had anybody for two whole weeks, and you can really get it, you know, with that amount of time at a pace that you're comfortable with. And I just—I loved the beauty of the area, but I think the thing that impressed me the most was the community of artists that were here living already, and their stories.

Jon Ellenbogen, the potter up the road here, was an aeronautical engineer, came and learned to throw a pot and never looked back. And there's some people that have M.F.A.s and never looked back. So there's a whole hodgepodge, but a little bit, in a way, the probably a lot of us that are the longer residents of the area, and there are certainly several longer than me—

MS. RIEDEL: When did you move here?

MS. SUDDUTH: We moved here in '94. There are people who have been here 20—we've been here going on 14 years, but 20 years and a few 30 years. We're old-timers compared to the vast number of people that have moved in over the last 10 years. But it almost was like the ones that were here in my coming—we're the generation that came of age in the '60s, and probably most of us didn't rebel or, you know, burn our flags or whatever. We pretty much conformed, and this was sort of our late way of saying, you know, hey, I want to do what I want to do. What I'm compelled to do. It's just—and that's just my theory. It may or may not be that, but there's a commonality of a lot of us of age and varied backgrounds and how we love the tranquility of this area, the nurturing between artists in various media, the support, like-minded—it's just, you know, it's almost an unreal place to live.

And in the summer, the place is alive with all the activities at Penland and all the tourists. Penland is a major draw for people that know craft, and the mountains are a draw for tourists, so it's, you know, like a tourist place. The good months, we're alive and the cold months, you don't see another person for days. And there is four seasons here—four definite seasons, and that's beautiful.

But even if you're not teaching at Penland, you can go over and see slideshows of other people's work. You can go to the session auctions. If somebody's teaching in your discipline, you're more than welcome to, you know, stay in their studio. You meet some of the most renowned artists in the world that come to teach. I just can't think of any place that I'd want to live that could possibly be any better than this. And I've taught at Penland several times, including concentration, which is a two-month stint, which was sort of difficult coming up with that much, you know, work with various stages of their ability.

And then also, I would rotate. One year, I'd teach at Penland, one year I would teach at Arrowmont [School of Arts and Crafts], which is a school in Gatlinburg, [TN], and then one year at John C. Campbell [Folk School, Brasstown, NC], which is based more on a folk school model. And I call Campbell the serene place. You know, the laid back, spiritual, almost. And Arrowmont is sort of a yuppie—it is great, but it's more modern and people that have careers in other fields are usually the ones that go to Arrowmont for a week or two. And then Penland is where the energy just really pops. So there are three—I mean, they're all wonderful. I don't prefer one over the other, but they're just different.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What do you try to teach when you teach? Do you have a specific curriculum?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah, I have a specific curriculum. In fact, you have to write it. I mean they require you to send them what you're going to teach long before you ever get there. And you also have to provide a materials list and tools list and all that. But what I have tried to do, and each time it's different, but teaching techniques, because I really have this strong feeling of all the—like the basket guilds now—you teach patterns and then the people, you know—you see 150 students walk away with Penland Pottery baskets. And I teach dyeing and safety of dyeing. We always start out dyeing. And then maybe we'll work on a twill and I'll teach them how to develop their own twill and how to figure out how many spokes or uprights they'll need to do that twill.

And then we'll make little gizmos—twining, so they learn that technique. And I usually teach them the Math in a Basket basket, because it's a great illustration and it's quick for people that, you know, weave, to understand a little better about Fibonacci. And over the years, I've limited my teaching to experienced basket makers, because when you teach beginners, when you've been at this almost 25 years, you tend to leave something out that's pretty critical, because, you know, I'm automatic pilot. I don't even think about that anymore. And it's like

oh, well what am I supposed to do way back here? So I think beginners are much better off, with me, if—to not be with me—[laughs]—to let somebody else teach them the basics and then come to me.

MS. RIEDEL: What's the philosophy, or what is it that you're trying to get across in, say, a two-week course or a two-month course?

MS. SUDDUTH: I don't know if I have any of the things—well, the two-month thing was—I don't even remember what I entitled it, but something about the techniques of basketry, where we would do, you know—I mean, I even put them through the basics of doing rib work. But rather than ribs, you know, we would use limbs and how to prepare them and soaking them and whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: So, will you teach, say, how to make six different types of baskets?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, maybe. Yeah. In one course I taught one time—I think this was at Penland—Put a Little Fibonacci in Your Baskets. [Riedel laughs.] That was the title of the course, and it was how to incorporate this magnificent ratio, whether you're doing it, you know, with height or width or depth or pattern or color, even how you could go, you know, from one color being part of it to 1.618 being another—you know, just how many different ways you can use proportions and things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's amazing when you start to research that, how frequently that sequence shows up—in the Egyptian pyramids and music and—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, the Parthenon.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, exactly.

MS. SUDDUTH: And [Johann Sebastian] Bach, and [Béla] Bartók, and the piano keyboard is, you know, eight keys to an octave and three blacks and two blacks, and you know, that's five up there and eight down here and the ratio of five to eight is—I mean, it's—yeah, yeah. And then we measure, like I talked to you earlier about the human body is the divine proportion in some shape or form. And most of my philosophy with teaching is, you know, if you want to gather your own materials, it's fine. It's a little hard to do twill work with gathered materials, but if we're doing rib baskets or even market types, you know, you can use kudzu and grapevine and honeysuckle and wisteria. And then to play with dyes, like there are a lot of—this time of year—blueberries up here, and what kind of dye and can come, you know, smashing blueberries and then boiling them, and so—

MS. RIEDEL: So the dyes you're more inclined to experiment with or you're more inclined to mix yourself—

MS. SUDDUTH: Oh yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Whereas the material that you prefer is—

MS. SUDDUTH: Already processed.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And you're able to color it exactly to the degree that you want.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So that's where a lot of your experimentation comes in—

MS. SUDDUTH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: —less with the material and more with the color—

MS. SUDDUTH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And with the actual form.

MS. SUDDUTH: Form.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And then what would a two-week class entail? Just less of the same?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, but then even getting into things like space-dyed reed. If we're there long enough where we have a lot of different dye pots going, and, you know, put a third of the material in this color and then turn it, and then put a third—it's not tie-dyeing, but it's variegated. It's making one strand of reed three colors or something, or put it in the purple one day and then put it in the orange the next day and see what that does. And then if you want to put alum in it, what does that do? Or if you put a lot more salt in it, what does that do? Or if you put soda ash in it, what does that do? Yeah, it's probably more about color.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. You've talked about teaching enough technique that they can then run with their own imaginations about how to make variations—

MS. SUDDUTH: To design it and make—you know, are they going to do a twill basket or are they going to do a market basket, or are they going to—you know, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And you've been teaching there since '93—on and off every few years.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. And I actually started teaching basketry in '83 just, you know, through a shop in New Bern. I would teach two classes a week and then—gosh, I did that from '83 to '93.

MS. RIEDEL: Two classes a week?

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

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And that was teaching elementary school kids.

MS. SUDDUTH: No, this is the adults—[laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, this was the adults. You've taught Math in a Basket from elementary through middle school—

MS. SUDDUTH: College.

MS. RIEDEL: —high school and in college.

MS. SUDDUTH: Because college—with college kids, you can really get into logarithms and fractals and sacred geometry and calculus and stuff, yeah. And it's funny, I mean they're all Doubting Thomases. You know, and this guy—there's a NASA engineer that retired to Asheville and he had heard about this Fibonacci basket maker and he visited a couple years ago during a tour we had. And Doubting Thomas, coming in the door, you know—just show me how you do it. And when I described how I utilize Fibonacci numbers, he was just, you know, taken with it, and he left, and about an hour later, I get a phone call from him. He had gotten back to Asheville and he said you remember that red basket I was looking at, and I said yeah. He said I want it.

So he came back two or three weeks later and got it, but then about a month after that, I get a phone call from him and he said my buddy's visiting me and I told him about your baskets and he doesn't believe me. Can we come up? And the buddy just happened to be a physicist at MIT, and by then I had started playing with chaos theory, and the same thing happened with that guy. You know, he walked in and—very skeptical that a basket maker would be using higher math to do a basket. And he walked out with a piece, too. [Laughs.]

But that scene's been repeated for 15 years, and stockbrokers—there's actually a computer program for stockbrokers that deals with either the buy-sell ratio or if something approaches that 1.618, they do something. And so stockbrokers are major collectors. They're really sort of intellectual baskets, so people—they're not for somebody that just wants a basket to put their potted plant in on their dining room table. I think in the essay, Howard Risatti said, or he said it or something like they're baskets with a brain. But they're not—I mean I could make just typical baskets all day long, but this is what's exciting to me.

MS. RIEDEL: I know we were talking about saving this quote for the end, but it's such an appropriate time to talk about—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, well at various exhibitions or craft shows, people would say, "Now what could I put in this?" So after a number of times of explaining that they're not made for you to put anything in, I've come up with a rather standard answer. I make baskets to hold your interest, not your objects. And if they sit perfectly flat, which I don't have a single one here like that right now, you can put your objects in them. But if they sit on these little four feet with a curvature, they're for your interest only. And I think a lot of what I've been about is really wanting to get baskets off the floor and up onto a pedestal. I see basketry coming into its own, but we're sort of where pottery was 30 years ago, you know, where people thought pottery was, you know, your goblet or something to use, and now there's art pottery and art glass, of course.

But people like that—there's a number of basket makers that do sculptural work. And mine is not really traditional and it's not really contemporary. It's sort of, you know, in the middle. But it's uniquely my thing, and

sometimes I've been in shows called "Contemporary Baskets 2006," and sometimes I've been in shows called "Preserving the Traditions"—like Early American Life had me as one of the 100 best craftsmen for a few years. And they're just sort of that in between. I call it bringing the traditional basket into the 20th century—now the 21st century.

MS. RIEDEL: Well they are so much about weaving in three-dimensional form—so much about form and pattern being one and the same—and to wrap your mind around that is really sort of a little bit of a weaving pattern in and of itself.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah. And then I think the other thing about my baskets—it's well known in the world of craft that red is a very difficult color to get—very difficult. You don't see it much in glass. You see, you know, pinks—not really even pink, but pale color. And in pottery, you don't see much red. In fact, Ben Owens III who is a Seagrove potter, and myself, are the only two in North Carolina I know that have really gotten red. And it's just sort of a happy accident that we bought this property, because I have a 300 foot well with a high iron content, and between my well water—I call it the magic in my well water—and the henna and the madder, I can get this red, whereas if I'm teaching just over the ridge at Penland, I can't get the same shade, because their water is a different chemical makeup.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And so all these really vibrant reds are only because of your well water.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah. Because otherwise, wherever I'm teaching, I use the same amount of henna and madder.

MS. RIEDEL: And they are so saturated.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. Well that's the other thing, too. I leave the material in the dye vat for a week.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, and I heat it up daily and then it goes into a salt, water and vinegar solution for another week where I rinse it and rinse it and rinse it. But the variables in dyeing are the amount of dye you use, the temperature of the dye and how long you leave it in. And most of the dyes I use are not toxic, even though I do wear a dust mask when I'm dyeing. And then crushed walnut hull stain is my mainstay. It's the over-dye for a lot of what I do.

And when we first moved up here, I put the word out that I was looking for some walnuts in the fall, and one of the doctor's wives brought me about 15 cartons—milk jug carton, boxes—full of walnuts and sat them right out there. And the next day, every squirrel in Mitchell County was right out there. And so we tried to collect them up as much as we could. Of course when it rains, walnuts are going to make dye if you got it in a dyepot or not. Our driveway got real stained and we put the walnuts in our outbuilding. Well, a few days later, the squirrels had eaten a hole through the siding of the little outbuilding. So now we put them in a metal garbage can out there to store them, because I like to have them at least two years so they can dry out and almost be powder. And then I put them in a zippered pillowcase cover and outside in a 20 gallon garbage can and let them steep, and then the squirrels and I reached an understanding. Once I get my color, then I take them out and dump them out for the squirrels, so they get the meat and the nut.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, when you're done with it.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And they're fine two and a half years after the fact?

MS. SUDDUTH: Oh, they're better for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And the squirrels don't mind. [They laugh.]

MS. SUDDUTH: Listen, our squirrels up here will eat anything. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So walnuts are a mainstay. You mentioned that once in a while you can get indigo.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, very, very rarely. I think I've only gone through three indigo periods in my almost 25-year career.

MS. RIEDEL: How do you get this yellow?

MS. SUDDUTH: That is a German dye. That's the only thing that's not a natural dye, and it's a wonderful dye. There are ways to get yellow, but I just—I had the idea of yellow long before I had the natural dye—you know, how to do it. So—

MS. RIEDEL: What about the turquoise and the pink?

MS. SUDDUTH: Okay, the turquoise is indigo, and that's really red, and it's henna and madder, iron oxide. I mean henna and madder.

MS. RIEDEL: Just slightly different saturation.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, well, yeah. I had to—I don't know. There was something about working with indigo and making sure the red wouldn't bleed on it at all. Because some baskets, like the black one there, I can clean up after I'm done, but you know, cleaning up the red would remove too much color, so I've soaked all of it for a long, long time before I even started constructing it.

[END MD 01 TR 06.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Billie Ruth Sudduth at the artist's home and studio in Bakersville, North Carolina, on July 26, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is disc number two.

We were talking about the Carolina snowflakes. We were just starting to talk about the first design that you've ever—

MS. SUDDUTH: Copyrighted, right.

MS. RIEDEL: What was that like?

MS. SUDDUTH: I was living in New Bern, North Carolina which is on the coast, and it never snows there. Or I shouldn't say never—occasionally, like once every 10 years kind of thing. But there's a place there called Tryon Palace, which was the royal governor's palace under King George, and it's sort of a mini-Williamsburg—I mean a restoration area, very beautiful English complex. And they wanted to have ornaments that were original, that had never been seen anywhere else, to decorate the windows at the museum complex in 1983. And prior to that time, I had demonstrated on the lawn of the palace basket making, and this was early off in my career, and it was around St. Patrick's Day and I tried to do a four-leaf clover. And I kept coming up, to make it three-dimensional, I kept coming up with eight points to it, and I would put them together like a turtle and I thought—it's not really a snowflake, because snowflakes have six points, but I didn't want to call it a star. I wanted to call it a snowflake, because we never get snow, and I could make a snowflake that wouldn't melt.

And I did them out of all natural color—the crushed walnut hull dye—and they got I guess about 300 of them that year. But they required me to get the design copyrighted so that they would know that it was an original design, because this is a fairly popular place for tourists to visit from England and everywhere else, and they would never want to be accused of using somebody else's designs. So I went through the whole process with the Library of Congress and got the design copyrighted, and then a couple years later, I did a how-to book on them because I figured that people were going to buy them and copy them, and I might as well write the book and tell them how to do it.

And I've made—I've kept a log of every basket I ever made, but the snowflakes I haven't, and I do not know how many thousands I have made over the last 24 years. They're probably in every state in the country and many foreign countries and whatever, because they're virtually indestructible unless you sit on them. And the natural ones you can leave up year-round sort of as an ornament hanging in the window. And the ones I originally designed fit perfectly in a multi-pane window, so Tryon Palace got about 300 of them and then when we moved to Vegas, I took the Carolina snowflake to the Mojave Desert which was sort of fun, and they were a huge success there.

And when we moved back to North Carolina in 1993, it was the year of craft in the whole country, and somebody—I guess probably the American Craft Council—contacted maybe about 200 artists to make ornaments—or 2,000 artists, or something—for the White House tree—this was during the Clinton administration. And so I got a letter from Hillary Clinton asking me if I would contribute a handmade ornament, and the theme was angels that year. Well I write back and say, you know, I'm honored that I was asked, but I don't make angels—I make

snowflakes, and I sent a picture of one.

Well about two weeks later, I get a phone call. And this lady says, "Hello, my name is Ann Stock. I'm Hillary Clinton's personal assistant"—I think that was her name—and she said, "I'm calling about your snowflakes." And I figured one of my sons had put somebody up to it, you know, as a joke, and I said get out of town, which one of my boys told you to do this. And she said, "No, ma'am, I really am Anne Stock and we were fascinated with your picture of the snowflakes and the First Lady would like to use a few of them." So, I sent them snowflakes. But I did them out of a white, triple-folded paper so they were very delicate and almost lacy looking. And people in Wilmington—I don't know, they just sort of took me under their wing or felt like, you know, their mission in life—a lot of them, from the TV station to the art museum—was to enhance my career, because they did an interview with me on how my snowflakes went to the White House, okay, for the local station, I thought. CNN picked it up, and it went around the world on CNN, all for the—these little snowflakes.

Well in 1998, I get another letter from Hillary Clinton, and it says we have asked each governor to recommend four or seven artists from their state to create ornaments for the Blue Room tree, and the theme is snowmen. Could you make an ornament? Well, I write back and say thank you so much for the invitation, but I make snowflakes. You had one in '94. Well, I get a phone call. "Hello, Mrs. Sudduth. This is Ann Stock." And this time I say, "Hi, Ann"—[laughs]. So they used I think eight that year. And once again, since snow is white, I did them out of the white and they were beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: You did them out of paper?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, paper. And I actually got invited to the White House for a reception. All four of us from North Carolina were invited, and I didn't go because I was heading to Wilmington—we were living up here then—to spend time with my grandchildren, and I didn't want to change my plans, and I had just gotten back from D.C. about two or three weeks earlier. And so I respectfully declined and that's one of the two things I've regretted in my career not doing—that I didn't go. And then this year, this past season in 2006. For the past about five years, the economy in Mitchell County has really declined. We have the highest unemployment rate in the state, and yet we probably have the highest concentration of artists in the state.

But the Economic Development Commission came up with an idea first of all to adopt Gloria Houston's childhood wonderful award-winning book called *Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree* [New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1988] that was sort of set in the mountains in this area, and they named her honorary chair of the Christmas parade two years ago. And she donated the rights of the book to the EDC to develop a storefront project called Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree, where the products in there had some relationship to either her story or the mountains or something more traditional, and they asked me if I would do the snowflakes, because they were trying to get some better known artists to sign up for the project so that people that had talent but, you know, had never done anything like this would use their creativity and maybe come up with things.

And they had the idea of sending all these things in the Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree catalog to the White House in hope that Laura Bush would adopt the whole thing as the theme. And it was too late getting there, but Laura Bush fell in love with my snowflakes and the blown red glass ball ornaments, and their colors this year were red—red. So, I had about two months to get 115 of the snowflakes to the White House. And as part of this project, it was to train laid-off workers to do something else with their hands. So I had already done some workshops at my church teaching them to make baskets that we could use as centerpieces at dinners we held to raise money for local nonprofits. So I knew I had a little talent there, and I got a few more people—a lady whose husband was laid off from the Forest Service and a few more—and had a little mini-workshop on how to make them. I think there were 12 people, and out of the 12, only 5 were good enough to ask them to help me. And they actually did every single one of them for the White House tree except for one, because I wanted to have one on the tree.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUDDUTH: And not only did the White House get them, but HGTV filmed me here and some of my little munchkins helping, public television did a four-part series on it, *USA Today* ran a story on it, and every newspaper in the state of North Carolina carried it. And then, of course, the White House special on their Christmas decorations, and they had on there the website of the local Chamber of Commerce. Well, we got swamped. I mean just—I knew that with visibility they would sell, because I've been—they're in every shop up and down the Blue Ridge Parkway and have been for years. And the Renwick [Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC] carried them at one time. And a lot of different galleries—I mean they're extremely popular, and they're the kind of thing that, you know, if you get one, you can get another one and another one and another one.

MS. RIEDEL: And you do them in different colors and sizes?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah. I started out originally with walnut, and then for the White House, two times they were white triple-folded paper that I got out of California that was used to secure the bottom of chairs before they were caned, but it's beautiful white paper—snow-white. And then I started doing them red and white, and then red and green and then—for the White House, I wanted something—or—this project that hadn't been anywhere else, so I came up with a walnut red and green. And—

MS. RIEDEL: And that's what this is?

MS. SUDDUTH: That's what those are, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: And I think probably a thousand of them were ordered, and so these people—by George, they got back to work. You know—

MS. RIEDEL: So you made a cottage industry.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. And years and years ago they were on QVC, that home shopping channel. They did something called 50 State Tour, where they would go to each state and select 10 of the best creations from that state. And they came to North Carolina and they interviewed us in Asheville, and I took the snowflakes. And then it was things like bourbon balls and—oh I don't remember—some kind of tool somebody made. But there were 10 of us they selected to be on their program, and they filmed us in Charlotte. And the funny thing—we were on Easter weekend, so can you imagine driving from here to Charlotte with a Christmas tree tied on the top of our car, and walking into the Sheraton Hotel in Charlotte with a Christmas tree and then decorating it with dozens of these natural colored snowflakes? And QVC sold 1,100 of them in six minutes.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MS. SUDDUTH: And I had people helping me—my son, who had finished college and done a year of study abroad in England wanted to go back to England for the summer, so—and he's sort of been observing me and weaving a little bit ever since I started making baskets. So he decided he could make them, and he became my trainer. He—and he was really good at them, but he trained a few other people to make them and was the quality control guy, and we filled—QVC wanted 1,200 of them—very meticulous about having barcodes on them and how they're packaged and all that. So that was about five people involved with that project. One was an IBM engineer that had retired up here, and one gal's still with me.

MS. RIEDEL: So you still produce them a certain number every year?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah, and we're stockpiling now for the Home of the Perfect Christmas Tree store, and then these shops and things. These are the ones here I made and then I take the ones to the store, you know, to be shipped out, or the Folk Art Center [Asheville] or the Mast General Store [Valle Crucis], which is a famous old country store. But yeah, that has survived coming on 25 years.

MS. RIEDEL: And how are they made, Billie Ruth? How did you come up with the idea?

MS. SUDDUTH: I was trying to literally weave a four-leaf clover—

MS. RIEDEL: Clover.

MS. SUDDUTH: And if you take that in half, there are four points to it, but I couldn't get it three-dimensional. When I put it together, it became that way. And they're Fibonacci related. There are five parts to the square—five woven each way—and there are eight points to it, so theoretically, the distance between the square and the point is the golden—I mean that's, you know, really stretching it, but the smaller size I make, and I think there's some in the bucket—it's three by three and there are eight points. So, you know, it's not four, it's not six—all Fibonacci.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was long before you even knew about Fibonacci.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right. Sort of that intuitive thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You mentioned that there were two regrets you'd had in your career.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, one was not going to the private reception at the White House with the Clintons, and the other was in 1993, the year of craft in America, and North and South Carolina did a project called Craft of the Carolinas and museum directors had to nominate people for consideration. And I'd only been back in North Carolina about three years at that time, and John Perrault was the curator. He was at the American Craft Museum or director emeritus or something, and talking about nervous in terms of him visiting my studio. And he

selected two or three of my pieces, and I was in the show, but I had time, fortunately, to remake the pieces, because I knew I could do them better, and that's what went. But for the reception, I can't remember—John Perrault was there from New York and Jane Alexander, who was head of the National Endowment [for the Arts] at the time, both governors—I don't remember who all else, but for some reason I didn't go. And I really, in retrospect—I think I was just doing craft shows and was tired of traveling, but I didn't go.

And last year, the governor of the state of North Carolina [Mike Easley]—it was two years in the making—did a project called the Governor's Mansion Craft Exhibition, and they selected—I think there were 20 of us throughout the state—to be a part of it, and then it's been traveling for two years. And we were invited to a luncheon at the governor's mansion, and I almost didn't go because I had just gotten home from something—oh, I was the Honors Day speaker at the University of Alabama, and I'd been traveling. And Doug said if you don't go, you'll regret it.

So we—excuse me—took that opportunity and went up a day early to Raleigh and saw *The DaVinci Code* [2006], which had to do with Fibonacci a little bit. And I'm so glad I went, because it was just—you know, there was a group of us that had been in our craft for a number of years—Cynthia Bringle and others from around the state. And it was a lovely luncheon and the people that were the servers were in unison, you know—white gloves, they would sit the plates down at exactly the same time, and turn—I mean it was just—it was a spectacle. And great food—shrimp and grits—[Riedel laughs]—some kind of chocolate mousse that was to die for. I don't remember, but true Southern fare—oh, rib-eye. You know, filet—a little piece of filet. Very, very good. So—

MS. RIEDEL: But the regrets have nothing to do with your art itself, but the recognition that comes with it. In terms of going to events.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right, and meeting people. And like with the Craft of the Carolinas, every piece in the exhibit sold that night, and I never have met the person that waited months to even get them, you know. He was from Charleston. But that kind of thing.

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

MS. SUDDUTH: And getting to meet a president. I mean that's—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, there's that.

MS. SUDDUTH: And then this time I wasn't invited. The economic development people were, but not the people that slaved—

MS. RIEDEL: Actually made the work—

MS. SUDDUTH: —to get these products. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: We were going to talk about two things—one was the evolution of your baskets, being influenced by traditional or historical baskets.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: What inspired that?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, I was sort of stylizing some of the Appalachian baskets early off with color, like the one I was telling you about that the dog discovered, and—

MS. RIEDEL: Daisies.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, daisies and whatever. But I got juried in to the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show, and I took my very modern Appalachian baskets to that show and had quite a successful show, but I had lots of baskets too. And I looked around and I observed that, you know, most of the artists had a very refined looking booth—

MS. RIEDEL: What year was this?

MS. SUDDUTH: Nineteen ninety-one.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: And not so many objects in their booth. And then somebody else made the comment, "Did you bring everything you've ever made?"—you know, kind of thing, but I was green. I mean, that was my first real craft show I'd ever done, you know, beside being on the street at an arts council show. And then I also, I think,

felt that, you know, I was just in the beginning of this process of being on the national level and that I couldn't maintain by replicating or changing a little bit, and that I needed to create something more unique and something more exciting. And I didn't feel panicked about it, I mean it just evolved out of—I think I had a few Fibonacci pieces there. Not many because I had just sort of, you know, within the last two years gotten into Fibonacci. I had the single spiral in the black and the red, and the response to those was incredible—just unbelievable.

That was the first time that I ever sold a basket for \$1,000—at that show. So—but it was more just, I think, a need to find my own voice—to find something that I felt comfortable with, that was uniquely my vision, that was—I think to express what I was all about—that there's not only a soul in the baskets but a mind in them—that they're more than what you're just looking at. There's so much more to them. And then the colors and—

MS. RIEDEL: So this was really the fusion of the Fibonacci and the Cat's Head –

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that your first unique design?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, because the snowflakes, early, early off.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, before that yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. SUDDUTH: And then if you could have seen some of these egg-type baskets I made. You know, they had jute and wisteria and color and driftwood for handles and—yeah, I mean I was playing with that all along.

MS. RIEDEL: From the start.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

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

MS. SUDDUTH: But the sense of order, I think, with Fibonacci is what kept me there. I mean I raised two sons and a husband—[they laugh]—and pets and all the many, many things that go on in a family life—you know, activities and not having any order with boys, especially, everything always in a mess—that with the basketry, I just found this sort of sense of order and peace and quiet and just sort of being transcended into another world almost. And the more I did the Fibonacci types, the better it felt.

MS. RIEDEL: How did the—

MS. SUDDUTH: And then the response to them. I think that's the other thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well they're just not like any other basket.

MS. SUDDUTH: And people that try, you know—anybody that knows anything about baskets knows that they're trying to duplicate my work.

MS. RIEDEL: How did the Penland baskets come around?

MS. SUDDUTH: They actually started in Las Vegas before we ever even moved back, and that's not what their original name was. They were called an Indian Pottery basket until I got more politically correct. I don't know. I was just sort of twining and leaving some of it open-weave and thought it needs something, you know, and I think the first time I tried to weave ribbon in it and it didn't do good, and then I thought about the braiding, you know, to just bring something. Rather than going this way with it, going horizontally, try doing something vertically with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUDDUTH: And that's how they evolved.

MS. RIEDEL: They also are so distinct.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SUDDUTH: And they totally change personality depending on the color. Some of them do look a little Native American, some look a little more classical, and some look just really like Pop Art, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative], absolutely.

MS. SUDDUTH: And that's the fun of them. They can just—many different colors I've done of those.

MS. RIEDEL: And they're always two-tone?

MS. SUDDUTH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well sometimes I've done three-tones.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: They don't look good just plain. I mean all the same color. And that would be too easy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I think you need at least the two tones to make the woven—

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

MS. RIEDEL: Would that be a spoke or a weaver?

MS. SUDDUTH: The uprights?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, the part that looks so ribbon-like.

MS. SUDDUTH: I don't—I just call them braids.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: They seem to go both horizontally and vertically.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah—[laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: We haven't talked at all about nature and its influence on your work. And how your influences have changed over time.

MS. SUDDUTH: I think two very different ways. One are the dyes and my well water—iron—I think the inspiration for my colors. And what I found a little bit unusual about that is that I live in a world of green. I mean the mountains, the—you know, they're called Blue Ridge Mountains, but everything is green this time of year. And I purposefully stay away from blue because—I don't know. Blue is sort of early American, what everybody has in their house—or used to. And green, people love. It's a very serene peaceful color. And green is a fairly easy natural dye to get because you can do magnolia leaves or leaves or you know, anything in nature that's green.

And yellow is not that hard to get naturally, if you can get a hold of marigolds or something like that, cochinel maybe. But I think the natural dyes, it's been important, well, because in the early years, I used store-bought dyes and you know, I would dye something black and in five years it would be gray. They just would not hold their color, and I wanted something—especially as the prices grew—something that, you know, 25 years from now would be as pretty as it is now. So it needed to be colorfast and lightfast. And I still tell people not to put it in a picture window that's going to get 12 hours of sun, but just natural lighting is fine.

And then obviously with Fibonacci, because it's called the Nature Sequence, that I cannot pass especially sunflowers and seashells without being profoundly affected by the designs in those and flowers and the distance between branches on a tree are the Fibonacci sequence, and just I think being so acutely aware of what I'm making with natural materials, even though it's, you know, from Asia. I mean, it's still natural fibers and natural dyes that I am bringing into a three-dimensional art object, something that occurs throughout our environment everywhere, and people—it's like I've done subliminal advertising.

People are drawn to them, they respond to them and I would say 90 percent of them do not have a clue why. The very earthy, warm, pleasing aesthetic of it, and then especially with some of the feminine forms. I've found guys that will be just stroking them—[laughs]—because they are. There's one I do I call Miss Scarlet that's red, and it's got white polka dots on it, and I mean it's like when they put that corset on her and drew her waist in and the hips bulge out, it is Miss Scarlet. More men buy that one than women. And they're feminine forms, for the most part, you know. That's just a happy accident, I think, because I never set out to do that. Some of them look pregnant, vessels. And I think, especially with *The Da Vinci Code* and how so much of it was fiction but everything he said about Fibonacci numbers I think was true, and the feminine that he talked about in that movie that influenced Michelangelo [Buonaroti] and [Leonardo] da Vinci and their art. It's hard to get away from it.

MS. RIEDEL: You've created a contemporary incarnation—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —a new incarnation—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —of something that's been around for a very long time.

MS. SUDDUTH: And done it in a basket, where painters have done it on canvas.

MS. RIEDEL: In a three-dimensional form, yeah. Good.

MS. SUDDUTH: I am, I guess, well I'm not sorry, but I think it's surprising when I say that my view doesn't—isn't a big inspiration. It's an aversion because I'll sit, you know, when I should be weaving, and I'll just be looking out at the whole Black Mountain Range or the clouds moving by, and in the winter, you can see storm systems come in, and I think my environment causes me to daydream or to maybe think about possibilities or something, rather than trying to take from the environment and create something that looks like the Blue Ridge Mountains, although I take that back—I have done a basket that has mountain peaks in it.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

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

MS. RIEDEL: When was that?

MS. SUDDUTH: Probably around 2000.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: Because I'd done one for the American Craft Museum for that show they did, and it was a zigzag going this way, sort of like sideways arrows—[inaudible]—arrows. It was an arrow design and—

MS. RIEDEL: Like chevrons?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah, that was exactly what they were. Thank you. And I wanted to make them go this way —

MS. RIEDEL: A-ha.

MS. SUDDUTH: —and have them different—

MS. RIEDEL: Vertical.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: And it took me a long time to figure out how to do that—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: So yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You've done horizontal chevrons quite a lot.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. Sets of them. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And that we'll talk about later. We'll start with that—

MS. SUDDUTH: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: —tomorrow, the whole idea of the nesting baskets—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —because you haven't talked about that at all. Some of those other patterns—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —checkerboard and—

MS. SUDDUTH: See, those, the Calabash clam baskets, are functional. I mean, you could carry bricks in them, their double bottom and that split-oak handle, and some of my museum pieces have been functional. Most have not, but I did that just because I wanted to. I wanted to see if I could gradate the sizes from small to big or big to small, and I've kept the pattern, and that's one I teach because I can teach them how to zigzag and go vertical rather than horizontal, and so that's a good teaching tool, and then how to do double bottoms and insert handles and stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Great. All right, well we will pick up there tomorrow.

[END OF MD 02]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Billie Ruth Sudduth, at the artist's home and studio, on July 27, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is disc number three.

MS. SUDDUTH: Any time, Max. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Good morning. We can hear Max lapping from his water bowl in the background.

We were going to start this morning with a discussion of your earliest exhibitions. Was the Smithsonian Craft Fair one of the first?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, actually the Philadelphia Museum of Art [Craft Show, 1991], in terms of a craft show, was the first national show that I ever did, and the first time I juried for it, I got in and I never will forget Carol who helped. Carol Sedestrom Ross was one of the jurors, and she wrote a note on my acceptance that she had loved my work from the first time she saw it, which couldn't have been in too many places at that time, and that she was thrilled that I would be exhibiting there.

MS. RIEDEL: What year was this?

MS. SUDDUTH: Nineteen ninety-one. That was eight years after I wove my first basket.

MS. RIEDEL: It should be said, though, you were selling your baskets even before then—

MS. SUDDUTH: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —individually.

MS. SUDDUTH: I did, since I was still working as a school psychologist nine months out of the year, I would jury and get into street fairs that art councils sponsored, which was a little bit higher grade than a, you know, just a craft show on the street because they were juried and I didn't have to compete with a beer garden or a, you know, a clown juggling, but it was strictly art.

MS. RIEDEL: So these were local and regional?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, local and regional, and when I first started basket-making, I got every book at that time that had been published on the subject, which were few, and I started subscribing to *Fiberarts* and *Shuttle, Spindle and Dyepot* and *American Craft*. I joined the ACC [American Craft Council] just so I could get the *American Craft* magazine and read with interest some of these basket makers, especially, that were exhibiting nationally and had quite a good reputation, and people like John McQueen and—I'm trying to think early off who some of them might have been—

MS. RIEDEL: Were there any books that were especially instrumental early on?

MS. SUDDUTH: Not really. The only one that really, to start with, was this *Basket and Basket Makers of Southern Appalachia*, written by John Rice Irwin, and it had beautiful photographs of 18th century baskets, and then a few years later, a book came out that—I think it was called *Early American Baskets* [author, pub. info?], and it sort of covered the gamut from the German influence in willow baskets and the Shaker influence in Appalachian baskets versus the ones, say, in Michigan that had a very Native American influence, and I was just fascinated by some of them, but it didn't say how to make them, and it wasn't until probably the mid-'80s that people started publishing books on how to make baskets.

But having a career, I was somewhat limited in what I could do in terms of craft shows or exhibitions, and subscribing to some of these national publications, I would enter some of their juried shows that were juried by

slides, and if you got accepted, you sent the piece, like Inter Mountain Weavers Conference and Denton, Texas, had a Materials: Hard and Soft, I think, is the name of their exhibition, and they still do it. Oh, one in Chautauqua, New York, that was a major exhibition of American art ["34th Chautauqua National Exhibition of American Craft." Chautauqua Art Association Galleries. 1991], and it seems like someone from the Smithsonian was one of the jurors, and they selected one of my pieces. It was probably more two-dimensional art than 3-D, but I could enter it under sculpture or something, and it got in the show, and you know, that was a very major exhibition.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember what year that was?

MS. SUDDUTH: It would have had to have been probably '89 [1991], and the piece already belonged—somebody had bought it, but I was able to borrow it for this exhibition, and then, mainly before we left North Carolina in '86, it was entering a few juried shows where I'd send a slide and doing street fairs that were arts council-sponsored. And then when we moved to Las Vegas, they had two fairly good outdoor craft shows, one sponsored by the public radio there and another by Boulder City, which was a major show, and I juried for them and got in, and people in southern Nevada loved my Appalachian baskets.

I started teaching basketry out there some, and the arts council, the Southern Nevada Arts Museum [Southern Nevada Museum of Fine Arts, Las Vegas], I think, sponsored competitions each year that I was there and I entered them, and each year, I was accepted, so that was more exposure, and right before I left Nevada, they put together a group of artists to demonstrate and exhibit for the National League of Mayors—or Cities—at the Nevada Convention Center, and there were, I mean, people like [Amado] Peña and whatever were there, and me, and my work was very well-received because I used southwestern colors in my Appalachian baskets, which sort of was different, and Goldwater's of the Southwest had me do an exhibit in 1989 with Peña, his art and my baskets, in their store there at Fashion—Fashion Show Mall [Las Vegas, NV] or something, their big mall there, and it was extremely well-received, and humidity being so low in the desert valley there, I could coil or wrap reed around dowels and have these long things hanging down and using raffia, so I really embellished a totally different look.

Some have been documented, and I have photographs of all of them, but basically, an Appalachian basket that was flat on the back side with raffia and all of these things hanging down from it done in terra cotta and turquoise and different colors, and it was fun experimenting there, but that was sort of the first time it dawned on me that perhaps, you know, I could really pursue this, and at the time, there was a publication called the *Basket Maker*, the *Basket Maker's Art*, out of Michigan, and they featured me in their publication one time, and then Shereen LaPlantz, who was in Mendocino, California, or something, took an interest in my work and published a story on me in her publication while she was still doing it, so I was sort of beginning to get some national exposure, still as a school psychologist. And then we moved back East and—

MS. RIEDEL: Were you dying all your materials—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —back in Nevada?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, but I was doing it in my kitchen, and then I would save it and there would be milk jugs in the refrigerator with skull and crossbones, you know, children, this is not Kool-Aid. Do not touch. And I had to get walnuts shipped from North Carolina out there, and by the time they got there, they really smelled a little bit like swamp water, but I was able to continue with my walnut hull dye, and I tried—olive trees were abundant out there, and you really didn't want them to bear fruit because they stained things so bad, so I dyed some with olives and, trying to think, there was another thing I got a hold out there, but I was most fascinated by the sunsets, especially that turquoise and red, and I think that sort of was a predecessor to my fascination with red now, even though it was a very different color.

And then we moved back to North Carolina and I decided not to go back to work full-time to really try to go as far as I could go with the baskets while I had the energy and the enthusiasm and the passion, and I sent most of the baskets I packed that I had to be transported back, but for some reason, I had the first basket ever made in the car with me, which was sort of a wonderful thing in lieu of so many being lost—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUDDUTH: —so that really showed the evolution of my work, from this very simply little egg basket to these things that were done with vines, and I really went through, as a lot of people did, a lot of different materials and styles, and when I found the math in it I think is when my whole career just began taking off, and lots of notice from people.

And the first regional exhibition I was in was something called "Craft of the Carolinas," and it was in 1993,

celebrating the year of craft in North Carolina. John Perreault was the curator of it and interviewed me, and I was nervous. That was the first time any curator for anything had ever been in my studio, and I got very involved with the art museum in Wilmington [Cameron Art Museum], which I had done the art museum in Nevada as well, and they would have juried artists, I think it was called Wilmington Artists One or Two or Three, each year, and I would enter pieces and I was always accepted.

And then Southport, a little town on the coast south of Wilmington, had a major competition once a year that was, I'd say, all over the Southeast, and I entered a piece called *A Hundred Points of White* [1990], and it was an Appalachian egg basket that I had formed the rims and ribs myself and dyed it black, and then I wove all of these little curls into it and painted the tips of them white. And the piece was called *A Hundred Points of White*. This was during the first Bush's administration, and a Republican—no, a Democratic Senator presented the award to me. It was one of the major—it wasn't Best of Show, but it was way on up there, and then he looked at the price of it and said, this has to be a Republican basket because no Democrat could afford it—[laughs]—and then I got a commission for another one like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember, recall how much it was?

MS. SUDDUTH: I think it was probably at that time maybe \$800. You know, that was in 1990, but it was one of the more—but it took me weeks to wrap all this round reed around a dowel.

MS. RIEDEL: Did he even understand what he was looking at?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, no. And the funny thing, being back in the South, it's like curling your hair and getting out in humidity and the curl falls out. Well, I had to find a way to keep the curls from popping out, so that's when I discovered polyurethane mat spray, you know, sort of like putting spray net on the basket to hold the curls. And I continued to do some curls, but I have to—

MS. RIEDEL: The wedding basket has beautiful curls, too.

MS. SUDDUTH: Well that's a different kind of curl.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUDDUTH: This—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: They look like springs. I'll show it to you.

[END MD 03 TR 01.]

MS. SUDDUTH: These are all mixed up with each other. But see I, I get a long piece of round reed and coil it around a dowel and I have different size dowels. And then I can spring them. You know, if I want to expand them, they won't go back as easily.

MS. RIEDEL: This is all reed?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, this round reed. I have to make sure it's top grade and very pliable. And then I'll weave it into a basket. And the next one in that series I did -

MS. RIEDEL: It's just a long extended coil, about 16 inches long.

MS. SUDDUTH: It's like a slinky.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it is like a slinky. Like a very -

MS. SUDDUTH: But a very—only about maybe -

MS. RIEDEL: Inch in diameter.

MS. SUDDUTH: Not even an inch.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SUDDUTH: And when we moved up here, I did one that was a green egg basket, very stylized. And I dyed, goodness, pinks and blues and lavenders and all of these pastel colors, and wove them into the basket. And one of my favorite composers is Aaron Copland—*Appalachian Spring* [1944]. So I called that basket *Appalachian Springs* [1995]. And that won an award somewhere. But I figured out that, you know, unless I was going to be

someplace where somebody was willing to pay, like, a month's worth of work to do something like this, it wasn't that worth it.

MS. RIEDEL: And this is what you had figured out in Nevada.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, to begin with, yeah. And then I brought—still with that Appalachian egg basket. So I was still trying to—in fact, Appalachian Springs is in the book.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: But I was still searching for that thing that I knew was it, even though I felt like any basket was it. I've never seen a basket I didn't like. And then I sort of got bored with plaiting and began doing twill work, which is going over and under more than one element at the time, and then just happened upon Fibonacci.

MS. RIEDEL: Much more complex patterns.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right. And that is about the time I got that emerging artist grant so I could document my work. I had good slides, and that is when I got it—started getting accepted to about anything I juried for. When I was in these very bold types of twills, Fibonacci, herringbone, hounds tooth, Japanese twills and whatever, and then learning a way to make a beautiful red. It's not as vibrant as the red I can make now with my well water.

And the first time, while I was doing all of these shows at Saint John's Museum—it's now called the Cameron Museum [Wilmington, NC], at least once a year when I would have this juried competition, and I branched out a little bit to other areas of North Carolina. And I can't remember all of the places that I have been, but, you know, Texas, New York, Iowa, Kansas.

MS. RIEDEL: In exhibitions?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, just where one piece would go. I was then—Intermountain Weavers conference, competition. And Jane Sauer was the judge, and this was early in my career. And I had woven a basket out of newspaper—folded the newspaper into different strips. And it looks sort of like Cherokee cownose basket where the back was taller and it graduated down on the sides. And then I did little curls and just sort of randomly put some in it. It was out of a wider reed.

And the title of the basket obviously was *Black White and Read All Over* [1991]—you know, a very original title. [Riedel laughs.] I don't think—it got in the show, but it didn't win an award. But that is probably one of the more unusual baskets that I made.

MS. RIEDEL: Because material-wise, once you found the cut reed you -

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, well, I was weaving with that almost from day one, but then I hosted a shaker basket maker, and she taught us how to pound ash and then she brought molds to do different shaker type baskets. And I did not like weaving over a mold. To me, it felt almost like cheating. You know, what is the excitement of creating something if you know what it's going to turn out like, which is really not true because if you do them right, they are fabulous. But I just—and then I would try weaving over big plastic containers to get better shape, and I never liked having anything inside for me to weave around.

So I just decided I needed to learn how to do this—you know, myself, my own way, and that is when I started hand shaping everything, and by trial and error, and when I would bend and push, and when I would increase the tension. Then I figured out the way to do it the best for me, because I don't know of any other basket maker that does them this way, is I weave upside down with the basket still—all the spokes or stakes fanned out flat on a table. They are—the base is woven—usually a herringbone weave or something.

And then I start pulling in the corners by cupping them in my hand, increase the tension, and put my arm in the middle so that the bottom will stay flat but the corners will start coming up. And I'll leave it upside down for a third of the way—I have woven a third of the way before I ever turn it up and start weaving it. And that is the first time that I'll even see if it's symmetrical, if one side is going to be, you know, fatter than the other—and with my strength in my right hand, usually the left side is tighter than the right side because I'm pulling that way. So I had to learn to compensate doing that and really lighten up when I do that pulling so that they can be symmetrical. And then I would create -

MS. RIEDEL: Was there any way to fix it on those early baskets?

MS. SUDDUTH: Unweave them, you know. And then I would be almost finished—[laughs]—and it would rock; it wouldn't sit on all four feet level. So I learned to turn it up every so often to make sure it was level, and then I did learn ways to push in on that little tip and make it sit more level. And the way I do it is in my books, I let other people—you know, I hope they won't do the designs I use, but the shape of it is something I think a lot of

basket makers would learn to do because you can do so many different patterns with that.

MS. RIEDEL: Your main form was the cat's head.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah, and I could use Fibonacci on the cat's head. I could use simple plaiting. I could use almost any kind of twill with it. And the hound's tooth twill, even though it's a difficult one to do it that way—but it's over two, under two, and each row is done individually, where most of my cat's heads are—excuse me, continuous.

MS. RIEDEL: What about that form speaks to you, to the degree that you continue to use it so continuously?

MS. SUDDUTH: I don't know. It still thrills me when I get that shape. But it's probably much like a potter that is doing a very earthy shape, something, and then I can do the spirals with it. But it just—it feels good. No two ever turn out quite alike, and it's exciting to create them. Some are very -

MS. RIEDEL: It's a dramatic shape.

MS. SUDDUTH: Sensual, very low center of gravity. They look almost pregnant. I have an OBGYN doctor that bought one because it was ready to deliver. And then some are more refined and not as pronounced. But the bigger the piece goes, the more I can exaggerate the shape. And then I like them too that I can—that they won't—they don't have to just sit on their feet, that I can tilt them if I get them balanced, and the center of gravity somewhere in the middle, that, you know, it's a whole new option on how to display them.

Let's see. I did local shows, and then that "Craft of the Carolinas" was major because it was North and South Carolina artists. Some were university professors, some very well established, and I was probably one of the new kids on the block to enter that.

MS. RIEDEL: Mostly still very traditional baskets?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, these I was getting in—there were a few Fibonacci in it, and the Calabash clam basket, which was a twill, but a functional piece. And I don't remember all of the pieces.

Then after that—and let's see, I received the emerging-artist grant, and then the "Craft of the Carolinas." And then I had already been to the Philadelphia show, and I had juried for the Smithsonian three times, was rejected, and then when I started getting in, I was never rejected to that show again. One year I won a major award, and the following year, I got wait-listed. I wasn't—I might as well have been rejected because I didn't get in, but I have been doing their shows since '94.

MS. RIEDEL: Every year, yes? Except for the one or two that -

MS. SUDDUTH: There was one that I was wait-listed. And that year, rather than—since I wasn't going to D.C., I was invited to Festival of the Masters at [Walt] Disney [World, Tampa, FL] and went. So that was increasing my collector base with people. And we moved up here in '94, and I had been to the Smithsonian once when we moved up here, and then the next year and the next year, and—the baskets photograph beautifully. It's just something about how they show up on film on camera. But while I was in D.C.—I forget the name of the PB—the Public Broadcasting station there, but they actually came and did a little segment on it. And it was all over the Washington area.

And then, let's see, Paul Smith curated an exhibition, 2001, for the American Craft Museum, now the Museum of Art and Design, and I didn't—I was in route and 9/11 happened and we didn't get there. That was in 2001. But before then, I had had—I was in a lot of group exhibitions where there would be several basket makers and I met Jan Peters at the Smithsonian shows. And for several years, I did their contemporary basket show.

And I don't remember how I met Katie Gingrass, but she had a connection to Durham, and had been in North Carolina and seen—oh, this Southern Highland Craft Guild, put me on about 17 billboards all over the Southeast—my basket—the basket is in the *Biltmore Estate* magazine there. And I mean, it was—you know, you would be going down the interstate, and there was a billboard with my—celebrating their 50th anniversary. And I was honored that they had selected that work.

So a lot of billboard exposure and a lot of TV stations in North Carolina, including North Carolina Now, had done features on the public television and then local CBS, ABC, NBC affiliates, and whatever. And so I got a lot of exposure in North Carolina that way. I think most things were group shows, Katie Gingrass, del Mano [Gallery, Los Angeles, CA]. I was still entering juried art competitions where it was just the piece and still getting accepted.

And then Blue Spiral, which is a wonderful gallery in Asheville, took an interest in my work, and John Cram purchased several of my pieces because I guess since the early '90s, I did not do consignment. It just didn't

make sense to me to take all of the risk and, you know, if the gallery promotes you, they may or may not sell it, but then you may or may not know who got it. And a large part of my excitement is meeting the people that purchase my work, and having been a social worker and then a psychologist, I have this tendency to almost take a social history. You know, are you qualified to take this basket.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SUDDUTH: Will you take care of it? You know, I mean, it's not literally that, but it's—but, you know, I mean, I really like to know where they are going. And the people that especially—you know, the ones that get more than one or two over the years, I mean, they are my friends, you know, and I am a part of their environment—nothing—that is the most exciting thing for any artist is to know that your work is in someone else's home, and they see it all of the time in they—it's me. I'm in their environment.

And sometimes—I had an Episcopal bishop from Atlanta that bought one of my pieces one year. And he was diagnosed not long after that with I think colon cancer. And he wrote me a letter—he's fine now, I'm happy to report. But he wrote me a letter as he was undergoing treatment. He had bought a small, very sensual cat's head, that he, as he was undergoing some of his chemo treatment, that he took the basket with him and he would just rub it. And he said it was just a spiritual—of course he was a priest—I mean, a bishop, but he—you know, just how it calmed him, and how it connected him with something that was outside of himself. And he just—I guess like rubbing a Buddha's belly in a way. But it just—it gave him peace.

And I have another—one of my major collectors that recently died of cancer—Jean Rourke, and her husband Don Rourke used to be head of Steuben Glass [Corning, NY]. And so they have obviously glass. And they moved to North Carolina from New York in the '90s I think. But I had met her at that first Philadelphia show I ever did, and she purchased some of my work. And that began a period—she has 36 of my baskets, and she has more than anyone. And some of the several exhibitions I have could have almost been Jean Rourke's basket on display because the gallery—the museums would supplement what I had available with some other work.

And I did some of the American Craft Council shows. The first one I did was Baltimore, and it was overwhelming but successful and I did that one a few more times and did their Atlanta show and Charlotte show. And the only time I have really been not in Philadelphia or D.C. but out of the South, I did the American Craft exhibition in Evanston [IL]. And being very lucky when I would apply to these major—you know, what I call the crème de la crème of craft shows, I would get in, and most of the time have a pretty successful show, always at Philly and the Smithsonian.

And then I sort of got tired of breaking everything down, hauling it, driving, getting there, setting up, breaking down, driving home, and wonderful shows, but I each year have sort of cut out someone. The most I ever did in one year was seven.

MS. RIEDEL: Billie Ruth, were you showing at del Mano and with Katie Gingrass at this time?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: But you were not consigning any work; you were only selling work. So you would do these shows and then you would send baskets to those galleries.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, now, del Mano and Gingrass was consignment. But any time it was like a group basket show, it was consignment. But then Katie wanted some to keep in her—and I couldn't—you know, I would just—don't do that, so she bought them. And John Cram bought them.

And early on in New Bern there was a little shop that I consigned pieces. But basically, no, I don't do consignment anywhere, which I'm really glad that I went that route.

MS. RIEDEL: That is unusual.

MS. SUDDUTH: It is very unusual, and also the fact that I haven't had galleries representing me because they obviously have a lot more contacts than I ever would. But I just—it just didn't make sense to me because the piece would be somewhere else and they may not explain the mathematics of it or how long it takes to create the dye, or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think you made that choice because so many of the artists here in North Carolina have their own small galleries and sell their work out of their own studios, or was this a choice beforehand?

MS. SUDDUTH: No. Much beforehand.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: Even Tryon Palace, which was the royal governor's palace at a tourist spot in New Bern would buy some of my early Appalachian baskets that sell at the palace complex. And I would demonstrate in different places. So I did my first Smithsonian show before we left Wilmington.

Oh, but while we were in Wilmington, I juried for membership to Piedmont Craftsman, which is a craft guild in North Carolina. It's about 40 years. And I juried for membership in Carolina Designer Craftsmen, and then moving up here, the Southern Highland Craft Guild. So I'm a member of three great guilds in North Carolina that each sponsor different kinds of craft shows once or twice a year. And I would show there. But I got to Philadelphia museum show before I ever was in these guilds and did those things. And it was just sort of funny there again to start at the top and then, you know, back up, and whatever.

And then moving up here—now, while I was in Wilmington, is when I got my second grant, more substantial, and did my research with Native-American baskets. And right after that, we moved up here.

MS. RIEDEL: So that would have been '92, '93?

MS. SUDDUTH: Ninety-three I think, '92, '93. In finding this place, we moved up here because of my having taught at Penland, and just having this sense of community with artists that were up here. And I was already, you know, I guess establishing a reputation because Penland had heard of me and asked me to teach. And a lot of the potters that live here, I had maybe done Piedmont Craftsman show, or Carolina Designer Craftsman and met them. But they just, you know, embraced us when we moved up here. And Cynthia Bringle, the potter, was sort of a mentor in terms of—which drug store, which dentist, which, you know, propane—you know, all of that kind of stuff. I could call her with the dumbest of questions and she would be very gracious with her time.

And my husband actually, we left Wilmington really for my career because every move we had made over our many years of marriage was for his career. And I just knew that this was the place that craft was going to explode and that Western North Carolina was the place to be. And I had also observed over many years in Eastern North Carolina, that those artists didn't get the fellowships or the different—they just weren't in an area where they got the exposure, for one thing, although I think their work is equal to any I have seen, and it's still a little bit that way.

In moving up here, I joined the Southern Highland Guild, and then I kept jurying for Philly and D.C. and kept going. And then I dropped the ACC shows, and—no, I think I dropped Philly first and then the ACC shows, and kept on with the Smithsonian until this year, and I'm—never say never, but I told them that that would be my last year exhibiting. And they wanted to know if maybe I would come back and be a judge or something. And I said, yeah. You know, as long as I don't have to bring my booth and everything. And I was honored.

They asked me to do their major fundraiser—make a basket for them that would raise about \$10,000. So I made a very large Fibonacci 21 that is worth \$10,000, and they raffled it off—I gave it to them because they had been good to me. And between the Smithsonian and all of the notoriety and whatever—and I've, you own, taught at the three craft schools in my area, and I have been asked to go to Peters Valley [Craft Center, Layton, NJ], and Idyllwild [Arts Academy, Idyllwild, CA], or something. I don't know if that is Colorado or California. And I did a few things.

I was a charter member of the North Carolina Basket Association, and I taught at some of their conventions for a while. And I taught Math in a Basket. I was invited by the Renwick Alliance to teach Math in a Basket to the inner-city school that was sort of the project of the Renwick. And it was a real inner-city school. And I did that one year. And then one year, I was asked to be one of the lecturers or something at their lecture series, and they had me come up for that.

And then the Renwick bought—this was after—well, Ken Trapp commissioned my work in '94. Well, they actually commissioned in '93—no, '96, and he got it in -

MS. RIEDEL: He commissioned a basket.

MS. SUDDUTH: No, I think that was '94—I don't know—getting my dates confused. It seems like it was '94.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] That is what I think too.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: He called you and commissioned the basket for the Renwick, right.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, right. But he had visited me -

MS. RIEDEL: For the permanent collection.

MS. SUDDUTH: —a few years earlier in Wilmington. Was that already on tape?

MS. RIEDEL: No. No, no.

MS. SUDDUTH: Okay, backing up, while I was still in Wilmington living in a suburban neighborhood, my studio was my garage because my family got tired of me sitting in the living room and slinging water on them. So they literally put me out into the garage and had to buy me a heater in the winter, and it wasn't air-conditioned. And it was—I mean, I had a double garage that you—I finally put in an automatic opener because that is how people could get in the garage.

And I got a phone call from this feller named Ken Trapp. And he was curator of decorative art at the Oakland Museum of Art. And he was bringing several of the museum patrons and others to the East Coast to take a clipper-ship cruise from Baltimore to Savannah. And they would be coming down the inner-coastal waterway and would dock one night in Wilmington. Wilmington is a beautiful waterway. And would I please send him slides of my work—that the state arts council had given him a list of artists in Wilmington that he might want to visit. He was interested in—more decorative art.

So I sent him the slides and he contacted I think about six of us, maybe eight, I don't know. And a couple of the people weren't even interested. And in retrospect, they are very sorry that they didn't do it because of his winding up at the Renwick. But he liked my work so he arranged to visit me and a metalsmith, and a potter, I believe. And mine was the first stop that they made.

And I had—I live next door to an IRS agent, running a business out of my home. I had all of the proper forms and taxes, but still. And they were bringing two buses to my studio on a suburban street. So I sort of let my neighbors know what was up. And they were thrilled. It was no hassle at all. So when the buses pulled up, you know, I clicked the opener, and here the whole garage opens up—[laughs]—I'm sure not what people would expect a studio to be. And the garage wasn't a garage; I mean, it was my studio, you know. The cars were out in the driveway.

And he just fell in love with my work. He wrote on my wall when he left, "You give good basket, yum." And several of the Oakland people, some of them were from Queensland, Sydney, San Francisco, just a lot of places, and they had never seen baskets like mine because by then I was really into the Fibonaccis as much as anything. And I had talked to him about Fibonacci.

Well, Ken wound up staying so long that I think the other people he visited got maybe 15 minutes or something. But that was it. And then I got a card from him when he got back home, and they sent me the book that he had done on early decorative arts of Southern California, autographed, and that was it.

And then about three years later, two years later, I was doing Carolina Designer Craftsmen in Raleigh and in pops Ken Trapp. He had a friend somewhere in Pinehurst that he was spending Thanksgiving with. And he said, you heard I'm up at the Renwick. And I said, yeah, I remember reading that in the craft magazine. And he didn't say much more than that, but, you know, how great it was. He knew I was going to be at the show and he wanted to come see my work. So that was that, and that was in November.

Well, one month later, I get this phone call—and he loved my name, Billie Ruth. He thought that was so Southern, and he had spent some of his childhood in Arkansas. And then JABOBs was a hoot because that is an acronym for Just a Bunch of Baskets. So his pet name for me was Billie Bob. He would combine Billie Ruth and JABOBs.

And he called me up—it was a Saturday in December. And he called, and Doug answered the phone, and I was actually cleaning the bathrooms for his office party due that night. And Ken called, and he said, Billie Bob, this is Ken Trapp. I want to commission the best piece you have ever made. And I said, Ken, I haven't made that yet. [Laughs.] And he said, no seriously, I want you to make a piece for the Renwick's permanent collection, whatever you want to do, whatever color you want, but I want it a major work. And I knew immediately what I was going to do. But it took me two tries to get one that I was really, really pleased with. And I shipped it to him and put the invoice in.

And then I get a phone call, and he says, your work is too cheap. Raise your prices. And they paid my price at the Smithsonian. And Kay—

MS. RIEDEL: Sekimachi.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, Sekimachi, and who is her husband?

MS. RIEDEL: Bob Stocksedale.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, Bob Stocksdale. They were the ones that donated the funds to the Renwick for an acquisition. So my piece is listed, you know, gift of them.

And then, I think the most wonderful thing happened. When they had the reopening of the Renwick at 25, my basket was on display in all its glory along with *Ghost Clock* [Wendell Castle, 1985] and, you know, the giants. [Laughs.] It was just unbelievable. And then not long after that when they did the new rack cards he puts my basket in the rack card. So I think it would be safe to say that Ken really responded to my work.

And in the meantime, I was still doing some basket group shows here and there. I think a lot of them may be in my resume now, and I wrote the book in '99 in *Baskets—A Book for Makers and Collectors*, and it sold 10,000 copies in, like, two months, and it was the earliest one of the guild's book that had gone into reprint. And then the book was purchased—the rights to it were purchased by Haupt—H-A-U-P-T, which are Swiss publishers. And they did a German edition of the book.

And then it was reprinted in the States maybe twice more, and then the guild decided that they were getting out of the publishing business. So that is sort of why the books is not in circulation right now. And I'm hoping that perhaps Lark will pick it up at some point or somebody, but, ah, that was quite an honor.

MS. RIEDEL: We started out talking about exhibitions and wanted to complete that—how did you see exhibitions changing, from the earliest ones you participated in in Philadelphia and the Smithsonian, to the later ones?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, I think doing things, like, in California and Wisconsin obviously broadened my audience. And they are such well-established galleries that people who collect baskets know that they are two of the basket galleries.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUDDUTH: And so that is where they go to look for certain artists, and—

MS. RIEDEL: Or Katie Gingrass or del Mano.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. Because Carol Strauss [sp], who is in Houston, has one of the largest craft basket collections that we know of. And then—he was head of Neutrogena—Lloyd Cotsen had huge Japanese basket collection. I mean, hundreds. But he also wanted American basket makers. And he bought a Fibonacci piece through del Mano.

And then the Montgomery—well, backing up just a little bit, in 1997, I was designated a North Carolina living treasure. And I was the ninth one and the only female and the youngest. And people in that group include Harvey Littleton. But that opened an incredible number of doors. And there was an exhibition with that.

MS. RIEDEL: And where was that exhibition?

MS. SUDDUTH: It was in Wilmington, at the Cameron Art Museum. And then Blue Spiral, after I wrote my book, had me curate a basket show with artists in the book, and I did that and was also in the show. And then I was asked, you know, from time to time to judge or jury for different shows in the South. And then in 2004, I got the—a North Carolina fellowship and branched out somewhat into pursuing chaos theory and fractals and sacred geometry.

So between craft shows in Asheville, Raleigh, and Winston-Salem, and then the Smithsonian and Philadelphia, and then some of the ACC shows, still pretty much in the South: Baltimore, Atlanta, Charlotte. Those were the craft shows. But people came from all over the planet to the Smithsonian craft show. I mean, I have sold to people from Hawaii and—you know, I mean, they came for that show. So that was just tremendous exposure, people from all over the country.

And then the Renwick Alliance would hold their Renwick weekend at that same time, and on different years, they would feature glass or wood, or whatever. So those collectors would come just for the Renwick, not necessarily the show. And then they would come to the show and then they would buy work. And a lot of them bought baskets and started a movement that I think *Fiberarts* said that glass collectors are turning to fiber to soften up their collection and that the glass had gotten so expensive that they were using a different medium. And then I have done two—well, I was at "Renwick at 25," which was just an incredible opportunity because the people in that were, you know, revered craftsmen, and that was an opportunity Ken gave me.

And then I got the fellowship. And then—I grew up in Alabama—and I had juried a big festival there called Kentuck, which was fabulous. And it was really deep South artists. I mean, you know, Southern Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana. So I got to see a lot of work that I had never seen before. And the art director from the Smithsonian magazine, Brian Noyes, N-O-Y-E-S, was the other—there were two of us, and they flew us

down and treated us like royalty.

And at the patron's reception, someone from Montgomery was there and became very interested in my work in terms of an exhibition. So the next thing I know, the director of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts is sitting here in my studio. And it took about three—I might be getting the sequence out of order, but about three or four years to plan it and curate it and get someone to write the essay, which was Howard Risatti, and to get enough work and get permission to borrow so much work.

And it was a wonderful exhibition. Some of the—they mounted the entire set of the Calabash clam baskets in a spiral, a Fibonacci spiral on the wall, and those they borrowed from Jean Rourke. And then the museum wound up buying a piece for their collection and then their director bought a piece. And before that, the Cameron Museum and—oh, I'm leaving out the Mint Museum [of Art and Design, Charlotte, NC], too—the Cameron had purchased a piece.

And one of my collectors in Atlanta was sort of put out that they were putting so much emphasis on pottery but they are only, like, an hour-and-a-half from Seagrove so they obviously would be collecting pottery. And he gave them some of his collection and commissioned—gave them money to commission me to make two more pieces for them. So he gave the gift. So they have several of my pieces, the Cameron Museum in Wilmington, North Carolina.

And then the Mint Museum, when they became the Mint Museum of Art and Design, as an offshoot of their main museum, Mark Leach commissioned a piece, and he wanted it bigger and better than the Renwick's. And I had done a presentation at SECCA, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art [Winston-Salem, NC]. And April Kinsley—I finally thought of her name—was there as part of this panel. And when she heard that Ken had a piece, nothing would do but the American Craft Museum have a piece.

So the Renwick got my—the Renwick was the first museum. The American Craft Museum was the second museum. And then we sort of filtered down to the museum in Wilmington and then the Mint Museum. And then the Montgomery Museum as a result of my solo exhibit there.

And then the Asheville Museum also wanted me to do a solo exhibit the same year. But the exhibit there was up for six months. It was up throughout the tourist season. And it was an incredible success. And it took a different slant, that they are the ones that did the poster that won a huge award in the American Art—Art Museum Association's design competition. It didn't have anything to do with my basket except they were the subject of the poster, but it was the way it was designed.

And I think that was the last museum show I did because I needed [laughs] to take a time out from that.

MS. RIEDEL: How has the response to your work changed over the past 13 years?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, people that are collectors have really taken notice obviously. And you know, people want it, you know. There are a few people that I have taught that their work, you know, can look similar to mine at times, and what I have learned over the years, probably the past 10 years, that that doesn't really matter, that the people want something that I made, you know. You know, it's not a basket that necessarily looks just like that, but a basket that looks like that that I made.

And I have—I mean, I have met people from everywhere from South Africa to England to Australia to, you know, South America. You know, it's just been phenomenal the people that have either been at a craft show or the museum show, or because of my proximity to Penland, have come up my driveway. I mean, you never—this is, as you know, is not on the way to anywhere. I mean, people have got to want to come to this area. And because I'm so close to Penland, I get a lot of visitors from them.

And then Handmade in America out of Asheville published a craft heritage trail several years ago and they have my basket on the front cover. And I have gotten a lot of traffic from that. It is sort of a guide to different artists and mediums, and from Asheville to Boone, probably. It is fairly comprehensive at that time. And I don't know; it's just been—I mean, this is a rural mountain area. And the owner of *The New York Times* might be sitting here or a university president, or—I mean, it's just amazing the kinds of people that have been here: bank presidents. [Laughs.] It's just phenomenal.

And then people around the curve, you know, on the dirt road's daughter wanting her mama to get a piece for Christmas. And my—you know, coming up with something much less expensive that still was a good basket. And the locals come. You know, it's a place; it's a destination for them to show their friends. And it's—I mean, it's been unbelievable. Most of the time it's like we're talking about somebody else—you know, these accolades and things, that it happened. And then since all of this stuff has occurred, then different museums have acquired my work from people gifting the baskets to them like we're seeing in art museum in Long Beach [Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, CA], and the Houston museum [The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX] has been

promised a piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Yesterday you were mentioning the new collectors—since the Fibonacci work began—scientists and mathematicians, and –

MS. SUDDUTH: And physicists and bankers and engineers, and people that—accountants—and people that dealt with numbers. And I would say that most of the people that collect my work are professionals in some capacity.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You said that the scientists come up –

MS. SUDDUTH: In doubt.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, not believing.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, really Doubting Thomases. Like, they heard of this lady up in the mountains that makes baskets using Fibonacci. And they walk in the door and the first thing they say is show me. And I show them and explain it to them. And they just said I never would have believed it. And most of them wind up buying one and taking it away.

And when I started exploring chaos, a NASA engineer who was a Doubting Thomas who came and purchased and now is a true believer, brought an MIT physicist here. This was last summer. And, you know, how in the world—I mean, I think he honestly thought when he came in that he would see a basket that was just a bundle of stuff, you know, just randomly put together.

And when he came in and saw a Fibonacci piece that looked about as good as my regular Fibonacci baskets, but how I would use those Fibonacci numbers and throw them into a chaotic pattern—and then this other piece I did illustrating how Mandelbrot demonstrated chaos on the computer with color and stuff, you know, he left scratching his head, that—you know, wouldn't have believed it unless I saw it. It's amazing.

And a lot of it—I mean, I obviously get very excited talking about the baskets. You know, I'm passionate about them. I love creating them. And it thrills me to no end when somebody really responds to them. And I think a lot of it—I noticed one of the questions that might have been asked was spirituality. And I'm—you know, I think I have faith but I'm not that religious, but I am a spiritual person in terms of just believing that there is something beyond me that has a lot to do with everything. And when I'm doing these baskets, at some point the hands are just the instrument. It's hard to explain.

[END MD 03 TR 02.]

MS. SUDDUTH: When I was in Chicago at the American Craft Exposition, a lady had e-mailed me prior saying she really wanted to meet me. She was a weaver and was fascinated by my baskets, and would I even be willing to have dinner with she and her husband. And I said, well, that would be great because we don't know anything about Chicago. And I said, I love shrimp and garlic, so she said, great, we'll go to an Italian restaurant up north of Evanston, right on Lake Michigan.

And so she came to the show and, oh, maybe for an hour she just talked about the basket and saying, you know, it's like the hands of God created it. It just almost gave me goose bumps. But she was I guess one of the first people that made a reference to—you know, there is something divine in what you do. And then somewhere not long after that, people started referring to them as eye candy, which I had never heard that expression before.

But this lady, she and her husband picked us up and indeed took us to the Italian restaurant. And he was sort of a gruff newspaper writer for the *Chicago Tribune*. He had just gotten back from Kosovo or something—covering the revolution. And he said that he was really trying to get fired from the *Tribune*. They wouldn't fire him. And I thought, okay, why don't you just quit, but I didn't say that. And we get back to the craft show the next day, and somebody in the next booth over said, you know who it was you had dinner with last night, and I said, yeah. And I said, why? He said, well, he is one of the owners of the *Chicago Tribune*.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SUDDUTH: You know, so I mean those kind of things—not a clue. His wife liked my work; he went along for the ride. And it was—the Chicago paper did a great feature—this was before we ever got there—on three or four of us that left our careers to do our craft. One was David Backarack who was a dentist and does metalwork, and somebody else that was a dentist and turned wood, and Cliff Lee who was a surgeon and started being a potter. So there was a nice story about four of us in the Chicago paper. But, you know, it never dawned on me that—you know, it was delightful, and I love not knowing.

And there are people in D.C.—[laughs]—well, the Renwick had a reception for me after I did this lecture at the Smithsonian out at one of the member's houses. And when I got there, they owned the whole top of a building.

It's their penthouse, and, you know, a massive collection, mainly of wood, with a few of my baskets. But she is the one that had taken me to the inner-city school and was a docent, and I just thought, you know, she was a great lady and volunteer but had no idea that the influence probably that she has had in the craft world and with the Renwick. But she is just such a sweet lady. And, you know, just situations like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you want to mention her name?

[END MD 03 TR 03.]

MS. RIEDEL: And the name?

MS. SUDDUTH: Fleur, F-L-E-U-R, and Charles Bresler. And they have a few of the funkier baskets I have ever made, and they have some of the more traditional baskets I have made because she wanted two to be on each side of an iron bed and one at the foot—this room that had a lot of quilts in it. She collects quilts. So she got my checkerboard baskets, commissioned those a couple of years ago.

And a whole bunch of people in the Renwick Alliance have my work. And wood collectors sometimes get it especially if I've got oak in the basket. But the people, you know—I just dearly love most of the people that have my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you ever tempted, when you started in chaos theory or with more abstract mathematics to branch out from the basket form?

MS. SUDDUTH: Not really.

MS. RIEDEL: The form itself.

MS. SUDDUTH: The form itself is—I wanted to do it with color and pattern more than form.

[END MD 03 TR 04.]

MS. SUDDUTH: In terms of where am I going or something, when I go do—especially like the Smithsonian, a show that I have been to for a long time, at the preview parties, people will come in and say what is new. They always want to know what is new.

And Ken Trapp, when he was at the Renwick used to also ask me if I was doing something new. And the presumption is that you need to keep growing and experimenting as an artist, which I don't doubt. But also I can remember what Sam Maloof said one time, that if it ain't broke, don't fix it. So I think there is room for both of those schools, that if you're compelled to—you know, you are not satisfied with where you are in your creations, then definitely explore, but if you're comfortable with it and baskets are time consuming and there is I don't know how many millions of people in the U.S., and you know, only less than 10,000 of them have my work, that, you know, there are plenty of people out there still that would love these classical shapes, and that is what I love making.

And no two are alike. And I'm playing with color a little more just because I started that in the winter when it was gray and bleak up here and I wanted some sunshine. So I created my own. And I'm sure, you know, I'll do different things, but I'm really comfortable doing what I'm doing, and it's certainly not affected people's responses to it.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have really experimented with color, as you said, and with dyes. The yellow that we're looking at is a brand-new color for you.

MS. SUDDUTH: And then early on I experimented with some free form, some mold, some natural materials that I got out of my yard. You know, I did a lot of that, and sort of found my voice doing these proportioned, balanced, mathematical pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You were talking about Chemistry in a Basket.

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, a lot of the color is like a mad chemist. Sometimes when I'm stirring the dye pot, something that—double, double, toil and trouble. But I use plant roots a great deal or nuts, barks, berries. But I have also played with things like pouring wine into the dye pot when it's turned to vinegar because vinegar is a great mordant and then how things change if you put alum in it or more salt or soda ash, or just various things that are usually found around the house, and how things like temperature, amount and duration affect depth of color and other things that you could put in the dye pot that aren't toxic like different berries and, you know, if you run them in a blender and have them in a more liquid state before you put them in, well, you get a deeper color than if you just put them in and boil them.

And then, you know, just writing, almost like leaving my secrets in a way in terms of how I—especially the red. I have had people studying it and studying it and wanting to know how do you get that red. And people have tried to get the red, but unless they get the water out of my well, I doubt seriously that they would ever come up with a red that I have got unless they live in an area that the water has the same chemistry. And maybe, you know, I find out a little more about what is in my water. I might not want to though since it makes the baskets red and who knows what it might be doing to our stomachs.

And then, just, you know, various possibilities. I avoided chemistry some as a student because of the mathematics part of it, and being in this area with all of the gems and mining, I know a potter that has started using some quartz in his clay compound. And, you know, how would it be if I ground or had somebody grind some of these minerals that are up here. Would that give me a color that is unique only to this area, you know, with mica and quartz, and various things.

MS. RIEDEL: How has it affected your works or your working process to have moved here?

MS. SUDDUTH: Greatly, because I am surrounded by so many creative crafts persons that are really, really good, and then the living treasure honor being bestowed. I feel like I can't do anything but my very best. If it's not really good then I don't want to send it out there. It has put pressure on me personally to make sure that I'm doing a quality product. But also some of these other artists that live here, especially the potters, are phenomenal, and the difference in how they're succeeding and how I'm succeeding is my being in the right place at the right time. Because I don't think my work is that much better in my medium than some of theirs is in their medium.

But I've documented my work, and it's been out there. It shows up in magazines now that I don't even know they're doing it. And a lot of it has really been luck because there are so many artists and crafts people that create beautiful work and they are not established yet.

MS. RIEDEL: But your work is so unique. The fusion of math and—[Sudduth laughs]—basketry. I was just saying earlier what a perfect reflection it is, culturally, of—

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, I think, probably, two things led to that, and this is something I've not really thought of before. Well, part of it I have. The concept of basket makers in Appalachia historically are uneducated, poor people, who don't have a choice about anything in their lives. That's how the Appalachian baskets evolved; they needed them to harvest the fields and stuff.

And then the other, that Appalachian people are dumb hillbillies. That's been the Snuffy Smith image. I think that's what HandMade in America has beautifully illustrated, that it ain't so. And also that southern girls maybe aren't as smart as northern girls, or that southern people maybe aren't. And that, you know, the southern wife is the good wife and mother, and maybe not even a career. That was the old stereotype of the old south. So I think my baskets dispel a lot of the old stereotypes. That I'm right in the heart of Appalachia, I was actually born in Appalachia, in Tennessee. I grew up between the last two mountains in the Appalachian chain, which is Birmingham, but I didn't cotton to the domestic part of being a female in the South. I didn't want to knit and crochet and tat and rug hook and stuff. I wanted to be more involved with people and I wanted to be educated.

And then with the basket, most baskets are done because of the aesthetic of it, you know, and I doubt seriously if there are many basket makers at all that have to use a higher level of knowledge to create what they do. And I really have been very proud that I have created something that has some intellect to it, and that's the kind of thing that these people respond to. That in itself is unusual.

And then I think another thing is that I've never shied away from talking about them. Because it's just—like that and my children and grandchildren ask me a question and I'll grin and tell you all you want to know.

MS. RIEDEL: So for the next stage, the Chemistry in a Basket, are you thinking about applying the same sort of experimentation that you did with math to the chemicals that go into the dyes?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. And of course, you know if I did anything with schools it would have to be something safe.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUDDUTH: And then another—I personally think you could teach an entire school curriculum using baskets. Because English, you know, the container, over, under, prepositions, all of that. Writing about them. That sort of thing. History, obviously.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SUDDUTH: Economics, and how third world countries are still making a nickel a week weaving where American basket makers can make up to—I don't know what John McQueen's [works] go for, but you know, many thousands, as other crafts people can. And then a little bit of geography, and the materials in different parts of the country. And now with the Green movement, you know, sustaining. I mean, don't just go down and cut oak and ash trees unless you can really use it, or you know, if you're using the bark don't strip it, unless it's dying. I mean, you know, to not purposefully destroy nature. And I think that's the other thing that my baskets sort of do, is celebrate nature, in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely, both material-wise and conceptually.

MS. SUDDUTH: But I get distracted, too, with exhibitions. And next year's my 25th and I have elected to do a show right here in Mitchell County at the arts council because the arts councils historically are the ones that really gave me my start with awards and fellowships and grants and things and I think it's really appropriate. And I live here now. And people come up to this area if they see it and there's a number of people in this county that have my work. And I will have new work. I'm going to make replicas of early work and then I'm going to borrow work from people in Mitchell County to show that not only is this a community of artists, but it's also a community of collectors.

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

[END MD 03 TR 05.]

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think there are any differences between a university-trained artist and somebody who is primarily self-taught?

MS. SUDDUTH: I really do, in terms of—I think university-trained artists have more opportunities, especially if they go into teaching and having an M.F.A. is critical if you are going to teach at a university. And I have an M.S.W. [laughs] which has nothing to do with art. But I have been a guest artist at East Carolina University School of Art. And people like Bob Ebendorf are professors there; they hold a distinguished chair. And I spent I think a week with them. And then the University of North Carolina at Wilmington has invited me to be a guest artist. You can be guest artist, but you can't be on the faculty. And you know the old adage, those who can do, those who can't teach. And it's been a salvation for a lot of fabulous craft people that couldn't make a living with their craft, even though it's wonderful, and they teach. But that's crucial, too, to pass on the legacy.

But I don't know of a single university in the whole country that has basket making in their curriculum. I don't. I think until probably 20 or 30 years ago nobody gave baskets the time of day. And Ed Rossbach sort of started a whole new movement there, and I think the interesting thing—most of the baskets that evolved from that period are much more sculptural and different materials and not traditional at all. And I sort of came in and, you know, well, mine are more toward the traditional in terms of the form, but then the math part of it. But I don't think people really took basketry seriously. And now I think they are.

And I think a university-trained artist probably explores a lot more possibilities than somebody who is self-taught. And are maybe forced to stretch even more than a self-taught artist and they probably are exposed to various mediums more than a self-taught artist. And they're probably better writers if they publish books. You know, because they've had the whole academic thrust. But fortunately, having a college education, you know, at least I had to learn to read and write and stuff. [Riedel laughs.] You know what I mean.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SUDDUTH: To be cogent, lucid and succinct.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. SUDDUTH: I think they have an advantage, too, with residencies in craft schools because it just sort of says, you know, I am committed to this. Whereas a self-taught artist might say forget it, or, you know, I'll do that when I have time but I'm going to do this. And I do think that a huge—[dog barks]. Yes Maxwell, you can be in the Archives too.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SUDDUTH: I think a huge problem that I've read about in universities, and it's certainly been the case with me, is that you're not taught the business end of running a craft studio. And mine—there again, self taught, trial and error. So, you know, there's still a lot that can be done, I think, in craft programs.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, do you try to address any of that when you teach at Penland?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, and I've been on seminars. And especially here in Mitchell County, there has been a

program—it was in the late-'90s—Rural Entrepreneurialship Learning, or something. And it was a marriage between Penland and the community college [Mayland Community College, Spruce Pine, NC] where established artists would take on an apprentice for three years and teach them the craft and the business part of it. No, Mayland taught the business part of it and Penland taught the craft. And three of the people wanted to do baskets. So Penland contracted with me to do the basket part of it. And one gal stayed with me the whole three years and she's one of the ones I sent to Long Beach for that Math in a Basket workshop.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SUDDUTH: And now she's teaching school [laughs] but another one is still making baskets, but not real seriously. But the community college there and then Haywood Community College [Waynesville, NC] on the other side of Asheville, they have serious craft programs. It's a two year program and you learn the business aspect of it as well as refining your craft.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SUDDUTH: So I see it, you know, being done more at the community level than say at Cranbrook [Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI] or RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

[END OF MD 03 TR 06.]

MS. RIEDEL: What place do you think American baskets hold on an international scale?

MS. SUDDUTH: I feel like they're almost vital to it. I think of all the basket makers that have been invited from London to Australia to, you know, Africa, to teach. I've been invited to go to Africa and wasn't able to, but I think there is a deep respect for the basket evolution in the U.S. and an amazing thing, a lot of it are carryovers or they're ideas that were brought over when the country was settled, like from the Germans and maybe the British and each country having their own unique style.

But I feel like that probably the U.S. has published more books on basketry at this point. A lot of them have been translated into other languages—U.S. basket makers are invited, especially in Australia and in Great Britain, to exhibit in international basket shows. The Philadelphia Museum of Art has added 20 crafts people to the 195 they already select from the U.S., but they select a different country every year to sort of share culturally. They've had Germany and England and Wales and Scotland and Ireland, and there have been basket makers that have come, and their processes are very similar but the outcome is just totally different.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you feel like there has been a special level of innovation in contemporary American baskets?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yes, absolutely, because most of the things that I've seen in other countries—most of them—are purposeful. They're made for specific reasons, whereas American basket makers I think have sort of trailblazed the ones that are purely art. And it's, I think, beginning to affect, obviously, some of the people that are in international guilds like Fiberarts International and things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Based on what we've said over the past couple of days, it seems like you consider yourself very much part of an American tradition, and then having branched out.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, I think that's a good way to put it, yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Taking it to the next step.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Are there any writers—either in specific periodicals, *American Craft* or *Fiberarts*, or in general—that have been significant or influential to you? You mentioned Ed Rossbach earlier.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right. Well, I love reading *American Craft*, and *American Style* has been a magazine that's sort of featured different people's homes and how they've lived with this craft they've collected, and that's been quite educational. I think *American Craft*, up until maybe the last year or two, has dealt more from a scholarly viewpoint on some of the artists, and *Fiberarts* has really been international in terms of featuring basket makers and weavers and dyers and people from third world countries all the way to, you know, the U.S., and *Shuttle, Spindle and Dyepot* have been valuable magazines because sometimes they have little instructions in there for—I know they've done my—what was it? They did an article I wrote called One One—"Fibonacci One One Two Three," and it's where they—or maybe that was *Fiberarts*—but it was where they were showing baskets that utilized these proportions versus baskets that utilize just the sequence, and that's where they showed some Choctaw and Cherokee baskets with the sequence, I mean, the proportions, and my baskets were the sequence.

And then books, *John McQueen: Language of Containment* [essays by Vicki Halper and Ed Rossbach. Washington, D.C.: Renwick Gallery, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1991] and Ed Rossbach, I mean, he's done two or three books, and that was a great loss, but he also, I think, you know, is sort of the Harvey Littleton of baskets, that he's the one that emphasized basketry in the educational curriculum of the university and was well-received and I think also wrote about the possibilities of baskets, that, you know, it doesn't have to be made with oak or reed or whatever. It can be made with who-knows-what.

MS. RIEDEL: We talked about that, too, that basket, as a craft, is the one that's not media-specific.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right—defined—yeah, because there have been baskets, you know, made out of clothespins and straws and grow-grain ribbon—

MS. RIEDEL: Nails.

MS. SUDDUTH: Nails, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Clay.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, it's just amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: Copper. All sorts of metals.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. And yet—silver. And yet, they are still discernable or called a basket. So that's definitely something very unique to baskets because we couldn't make a basket and call it glass, but Dale Chihuly can blow glass and call it a basket, even though I did a basket and I call it pottery—[they laugh].

MS. RIEDEL: You call it pottery, right.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, the Penland basket.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah, but still, that's sort of not the norm.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Would you tell me what you think the significance of baskets are—what baskets do that nothing else can? What's so important about a basket?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, personally, I think they say that, you know, they're for everybody, you know, users, collectors, that they're not—they can be art; they don't have to be art. They can be used; they don't have to be used. And I think there's probably not a home in the country that doesn't have one of some kind, you know, whether it's an inexpensive import or, you know, a major work of art, and everybody probably grew up with baskets, and then they are things like, you know, Easter, where baskets are the thing of choice to get Easter eggs. This is something I did in the Math in a Basket when I brainstorm with kids, but you know, even America, one of their great sports, basketball, you know, it's a basket, but it's open-ended so the ball can go through it.

And there are just all sorts of uses or non-uses, and they're not necessary most of the time anymore, but there was a time when they were vital to people, and that's why there are not a lot of really old ones around, because they weren't considered beauty, so they hung them in the barn or on the back porch until it was time to, you know, go to the field again, and they, over time, you know, would wear out or burn with the barn or insects would eat them or—but then they keep resurrecting themselves.

MS. RIEDEL: They've been essential.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —Native Americans cooked in them.

MS. SUDDUTH: And the amazing thing, and not a whole lot of people are really aware of this, and there are two facts that I find interesting. It predates pottery. It's probably the oldest craft form known to man because they would weave a basket and smear the basket on the inside with clay and then burn the basket away until it dawned on them that they could just shape the clay and burn it, you know, fire it, and then basketry, there's also references somewhere that basketry is the oldest profession known to man, not prostitution—[they laugh]—that the early, early, early, early people, you know, wove baskets out of grass or straw to either catch fish in or their huts or they buried the dead in a basket thing. So it's, you know, it's been around forever.

MS. RIEDEL: As we were talking about yesterday, each culture has its own—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —particular style, its own particular shape, often.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right. I mean, you can tell a Zulu basket from a sweetgrass basket from a German willow basket. I mean, you know, yeah, it's very, very distinctive.

MS. RIEDEL: And all the different functions, from fishing—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —to egg baskets to—

MS. SUDDUTH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: —elbow baskets.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right. Well, the elbow baskets are really Native American, and they were made for medicinal purposes, that they would store herbs and things in it, and then, later, they would put quivers in them, but they basically were like herb-drying baskets.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm, hmm.

MS. SUDDUTH: And the Native Americans, you know, a lot of their earlier work was purposeful, and then when white men came and showed an interest in these designs, then that's where it became commercial. And the Shaker baskets, they were done strictly as a commercial venture, sell, you know, to the masses. They had tremendously high standards that each one had to be perfectly made, but they made it to raise money for the religious sect.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you talk a bit about your working process and how it's changed over time?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, space—[they laugh]—is a major—

MS. RIEDEL: Out of the garage.

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, no, before the garage, I had the dining room.

MS. RIEDEL: That's right. [They laugh.]

MS. SUDDUTH: Yes, and we would put plastic down on the carpet and I would have paper bags stored with every conceivable weavable thing you could imagine, and then when I went through my really native material phase, we were living in Las Vegas, where everybody in the world had a swimming pool—you know, low class, middle class, they all had pools because it was the only way you could survive the heat, and our swimming pool sort of became a repository for all the grapevine that I had harvested so it wouldn't dry out until I could use it.

And in New Bern, I had the dining room. In Vegas, the dining room. When we got to Wilmington, I was moved to the garage because my family was really tired—I'd be sitting in the living room or the den and we would be watching something on TV and I would be weaving and slinging water on them, so the garage became my first real studio, and when I quit my career as a school psychologist, even though in Wilmington I did some contract work, I would—I couldn't wait to get up in the morning to start weaving. When I was doing both, I usually couldn't start weaving until about 9:30 at night, nine or 9:30, because I had my job, then I had children and Doug, and meals to fix, laundry to do, transporting the kids to numerous activities. So I'd start about nine and stay up to about one, and then I'd get up at six or 6:30, and that's that point at which I finally decided one of the careers had to go.

MS. RIEDEL: How long did you do that for?

MS. SUDDUTH: Six years. I would be weaving on the sidelines of a soccer game. I think I wove everywhere but in church. Yeah, and then when we moved to Wilmington, I could sort of pick and choose when I wanted to work professionally, so I spent most of my time in the garage. It did have windows, thank goodness, and a back door that I could keep open, and finally had to have a screen put up so the bugs wouldn't come in, and my dogs would stay out there with me, but it was, you know, except for having a garage door on it, it was a studio. I mean, there were shelves, and on one side were the supplies and on another side finished pieces, and it was up about five steps into the kitchen where I would have to bring boiling water out to make dye, so that was a pain but—and I did have a big laundry sink to put in. So really, once we moved up here, this is the first real studio

I've ever had, and I have hot plates now in the preparation area, so to speak, so I don't have to drag water from upstairs down, and the hardest thing, living on a mountain, is getting water.

MS. RIEDEL: How high up are we here?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, we're almost 3,000 feet here, but water is a big, big deal. Make sure you have a source of water and you're near a state road so you can get scraped and snow-plowed and whatever. But part of my studio that's where my supplies are and the shave horse and all the dyes and dye pots is below grade; it's lower than the ground. So we got water into it, no problem, but getting the water to drain uphill was a little bit of a problem, and fortunately we had a very creative plumber who figured out a way to do that.

And since I've been up here—and this is going on 14 years—I think I earned the reputation of being one of the hardest working artists up here because I would get up at 6:30 or seven and stay down here until midnight, and I sort of quit cooking much because I needed a break, so I'd go out and eat when there were places to go. But I just strictly buried myself in it for a number of years and didn't socialize much. I would go to Penland openings, but I would be preparing for these shows, and tourists would come to me or whatever, but I really, you know, stayed here, didn't do anything except make baskets.

And then I started having grandchildren so I would take off and drive across the state to see them, and then I sort of got to where I could coordinate some of my exhibits with making sure I could get down there to see the grandchildren. And this year, in April, I actually taught Math in a Basket at my grandson's school in Wilmington, pro bono, I just wanted to, because he would say, Grandma, why can't you come to my school?

MS. RIEDEL: How old –

MS. SUDDUTH: He was 10 years old—

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. SUDDUTH: —fifth grade. So that was real special. And—

MS. RIEDEL: How was it received?

MS. SUDDUTH: Oh, fabulous. I found out how shy my grandson, oldest grandson, was, but it was very well—and the teachers, you know, want me to come back next year, and I said, you've got to wait another year—then the other grandson will be—[laughs]—in the right grade. But I still work, you know, if I'm home, I'm working. But we have started doing a little more trips that don't involve a show, like the one coming up, obviously, to England.

MS. RIEDEL: Because your son is getting married?

MS. SUDDUTH: Because he's getting married, yeah. And I'm excited—I'm hoping that I get to meet a few of the English basket makers. They've written books that I've had and go to the Victoria and Albert Museum [London] and things like that, but I'm still working as hard as ever, doing more involved pieces that seem to take longer, and cutting down on my shows but still never have enough work. So.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you raise the prices?

MS. SUDDUTH: They've incrementally gone up over the years. Yeah, but when Ken told me they were too—I was selling them, you know, far less than I should be selling them for, I slowly, each year, would start raising prices, and now they're pretty settled where they're going to stay. In one way, I've come up with my price structure. Someone told me years ago, don't put a price on it that would be less than what you would be willing to make it for again.

MS. RIEDEL: Did your dealers encourage you to raise your prices, too?

MS. SUDDUTH: No, one of them had a fit. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm surprised, actually. I would have thought the encouragement to raise prices would have come—

MS. SUDDUTH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: —from dealers—

MS. SUDDUTH: No.

MS. RIEDEL: I would have thought that it might have been an advantage to having a dealer as opposed to doing it all on yourself.

MS. SUDDUTH: No, I sort of raised them as the market would bear, and I've had a range of work, from price ranges, so that, you know, there's something affordable.

MS. RIEDEL: You have a real range. I—

MS. SUDDUTH: A real range, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Under a hundred dollars, it seems, some of the—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —ones at the shop downtown.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then up to a few thousand.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah. And most of it's based on how long it takes me to make them, but I don't figure in, you know, okay, three hours and I want to make X number of dollars an hour. If it's, you know, a museum piece, it's going to be a lot more expensive than one that's not because it took me a lot of time to make it.

Yeah, I don't think I've really followed any of the normal paths of being a crafts person, but I've been fortunate, and I'm still thriving.

MS. RIEDEL: What are your immediate plans for the next few years, other than lots more time with the grandchildren?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, more time with the grandchildren, less shows, making whatever I want to make, not having to prepare for a museum show. I figure I've got time to do that, you know, for next year because it's not until August when I do the, sort of a retrospective show. Maybe develop a little more of a life. I think I can't play tennis anymore because I'm so out of shape, but this winter, just as a break, I started back with a bridge group, and then I had to quit because of shows that were coming up, but I like the mental challenge of bridge. And maybe travel a little more, and rather than go do exhibits, maybe do more judging or jurying, lecturing, well, you know, just, I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: And the baskets themselves, is the emphasis still on the exploration of fractals and—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —sacred geometry and chaos theory?

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, I mean, there is—and you know, I already have in mind more ways to incorporate Fibonacci in the twills, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to talk about that?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, it's just—it'd be different patterns to it, and I still want to do that yellow chaos basket and either dip it in paint or spatter paint on it or something, and I think that I can do that now. [They laugh.] I mean, I mean, I've done three, and gosh, they were all gorgeous, and I just couldn't do it. But I'm going to—what I would sort of—

MS. RIEDEL: They were too beautiful—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —to want to spatter.

MS. SUDDUTH: But what I would really like to do is have it have a small rim and stick that upside down into paint and turn it back up and let it drip down and then put it upside down into another bucket into four colors, and as they drip down, let that be the—sort of like candle wax drips down, just to see what it would do.

MS. RIEDEL: And they'd be dyes you'd be using or actual paint?

MS. SUDDUTH: I would use paint for that. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And you haven't painted on baskets in a long time, since the daisies.

MS. SUDDUTH: Not anything except for polka dots.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SUDDUTH: I paint a lot of polka dots, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, for the Illusion baskets.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SUDDUTH: And I would sort of like to create a basket that's like chaos or—pendulum—to do one that has a basket in the center but has basket appendages to it, where it would, you know, go in chaotic motion. I'll get there.

MS. RIEDEL: It'll be an interesting evolution from the basket in Las Vegas, with all the dangling materials.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Well this has been wonderful. Is there anything else that you'd like to add? Any final thoughts?

MS. SUDDUTH: Well, I guess that this will be preserved for historians and whatever. I don't think anybody really knows what makes me tick—[laughs]—but a quality I had my whole life, I think, is spontaneity and enthusiasm, and I'm outspoken, but I have to say that I have been very, very fortunate in how my career has evolved, and you don't get there by yourself. I mean, you honestly—you know, there are people every step of the way that have an impact on you and your work and how it's perceived and the importance of it, and I've just been real lucky.

And then, living in an environment like this, where there are crafts people coming out of the woodworks and they're my neighbors and my friends, and people come from all over the planet to see their work, and it's sort of like living at the ocean and not going to get seashells because they're there, but it's just an environment that's conducive to creativity.

MS. RIEDEL: It's true. Just driving around, one is just struck by the number of—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —studios and galleries open to the public, anybody who'd like to knock on the door.

MS. SUDDUTH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Or just walk right in. [Laughs.]

MS. SUDDUTH: Walk right in, yeah. And some come without a clue, and a lot know exactly what we're about, and it's fun educating people, you know, to explain to somebody why that might be worth three times as much as the other one and that sort of thing. I think that's—I think that's a responsibility we have to people that purchase our work, is to let them know, you know, why this piece is what it is and why it's the price it is and how it got to be that color or that shape or—and that's, I think, the beauty of craft shows, is people, especially like at the Smithsonian, they really want to meet the artist and talk and find out, you know, how and why and all of that, whereas if a gallery represented me, I wouldn't have that opportunity. I will say, though, that probably within the next 10 years, I will start letting a gallery represent me so I don't have to.

MS. RIEDEL: It's very time consuming—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —explaining and talking and—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Often pleasurable, but often—

MS. SUDDUTH: But I think I'm established enough that, you know, if people see my work in a gallery, they'll know

it's my work, but that still doesn't take away the thing—it's like they'll see a piece at Blue Spiral and they still want to come up here and meet me. So we'll see.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you so much.

MS. SUDDUTH: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: It's been a great pleasure.

[END MD 03 TR 07.]

MS. RIEDEL: We're back to add this one—

MS. SUDDUTH: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: —at the end. So—

MS. SUDDUTH: A final thought.

MS. RIEDEL: Over the past five years—

MS. SUDDUTH: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, final thoughts.

MS. SUDDUTH: Over the past five years, probably a little longer than that, just sort of gradually increasing in number, I've been approached by museums and non-profits and whatever to donate things for auctions like I did the Smithsonian raffle this year, but our little county in western North Carolina is greatly impoverished right now with industry and stuff leaving.

MS. RIEDEL: It's one of the poorest, if not the poorest, county in the state. Is that—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah, and the highest unemployment rate, and I used to give to just about anybody and everybody that would ask for something, but now I've narrowed it down to primarily Mitchell County and museums, and I feel that it's really important to give back. I mean, I have been so fortunate in my career and people wanting my work and collecting my work that a great way I can give back is to give baskets to various fundraisers and no strings attached, you know, and people bid on them, silent auctions or live auctions, and I've been doing that with—excuse me—Penland for many years, but having just totally immersed myself in my craft, you know, I don't volunteer, I don't do much of anything in that respect, whereas my husband will deliver meals on wheels and he's on boards and stuff, and I thought, well a great way is through my baskets.

So some of the events I've organized myself as fundraisers, and others are through established agencies like the battered women's shelter and the food pantry and Habitat for Humanity and the animal shelter. Animals are a large part of our lives up here. You probably won't go to any studio that doesn't have at least one. And I've organized dinners where I've taught people how to make baskets, and they're the centerpieces and they buy the centerpieces, and I have a workshop tomorrow, as a matter of fact, if you want to drop by, downtown.

But I just, I think it's important to, you know, not just take, take, take, but to give, and there are a lot of artists that, you know, whether it be a glassblower at Pilchuck [Glass School, Stanwood, WA] or somebody, you know, though Penland or whatever that give, and I think it would be wonderful to be at a point where I didn't have to sell any, that I could just give them to whoever I chose to give them to, and especially people that can't afford them that would just love one, and I'm sort of doing things in that vein a little bit, too, but it's just important to not keep it all.

MS. RIEDEL: We were just looking at your log as well, which dates back to the early '80s—

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: —and something else we thought worth mentioning is that this is, the latest basket is number 9,336.

MS. SUDDUTH: Yeah. [Laughs.] Nine thousand, three hundred and thirty-seven is in progress.

MS. RIEDEL: We're looking at it right on the table.

MS. SUDDUTH: And I sign and date every single basket I make, and each one of them has a tag with a number up to that point of how many—I didn't keep numbers, you know, of like garlic baskets or Fibonacci Fives, although I have another record of that somewhere else. But it's just in succession how many baskets I've made.

MS. RIEDEL: You didn't do that for the snowflakes, though?

MS. SUDDUTH: No. I've probably made 10 times as many snowflakes or overseen their making, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Good. Well I think that was absolutely worth adding.

MS. SUDDUTH: Good.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]