

## **Jack Lenor Larsen Oral History Project: Interview with Karen Tokar**

**Stephanie Zollinger:** It's Friday, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2010, and I'm here with Karen Tokar. I'm going to ask her to tell us her Larsen experience, give us a little background information such as where she grew up, what her interests were, her textile background, and then I would like her to tell us how she began working with Larsen.

**Karen Tokar:** I grew up in Forest Hills, Queens, New York. I'm a New York City girl. I graduated from Long Island University with a Bachelor's in Pre-Med. I got married and moved to Rome, Italy. I lived there for five years, where my daughter was born. My son was born shortly after we returned. Like many people of my generation, the time came for a divorce. After that was finalized, I needed to get a job. The first job I got was working for a company in customer service that made blood in urine analyzers, because of my science background. They moved to Indianapolis. I decided not to go with them, although I was offered. A friend of mine had interviewed at Larsen and did not feel it was an appropriate position for him but recommended me for the job. I walked into the offices that were on University Place and 11th Street. I had never even heard of Larsen.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** And didn't know what textiles were?

**Karen Tokar:** Not a clue. Well, I used to sew and I knit, so I knew about dye lots. I knew things about physical properties from sewing, especially what they will do, and what dyes will do and such. I walked in and there were these fabrics, this small waiting room and these fabric samples hanging. There was an upholstered chair that had a fabric on it. It was this sort of cognac colored square with the center square in this gorgeous turquoise color that was highlighted by the light. My reaction, while I'm waiting to be interviewed was, "Any place that can make something that's this gorgeous has to be a cool place to work in." That's how I started working at Larsen. I was interviewed.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** For what position?

**Karen Tokar:** For the Customer Service Manager. The Customer Service Manager at Larsen was responsible for customer service, order processing, complaints, problems, invoicing, and also purchasing. We gave the purchase orders to the mills for what to make. We fought with them about delivery. We fought with them about quality. As soon as it came out of the Design Studio and got ordered it came into our domain.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Did you feel overwhelmed when you first were hired?

**Karen Tokar:** No, I loved it. I loved it from the second I walked in the door and to this day I loved it. I had a wonderful mentor. There was a woman, Ellen Guarnieri, who was in charge of the Textile Division at that time. She taught me everything about customer service. I had several years of experience by that point but she taught me a lot more about it. She taught me about the processing and so forth, and the rest I learned by the seat of my pants.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So about what year did you begin working?

**Karen Tokar:** I started in 1983, January. After my interview, I came in because every year we used to have these Christmas parties that were legendary for us.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Famous.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. The company had a phenomenal mix of ethnicities. The Christmas party would have everybody make something that was a favorite and, because we had people from all over the world and all walks of life, we had a great assortment of food plus the standards were brought in, the turkey, and the ham, and such. In those days we had a band and we invited vendors and they were these big events. My first experience was meeting my staff at the Christmas party right before I started. And, right before I started, I also met two managers who would be critical in my interactions, the Head of the Shipping Department and Warehousing and the Head of the Sample Department. Livi McFarlane was the Head of the Warehouse and Rose Marie-Nielsen was sampling. For customer service we had to be able to get samples out and we had to be able to get the goods out and in.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** You probably had a lot of designers after you for all those little memo samples.

**Karen Tokar:** Well, yes, but they went to the showrooms. We really tried to feed them to the showrooms. That's the way to get the salespeople hooked onto somebody, working on something, what do they need, let me send you these samples. Also, if you've got that kind of project, it's a phenomenal sales tool. Then, through time, I learned more about the financial end of it. I learned more about the qualities. I learned more about the various mills which were all over the world. I learned more about dealing with people. At some point, I became the Textile Division Director and Ellen went into Sales and Marketing. Then, at some point, another woman, Susan Lehrmitt, came in. She became the Textile Division Director and I became the Director of Operations. At that time I took over the customer service for furniture and purchasing for the Furniture Division as well. I ended up, by the time Larsen was sold, I was the Vice President of Operations.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Okay.

**Karen Tokar:** That's the history with Larsen. My interaction with the studio was constant because if there were quality issues and mill problems I dealt with them. If a product's in development we always talked about what are potential faults that could happen. Jack often asked what did I think about something in terms of sales, because I watched the sales histories. I would submit to him things to be discontinued. I had a very good handle on what colors in general seemed to do okay, what kinds of patterns seemed to do okay and what qualities we had issues with.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** What were some of the most common quality control issues?

**Karen Tokar:** Well, a lot of the things were handcrafted. Even though they weren't necessarily hand-loomed they had this handcrafted quality about them. People don't always understand those kinds of variations. Many of the processes of dying the yarns were all hand-done and there were variations. Designers, unfortunately, will often paint the walls before they get a sample of the actual dye lot they're getting and it doesn't always work the way the memo did. That was a problem and delivery times. The main issue is the delivery time. We didn't have too many complaints.

More of the complaints were where is it, when is it, you know. We didn't have many quality complaints. People would use a silk unlined in the window and complain after four years that it rotted, it happens, you know, it happens. We had all kinds of disclaimers on things about what you could do, couldn't do. The sales staff and the Design Studio were all very helpful if we ever had a question of its being properly used. They always helped put it together if there was a question.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Did you keep a certain number of fabrics in stock?

**Karen Tokar:** Oh yes.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** You had to, almost.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. When I became Vice President of Operations I was also responsible for the warehouse, and shipping, and sampling. We had a large warehouse. We inventoried our own. We shipped from our own location. The orders would come or the reserves would come and we'd enter them into the system. A good designer will always ask for a cutting for approval of a dye lot. So a sample will go out for them to approve. At some point the fabric would be ready and we'd ship it.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So were you in charge?

**Karen Tokar:** I was in charge.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** In terms of when flammability codes came about and you had to have a flame retardant applied, did you then ship it off to, say, Kiesling-Hess?

**Karen Tokar:** Yes, one of our favorite firms. Jack was a firm believer that a fabric that's properly used for the application it is intended doesn't usually need treatment. We didn't supply anything with paper backing. We were firmly against paper backing because, when you paper-back something, if there's a crinkle in the paper, it's permanent. Some of the handcrafted fabrics we put acrylic backing on, like the ones from Colombia and the ones from Uruguay. They were more loosely woven so you wanted to make sure they anchored for upholstery. We sold nothing

with a flame retardant treatment. It was either a Trevira, that is a yarn which is inherently flame retardant, or, if a designer was using an application that required it, they had to send it out and take care of it themselves.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Okay.

**Karen Tokar:** We would do it occasionally. We'd charge them. We preferred not to because flame retardant finishing always changes the color and the hand. It really affects it, it really does affect it.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** My question to you was, then, if you did use a lot or send out in terms of flame retardants, how did you look ahead and say, "I know that this orange is going to vary this much how can I mitigate this?"

**Karen Tokar:** We never sent out. We never inventoried it with the treatment on it. If it wasn't something that was inherently flame retardant and if a designer wanted it done, we would send it wherever they wanted to have it done, with the notice.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** With the claimer, yes.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes, and most of the designers know. For residential, especially at that time, nobody required any kind of flame retardant finishing. For contract they would do it, they would finish it, or they would buy a Trevira. Upholstery was a different issue because upholstery you really had to pass a lot of tests. There were some fabrics that we would test. We would publish that it passed certain tests on their own like...

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Abrasion resistance?

**Karen Tokar:** Abrasion resistance. If they, like the Treviras, passed California 701 and things like that, we put it on the tags. As the contract market started getting more involved we started putting more of the information on the tags.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Right. A lot of the fibers that he used during those time periods, the wools, were actually inherently flame retardant anyway.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes, they would pass your basic tests. The industry became a lot tougher after the fire in Las Vegas. They became a lot more strict about tests. For upholstery, if a cigarette fell behind the cushion, they wanted to know if it passed. At some point some places required the test where you would actually burn a piece of furniture, which we didn't. Fabric wasn't so bad because you supplied the fabric but, in the Furniture Division, if we had to supply the furniture frame upholstered that was a lot of money.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Did you see it change the direction of Larsen Fabrics at all?

**Karen Tokar:** No. We were always about the design and the qualities. Mostly, because we were predominantly a national fiber house, most of these fibers can be treated to pass almost anything. It wasn't a big issue for us. We did, I don't know how many, thousands of yards of silk on walls that people backed and in the backing process treated it and up it went.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Yes. Can you talk about your involvement, if you had any, with the showrooms?

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. Obviously my customer service people were always involved with the showrooms. Sometimes designers would call directly to place a reserve or to check stock. More frequently a salesperson, if there were problems that they needed to get something in a hurry, they would ask if we could do something special, a custom order, because we did do custom colors and custom qualities. Those would all come to me. I dealt with them daily.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Can you talk about some of your most well-known accounts or clients that you dealt with?

**Karen Tokar:** Certainly. Gensler comes to mind pretty quickly in the contract world. Here's the problem you were talking about with memory, things go with memory. Let's see, there's Genslers and I'm trying to think

of others. There were a lot of small, ongoing residential or mixed designers, small firms. I, in fact, still work for one of them, a gentleman by the name of Stuart Major. He was a regular. He was the kind of designer, designers like him, who paid the rent. You knew, almost every job he had, we were the first place he would come.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Great.

**Karen Tokar:** You know, the 400-yard orders are wonderful, the 3,000-yard knock yourself off orders, or the 10,000 yards are wonderful, but they're not consistent, they're not regular. You want the guy who always wants 20-, 25-yards for a sofa, 30-yards, 50-yards for drapes over and over and over again. There were thousands, there were thousands like that. I'm trying to remember.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Like The Limited. You had their account?

**Karen Tokar:** We had their account, yes, we had their account.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Any others that come to mind?

**Karen Tokar:** No, but I'm sure there are. That was the kind of thing that salespeople would say, "But it's for so and so." For me, it was, "I don't care." I can only do what I can do and it could be The Limited and it could be for God and they still can't weave it faster than they can weave it. If there's a problem they have to deal with it. I didn't pay a lot of attention to that.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** You had a lot of involvement with all the outside mills, correct?

**Karen Tokar:** Oh yes, all the time, yes.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** How did you decide which mills to use? I'm sure it was based on what they could provide and what outcome you were looking for.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes and that was a Design Studio call. When I first started at Larsen the world of textile design was already starting to change. Jack was in the forefront getting mills, finding mills, finding sources, and getting them to do things that they didn't know they could do. Getting them to weave in a certain technique, or to dye, or to use certain fibers or certain combinations. We had the Design Studio for that. We did prints and we did wovens. Through time, the mills started developing their own design studios, especially the bigger ones, to broaden their sales base and to learn how to use their technologies better.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Was that a natural evolution or was that mainly because they saw what Jack was doing?

**Karen Tokar:** I think it was an evolution because they saw the market. They saw Jack and Jack, by the time I started working, was not the only one. I think they started saying, "We developed this with Jack but we can use this technology." They started taking samples to other people and they said, "Well, we need to change it." They obviously had to change it as most of our work was copywritten so they had to change it, they had to. Once they developed a technology and either they bought looms, or they bought equipment, or they did something, then they wanted to develop it and take it further. I think it was natural as the market grew. It also became more and more middle class. People were using designers who wanted nicer fabrics.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Over time then, as the mills changed, did it become harder for you to go to them and have them work for you?

**Karen Tokar:** Only in terms of that they were busier but Larsen opened doors. The name Larsen opened doors. So, with a little bit of charm and Jack's name, you'd say, "Come on, please, we need to be able to do this. We need to have this. We need to get this." I, again, wasn't involved with the development. I think the mills would really try to get work with the Design Studio. If they could, say, develop a quality at Larsen, if they could get a new quality, a new development, if they could get it out to the market through Larsen, then they could take it around and say, "Well, we placed this. Larsen does this." It was, it is, a name. It's a brand at that point.



**Stephanie Zollinger:** Did you ever have to travel and go mill to mill to network and keep up?

**Karen Tokar:** I did. I went to the Far East once. I was supposed to go to Europe several times but Europeans kept coming here and the time was never quite right, especially by the time I was Vice President of Operations. We moved a couple of times and it was just always busy. The need really wasn't there. I went to the Far East because we had Thai Silk.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Now maybe you can tell me the story about...

**Karen Tokar:** Jim Thompson?

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Jim Thompson and his disappearance.

**Karen Tokar:** Right.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** I've heard conflicting reports. Did Larsen actually buy Thai Silks from Thompson or did it end up being a joint venture?

**Karen Tokar:** Well, actually, we bought a company called Thaibok.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** And they produced the Thompson line?

**Karen Tokar:** Yes, sort of. They didn't buy the weaving capabilities. They bought the line and then developed it. The weavers of Thaibok were Jim Thompson, were Thompson Silks.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** I see.

**Karen Tokar:** It was Thai Silks but Thompson was Thai Silks. This is my understanding of how it all came down. Then we worked at developing new patterns and new products and so forth that for many years were under the Thaibok name. We used to have Thaibok on the tags. Then, I think, Thompson started his own collection. They started their line and we

just became a source for them, a client. We'd always been a client but then we became just a client and we no longer carried the name.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So, when you bought the line it, over time, fused in with the Larsen line?

**Karen Tokar:** Into the Larsen line, yes, the shantungs, which is the core of where all that started, those woven silks.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So the Thompson weavers, just for a while, worked with Larsen and then, over time, ended up working for the other lines?

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. They'll work for whoever it is that they sell a pattern to.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** I see.

**Karen Tokar:** Most of these mills sell a pattern to somebody and they work for them. It's like a gas station effect. You pull in, you find gas you like, you go and you buy it.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Did you have a lot of involvement with that?

**Karen Tokar:** Well, yes, I had involvement with all the mills because of the way the flow was most of the time. When I first started, the mills and the Design Studio would work together at developing things. Later the mills would come with suitcases filled with samples and meet with the design team, or the head weave design, or prints, or whatever they were working on. If there was either a quality that caught our eye, or a pattern that caught our eye, we would then start the design process. It was very rare that they showed us something and we liked it off the shelf, the way it was. Most of the time it would be, "This is a really cool quality, we have some patterns we want to work on."

**Stephanie Zollinger:** What can we do with it?

**Karen Tokar:** To develop it into something else. Sometimes we would make changes to the quality, "Can you do this with it? Can you do that with it?" That's really where it would start. Depending on the fabric and how things went, and any problems that anybody had on any side, development could take anything from a couple of months to a couple of years, or not happen. I would get involved at the point of, "Hey, is this a good mill to work with?" It's one thing if you can design beautiful fabrics but if we can't get it to the market, if we can't keep it on the shelves because we can't get delivery, if clients are cancelling orders because we don't have it, or because of misweave problems, (because there were times that they were excessive), it's a problem. If there were any of those kinds of issues, let's say twice before we go forward, can they produce what they say they're going to of what they show us this beautiful sample of, it's a problem.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** In your mind, what are some of the most memorable fabrics that were produced overseas?

**Karen Tokar:** Some of the French ones. The tapestry, *Summergarden*, was a classic. We could never keep that on the shelf enough. Several of the patterns from that mill, *Solace*. One of my favorites was *Lilliput*, which was a chenille with little people printed on it. When that one was in the works there was a question of, will people sit on fabrics with people on it, will they find it objectionable? They didn't. It wasn't a problem at all. The silk prints from Korea because I thought they were so beautiful. The technology was so clever because they would dye it, they would print it on the warp, and then weave it so you got this beautiful watercoloring effect. There was *Bellefleur*. There were a lot of them, there were a lot of them. From Colombia, *Doria*, a classic, simple, simple, simple design all about color and all about texture. I can run through a list. I was just on vacation in Uruguay and there's a company there, Manos del Uruguay. I went in, I actually went in. My scarf is from there. They did a wool for us. They called it *Luxor*. It was wool but it was almost like liquid butter in your hand, it was so soft and so delicious. Yes, I could come up with a list. I could come up with a list.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So a lot of favorites.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. Out of the UK we did all kinds of fabrics. Yes, there were lots.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** What were some of the hardest fabrics to produce in terms of technicality?

**Karen Tokar:** Well, you probably need a designer to answer that in terms of what's really technically difficult. The ones I ran into production problems with because they said it was technologically difficult were things like *Solace* because it had this satin background. If they had any problem with the yarns, the satin shows every misweave and every problem. The silk velvets that we got from Italy were supposedly, even though it's a velvet, supposedly a problem because they were difficult to dye. *Doria* was a problem because it was difficult to dye and difficult to produce. It was one woman who wove it, hand wove it. It was difficult to produce because it was just so hand done.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Where was it produced, which country?

**Karen Tokar:** Colombia. Yes, it was a wonderful experience to deal with people in all these countries. We had a woven leather that came from the island of Mauritius, also impossible to get. Now I see it all over the place but, at that time, impossible to get because it was just so difficult to get the leather cut into the right size strips and then dyed, and then cut, and then woven.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Do you think it would be possible today to do what Larsen was doing 20, 30 years ago?

**Karen Tokar:** No. No, because there are so many design studios and so many people working on trying to make what's new. I think it's really hard now. You can get new patterns, you can get new looks. I have a client who does all woven textiles and she's all about color and texture. So, you can push what exists but I think it's really hard in today's world to create things that don't exist, like the Haitian cottons. *Doria* didn't exist and nobody thought of it possibly existing. I think it's really hard now to come up with something so new. Everybody's working on doing something new with some amount of success.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** But Larsen also took old techniques and revived them?

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. Things like the printed velvets, nobody could do them. He could and now people can do them. That was a big thing. Jersey for upholstery was something that he did and now it's everywhere. The printed velvets were something that had been done decades, centuries ago.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** I heard he had a special machine in which to produce batik-like prints and it was bought from someone in Hollywood?

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. It was a big drum that had screens. It was a rotary screen. It was a big thing and you had to be able to run it through. You had to be able to get the velvet waxed, and then dyed, and then removed. We used to do the printing of the velvet in-house.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So you actually got to see the process?

**Karen Tokar:** No. It was down by the time I got there, which was infuriating. We didn't do it.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So, if somebody wanted some of that today, you really couldn't go back and produce it?

**Karen Tokar:** No, no.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So if you have a piece of that, hang on to it.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. In fact, when we were shutting down the archives, I tried to see if I could get a sample but I couldn't. It's funny where you find Larsen, where Larsen comes up in your life. My mother lived in Queens and she used a local bank. I went with her to the bank. The bank hadn't redone their customer service area in decades and on their furniture they had one of the Larsen cotton velvets, the batik cotton velvets.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Amazing.

**Karen Tokar:** I walked in with her because for many years I didn't have to worry about her banking and so forth until she got older. Then I walked

in with her and it was, "Oh my God." They had that and they had a *Doria*. When Larsen designed it he wanted an indestructible fabric and got it, and got it. They got it.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** It lasted all this time.

**Karen Tokar:** You know, there were other things that, once he figured out how to do it, became mainstream and I think was an old technology that he put to modern use, hand printing silks. Most of these hand prints are done on 55-yard tables, these long tables or 40-yard tables. He worked with a guy in Pennsylvania, too. We had a couple of tables that were waxed and the wax would get heated and the silk would get laid on it so that it wouldn't slide while it was printing. It was always a problem because it was very hard to keep it on register because the silk would move. You had to be able to keep that silk immobilized. I think that was one of those old technologies that got used.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Yes, and some of the burnout technologies.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes, those have been reused.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Devoré, is that how it's pronounced?

**Karen Tokar:** Devoré. Yes, pronounced de-vo-ray. Yes, and he worked on trying to do that with velvets. It didn't get very far but I think it's done a lot more now.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** One of the other questions I had was, what was your interaction with Jack and how did you see his role in the company?

**Karen Tokar:** Well, when I started, he was the boss. Even though I was in the operational arm and it was truly completely separately run from the design, in my mind, he was the boss. The company had his name and that made him the boss. He didn't often get involved with things operational. He would occasionally have somebody, a friend or one of his original investors, who he wanted to sell some fabric to. He would come and talk about that. Other than that he never really got involved in the day-to-day operations, only when it came to, if they were working on

something and he wanted to know, what is this mill like? Once they finished with the development of the fabric, they knew how the mill was in terms of developing something, whether they were slow or fast, but they didn't know how any particular mill would be in terms of the rest of the fabric's life, were there problems. I would let him know if I thought a mill was a problem even if he didn't ask. If I was really having serious problems I would go and talk to him about it.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Were tariffs and things like that a problem?

**Karen Tokar:** Oh, yes, they could be. When they were working on a new fabric I would check out the duty rate. Some of these come in at 20 percent and 18 percent duty. If you can just swing the amount of linen in it or if you can do something to change it we can get it in at three percent. It makes a difference, an enormous difference, on how much you have to sell it for. Sometimes price could kill it and sometimes duty rates killed it. By the time I was in the Vice President's role, we had forms in place and all kinds of things. If something was in the development stage the form would come around, this is the fiber content, this is the price, this is the specification on it in terms of widths and so forth, and its weight, because those all affect the duty. Then it would go to me to calculate what the duty rate would be, what kind of issues I would have with warehousing it, or sampling it, or anything like that. Then it would go to the financial person for costing, and then it would go back to the Design Studio and we would all have an input as to whether we thought it was viable. There was always a sample of it. There were occasions where something didn't happen because of conversations with Jack and me. I'd say, "You're out of your mind if you try it again. We've had three that haven't worked, why would we do a fourth?"

**Stephanie Zollinger:** You had some fabrics that were woven in one country and dyed in another country?

**Karen Tokar:** Yes, we had fabric that was woven all over. We would buy the ground cloth in China. We would send it to Switzerland to be printed, or back to the States to be printed, or we'd send it to another place to be dyed, and then to another place to be printed. That was easy.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** But that was unusual?

**Karen Tokar:** It was normal for us.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Normal for you.

**Karen Tokar:** It never dawned on me that it was unusual because it was normal for us. It was just the way we did business.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** You were global before you realized what global really was.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. That, for me, was what the fun was. We had at one point a Vice President who got hired who didn't understand the industry and didn't understand Larsenites.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Define a Larsenite?

**Karen Tokar:** Somebody who loves being connected with the man and the company.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Who shared that same passion.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. It's one thing being awed and impressed by Jack's talents, which are huge, and it's another thing pulling together to be part of making some of the most beautiful things in the world, to be in the market, making it happen, touching it. You know, if you have a bad day, you just went into the Design Studio, "What's new? What are we working on?" Or you go over to the samples and you look at them and it's living in this land where every day your product is beautiful. It's very rare. We had, before flexi schedules and before women's and men's maternal and paternal leave, and all those flexibilities, we were a very flexible company. If people had kids and they needed to go to school to a parent-teacher event, if they needed to take the whole day, they took a personal day. You just don't call me that morning otherwise it's a problem. But, if you needed a couple of hours and you made up your work, or worked through lunch, nobody said, "You're going to lose two hours time or we're going to take half a day of vacation time." There was this understanding that the people who worked at the company had this job but it was part of their lives and you can't separate people's lives from their business that day. It



made it very easy. If kids needed to come in on a day, within reason, kids came in. It made it an easy place to work in terms of attitude. Somebody once said that we were one of the least well-paid, which I don't know. This Vice President, who did not last more than six months said, "Well, if you're one of the worst-paid, why does everybody stay?"

**Stephanie Zollinger:** So he didn't get it?

**Karen Tokar:** He didn't get it. He didn't get it. He didn't get that you liked the people you worked with, you respected the people you worked with. It was a group of people who really had a sense of pride, of being connected to this company. By far, not all of them had textile backgrounds. There were a couple. There was a woman in Customer Service who used to be in the Design Studio and went to Customer Service. She was fiercely loyal. She was there forever. Even people who were only there for a year or two always came out, almost always, never always with employees, but almost always they came out richer for the experience of having a company that you worked for that was aware of you. Or richer that you were part of a whole organization, that you were part of your life, and you were part of this life, and that they were all interacting.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** I hate to use this as a pun but it was a fabric.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes, it was, it was. You can see when you talk to us old-timers which, according to case history, I'm a newcomer. We stay in touch. We don't talk to each other for a while but then it's, "Hey, how are you? This is great." When I came in I said I was going to stop off and see somebody. I haven't seen him in years but we're, "Oh, you're going to see so-and-so." There are people I keep in touch with. There are at least a dozen people I still keep in touch with and at least another dozen that I could call and it would be, "Hey, you want to do lunch?" "Oh, yes, let's."

**Stephanie Zollinger:** One of my last questions is, what are some of your most memorable experiences in working with Larsen? I know you probably have a lot.

**Karen Tokar:** I have a lot.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** What would be the highlights?

**Karen Tokar:** Well, Jack himself. For me, one of the highlights is just the education I got in terms of fabrics, in terms of dealing with people. Jack is not a regular kind of person.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** There's an aura.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes, there's an aura. He wasn't always easy but he was always right, which was terrible. It was always amazing to work with somebody like that. Just Jack by himself is one of my highlights. Things like the Christmas parties. Things like one of the people in my department had a little kid. There was a problem with his daycare one day and she was relatively new working there and said, "Can I bring him in?" I said, "Yes, as long as he stays away from the computer, sure." He walks in and he walks over to the computer and he turns off the switch. All of us who were in Operations, to this day, when we see her, say, "How's your son doing?" There were things like that. Moving warehouses was always a memorable thing. I haven't got a lot of standout memories because every day was really cool. You know, I really loved going to work.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** That is great.

**Karen Tokar:** There were meetings with mills. There was the mill in India, there was a big argument with a mill in India. Getting ready for a show opening was always a big event, especially in the New York showroom. Getting the archives together to go to Minnesota. I haven't got a lot of single things. I just have a whole sense of a wonderful 15 years.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** That's great.

**Karen Tokar:** Seventeen years, whatever it was. That's probably the one thing that stands out in my mind, when the company was sold.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Was it sad putting closure to it?

**Karen Tokar:** It was a death, it really was. You can see, I get teary. If it was to form tomorrow and they said to me, "You want to come back?" I'd go in a blink, in a blink.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** But would you have to have all the same people there?

**Karen Tokar:** Most, or, I'd like to have the same people. I think that we would find the same kind of people. Towards the end there were people who I didn't get along as well with and other people didn't get along well with. You could see the change happening. It was harder and harder to hold it all together because of the demands of the market and what we needed to be able to sell to survive without being involved with a larger company. We were an old company. One of the things, we had a speaker come in from Wharton to give a presentation and a seminar for the management of the company. How do you take a 40-year old company and take it forward? He said it is the hardest thing in the world to do because you can't shrink and it's almost impossible to make it bigger because at some point it's almost like it's saturated. He made his mark and you can't keep making it. You make your mark, he made his mark, on history. I'm sitting here, I'm looking, there's Larsen Fabric, and there's Larsen Furniture, and there's Larsen Carpet. I'm looking around just in this space and there couldn't be more, there just couldn't be more.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Technology, I'm sure, changed that.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes. It needed to have more money in it than sales could create. It needed to have a bigger networking and bigger source. We just didn't have the wherewithal to do it. I'm glad it's still surviving. I haven't been in the showroom for a while but, the last time I was in there, I was glad to see that a lot of the aesthetic is still the Larsen aesthetic. Yes, and it's like a lot of companies, the name of the company will survive, past the staff, past the man.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** And times go on.

**Karen Tokar:** Yes, and time goes on, yes. I think Kay and several of us are in the same situation, would we have liked to have it that we retired

before all of this happened? Probably, but it was probably the best experience, the best place any of us have ever worked.

**Stephanie Zollinger:** Well, thank you so much.

**Karen Tokar:** You're welcome. I hope it helped.

#### End of STE-Karen Tokar.mp3 ####