

KENTUCKY CRAFT HISTORY AND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, INC.

Interview with Elmer Lucille Allen
Interviewer is Bob Gates
June 26th, 2017

() This symbol refers to an inaudible word or phrase.

. . . This symbol refers to an interruption to the speaker

Camera man:

Okay. 10 seconds.

Gates:

So, clay. I've worked with people who traditional artists make clay pots of funny faces, things like that.

Allen:

Well, I like clay mainly for the feel of it. You know, I like the feel of it. And when you think about ... you look at the earth out here, clay is nothing, but dirt. And some yards that you have, people can actually go out in their backyard, dig their clay, and you can test it and you might be able to use it, you know, to make something out of it. But it's also, clay is something that's flexible. You can teach people that have handicaps or children, how to use their hands and you can make pinch pots. There are some people make a living, just like Mike Imes. All he does is pinch pots. In fact, he's on the show now at the Craft Gallery down at Fourth and Chestnut. At the Craft Gallery. But all he does is pinch pots.

Gates:

Pinch...

Allen:

In other words, you'd take a piece of clay and you can take your finger and you can pinch it out. And as clay expands and you can make big pots out of this, you just keep on adding clay.

Gates:

Does it always have row over row over row?

Allen:

Yeah. You can see rows and rows and you can see where the finger, where your fingerprints go.

Gates:

Oh really? People like that now, too?

Allen:

Yeah, well you see Mike Imes, because he lives somewhere outside. He doesn't live in Louisville. He lives in one of these counties, but he was one of the early artists that I met. And he's still doing pinch pots. But they're large. Yeah.

Gates:

You like clay for that reason. You can do a lot with it.

Allen:

Well, you can do anything that you can think about, you can make, you can hand build. Hand build you can make anything. If you throw it on the wheel, it's all always symmetrical. You have to alter it. So, in hand building, you can do whatever you want to make. If you see it, you can make it.

Gates:

When you're doing a non-functional teapot that's doing by hand?

Allen:

Well, you can do it by hand, or you can throw it and you can make it. You can throw a teapot and alter it. You know, it doesn't happen. You can, you know, but the main thing is that in order for a teapot to function right, it has to be in a certain ... A pot has to be able to pour a certain way and it can't leak. It has to be fired at a certain temperature to make sure it holds water.

Gates:

Sure. But your ones that aren't functional and they're more aesthetic. You're looking for something in it. Right? You've got certain colors you like better than others?

Allen:

Well, mainly I did a set of my (inaudible) teapots and they're white and I use colors on there.

Camera man:

[Inaudible]

Allen:

I made a series of my (inaudible) teapots and (inaudible) they're white, but then they have different color designs that I've made on them. And then they're fired. And they hold water. Yeah. You can use them.

Gates:

Is there a subject matter that you want to portray in those pots?

Allen:

No, I just like making teapots and they're all ... I'll make a series. And I was taught when I first went into with Tom Marsh that you should make a series of you don't make just one, you make a series of pots. So, you might make 10 teapots. And like, if I was teaching a class or whatever they're doing, you need to make a series. And so, the first one is maybe not be your best by the time you get to the 10th one, you might've perfected that 10th pot. Yes. So, you learn by multiples.

Gates:

Do you sell the other ones?

Allen:

You might not sell any of them, but you learn. That's how you learn.

Gates:

The other ones aren't considered rejects ...

Allen:

In other words, what you like about clay, until you fire it, you can always recycle it and make new things out of it. Until you fire it. Once it's fired, you can't do nothing with it.

Gates:

Oh, so you can make a series of 10 and then only fire one of them.

Allen:

Yeah, that's right. That's right. Yeah. And that's how, and so if you're teaching a class, you always keep your first one to see and you can see how your progression is, but you only pick out the best one out of that 10.

Gates:

Do you like teaching people?

Allen:

I've never really actually taught school, because I don't really like teaching, but I know how to teach.

Gates:

Well, I mean you teach kids in community centers right?

Allen:

No, I don't really teach in community centers. I mainly go to maybe like community projects that they're working on. Like now I'm working with the Louisville (inaudible) Arts Community Center. I do more or less ... not consulting, but you're a part of a group that helps to make things happen. You know what I'm trying to say? It's like here... Last year they wanted to put the methane plant in the west end, what you call a bio digester. And I worked on that project, which was a total ... But anyway, we were able to, not to that project, that was not a success because women, people got together and worked on this project and they decided that we didn't want it and it failed. So I've worked ... in communities. And right now I'm working with the city's trying to... they have a lot in the west end at 30th and Muhammad Ali. And they're trying to put a project down there that four companies and want to do something there. And each one presented their project on it. And what I enjoyed about working on things like this, you get to see how things work and you get to decide if this is what you want in your community or what you don't want in your community. And at this particular one each person had seven minutes to do a presentation and they had seven slides that they present. So, what you couldn't present in seven minutes, you didn't get, and then you had question and answers and then they had a board and put up, I think they had six ... how they relate to that community and then you had a sticky note and that's how you do it. But there are a lot of things in the community that ... like now they're getting ready to put in the west end, they wanted to put a Walmart at 18th and Broadway and the city of Louisville and the west end downtown, everything has to be built on the street. Well, Walmart wanted to be build back and put a parking lot in the front, I worked on that project. It didn't go through because I felt like... so anyway.

Gates:

Is this a certain group you're belonging to?

Allen:

It's all with the west end. There's no group, I do not associate with a group, but I work with a group of people.

Gates:

It's not like a ... like in Frankfort is a group called Envision Frankfort. It's all about what's best for Frankfort.

Allen:

Yeah, in other words, there are different organizations wanting to do different things... And I work also with the city on projects, like on vacant lots and stuff like that. I'm more like a community person now. Yeah. And, and you just sit down and somebody has to come forward and say things and it, you might think one voice doesn't make a difference, but it does. And also, your presence makes a difference. And it's like the lot we're talking about the Walmart, the Walmart they wanted to put there, they pulled out, but now Passport Insurance is going to be there, and I'm invited to be sitting on one of their meetings tomorrow. They want to include art in their building. So it's a totally different ...and they're building on the street...

Gates:

And you're going to be a consultant for helping...

Allen:

Not consultant per se, but part of the community. So, they got people in the community. So, those are the things that I did.

Gates:

I saw on your resume, a lot of those things. I also saw that you were a judge for art competitions sometimes?

Allen:

Oh yeah. I judged the ... they had a Mary Hadley, Mary Alice Hadley... This was for the Community Foundation of Louisville, Community Foundation of Louisville ... Anyway, they had a Mary Hadley prize they were giving out for \$5,000 and they brought, they picked eight or 10 people to come in to judge. I think they had, I forget how many people we had to go through all their resumes and their artwork. And then we picked them the winner.

Gates:

And you feel like you are a pretty good judge of other people's art?

Allen:

Well, everybody comes to a consensus. And there are different ... Some of them that were printers, were printmakers, some were ... they were all visual artists, but they, in fact there was one ceramic artist in that group, but they're all visual artists. Yeah. But anyway, they picked that one and that person got money and then they could travel with it and do what they wanted to do. Yeah.

Gates:

Did you like doing that?

Allen:

Well, I liked doing that. I liked meeting people and I keep good records at home and I have a lot of records on artists if I go and I can take notes wherever, wherever I go.

Gates:

Part of your scientific background?

Allen:

Yeah. Well, not only that, but I have it to go back, go and look at it. And just for my own benefit, I can go back and read about it. And I'm working ... I went to a meeting Saturday, this young lady is doing a ... in Louisville, a math and science fair and where she's doing it in August and it's a three hour session and you're working with a parent and the child, there's two volunteers working with a parent and the child and we're teaching them how to multiply and stuff like that. So, it's, just things like that, that I do.

Gates:

I saw online that there was a play about you.

Allen:

Yeah. Nancy Gall-Clayton did a play about me and that was done at the... I forget where it was done, but she did that, Nancy Gall-Clayton.

Gates:

I saw a young girl playing the part.

Allen:

Yeah. Uh huh.

Gates:

She did a good job.

Allen:

Yeah. So, I've had quite a few things done. And then I'm in a couple of books and stuff.

Gates:

A couple of books?

Allen:

Yeah. And in fact, my first ceramic exhibit that I had when I retired from Brown-Forman, they want to know what that I want for a retirement party. And I told them I wanted, you know, I'd like to have an exhibit of my work, because no one has seen my work. And I had an exhibit at Portland Museum.

Gates:

At the Portland Museum?

Allen:

Portland Museum in 1997. And I'm included in the book that Eugenie Potter made. Two centuries of women, you know, in that book.

Gates:

How'd that go?

Allen:

That was fine. People have different ideas of, you know, you were the only do two pages where you do a lot of women. I think it's 70 some women in this book and every woman has two pages and they talk about you or what you've done.

Gates:

Is that a women's foundation grant?

Allen:

No, this was a ... Eugenia Potter ... She was with the Women's Commission years ago I think.

Gates:

Women's Commission, okay.

Allen:

She was there. But these are individual books that are hardbound. Yeah. And then, and then there's another book this lady called Portraits of Grace. And she did, and this was at ... Mary Craik, Mary Craik did quilts had a shop down on Jefferson Street. She's disabled now, but anyway, Portraits of Grace and you know, Joan Zehner. Z-E-H-N-E-R? She's an artist. And she does religious art. And then she does a lot of women. Well, she did a painting of each woman that's in this book. And then another lady wrote an article on each woman, and that's called Portraits of Grace.

Gates:

And that's a book?

Allen:

Called Portraits of Grace.

Gates:

And you're in there?

Allen:

I'm in that one. And then I was in another book called Fascinating Women, I think. And that lady did that one. Yeah. An art book.

Gates:

Does that feel good to be in all those books and things?

Allen:

Well, you know, like I tell people, it's better to get your flowers while you're alive, then when you lay down and die and people talk about you and you don't get to hear what they say. And people say, I never talk about myself, unless somebody asks me about me. I don't brag on myself. And if you want to know something, you've got to ask because I don't volunteer anything.

Gates:

When people come ... I mean, being the first black chemist. Yeah. So, you got some landmarks there, and being a black artist. And I asked you earlier, if your art reflects your early days, you said it doesn't reflect.

Allen:

No, because it's all my work is mainly geometric.

Gates:

Does it reflect your chemistry background?

Allen:

If it reflects my math background. Yeah. Yeah. Circles. Squares, triangles. Curves.

Gates:

You map these things out, right? Before you ...

Allen:

Yeah. You sketch. Yeah. I got them. I have a notebook, have a graph notebook.

Gates:

Where do you get your ideas?

Allen:

Well, I just sat down and think about what I want. You either decide on what size I want to make it. And then I decide what I want to put on it. Like some pieces have curves. I really love diamond shapes, double triangles. So, I like those and it takes forever to, so you have to sit down and figure what size this triangle is going to be. And then you draw it on a piece of paper, then you got to scale it up and then you stitch it all out. And then you decide ... and one piece that I really like is orange and yellow. And I dyed it yellow first. And then I stitched it. And then, so it's orange and yellow. So, all the design is yellow.

Gates:

This is a Japanese technique?

Allen:

Japanese technique, all hand-stitched.

Gates:

Is there one in your office?

Allen:

Yeah. Everything on the wall is what I've done.

Gates:

After we're done with the interview, we'll go in there and take a look at some of those. Sound good?

Allen:

Yeah.

Gates:

Those are textiles. And you like textiles and you like working with clay. Is there anything else you'd like to do with ...

Allen:

Well, I've done other things, but those are the primary things that I really love. I really enjoy. And I still do those. Yeah.

Gates:

Is that your legacy?

Allen:

Well, I don't know if it will be my legacy or not, but it's what I enjoy. That's what I enjoy doing. Yeah. Yeah.

Gates:

So, if you were talking to a young person about art and they're wondering why they should do art, what would you tell them?

Allen:

Well, you have to do art for you. Not for somebody else. You have to do it for yourself. And it has to be out of your heart and you cannot do it for money because you cannot be guaranteed that you're going to make a living out of it. So, I can make something. And if I'm not, I don't need it for money. And I, and you have to enjoy what you're doing. And I think that you need to go and support other artists. I firmly believe that you get ideas and you meeting other artists and you conversing with them is that you share ideas. You might not gain anything, but you'll learn something. You know? And I think that young people need to ... young artists need to go to openings. I've tried to go to openings, to support the artists. Even though you might never get to see the work at an opening reception, you don't really get to enjoy the work at an art reception. When you go to reception and you've got four or five people exhibiting work, you cannot see the work.

Gates:

Why?

Allen:

Because people are standing in front of what you ... okay. That's what I'm saying. You really ... you can see the work, but in order to go back and enjoy the work. You need to go when the museum is empty, where you can actually go and you know ... But if you want to know what the artists themselves have done, you can talk about the work with the artists. Why did you do this? Why is it this color? Why did you do that?

Gates:

You recommend them going to the exhibit early, before anybody gets there, look at the art and then go to the reception?

Allen:

Well, I usually go the night of the reception, because most times the work doesn't go up until that day, most times. People putting it up that day. And, last month ... I went to ... Because I run the gallery for Wayside. And so, I'm always at Wayside on the first Friday from five to eight. And the Louisville artists had an anniversary at the Craft Gallery where I said Mike Imes was. And so, I didn't get there until about 8:30. And I said I went ... because these are all people that I'd gone to school with. Some, you know, that I had gone to school, what to call it that time. We had Louisville Clay and we'd had Louisville Clay and I was the treasurer of that group. And they had (inaudible) here. And I worked with that. And so, you know, National Ceramic Organizations and that was here in 2007. But there are things that I just enjoy doing. And I just enjoy talking to people and you can, and you can look at the person and see, 'Does that work reflect them?' Because some people do self-portraits of themselves and other people do, you know, like a lot of people like you look at Ed Hamilton's work, and what he's done. And you think about him. I traveled with him when he, when he did the very first statue he installed in Hampton, I went with him, drove his wife up there. And when he was putting up Booker T. Washington, I was in Washington DC when he installed it, then I was in, when he did the one in Amistad up in New Haven, I was there.

Gates:

Because you were good friends with him?

Allen:

We were good friends of his. And I just liked him as a friend. And, and he's a, been a mentor to so many people, you know, and you just think that you need to support artists and, you know, going to support them in any way that you can.

Gates:

Was that fun going up there to see those things?

Allen:

Well, we went to his very first installation, which was this very first statue, Booker T. Washington. And I drove his wife. So, his wife, and he had two children and his mother and so we drove in the car and his statue ... He and William Duffy, you know, William Duffy. They had to go to Detroit to get the statue and bring it there. Well, when we get there and they get ready to install Booker T. Washington, the holes where they were supposed to be, were not ready. So,

they had to go out and buy tools and things to do this, to get all this done. And I documented the whole thing on a brownie camera back in those days. And National Geographic was there and you got to see them hoist it up, you know. And it was just amazing. And so, he was being recognized last week, week before last at Farmington. And he got to talking about ... and he had a display of these statues of his, his first statue, but I got them out in my iPad if you want to look at them over there. And, and he was talking about, you know, what a friend I was to him and how I had driven his wife and family there and how he has progressed. And he's still doing artwork, you know? And, but you go to support, you go to go to support people.

Gates:

Sounds like it was a good time.

Allen:

Oh yeah. You know...

Gates:

They had the holes drilled in the wrong place? They had to make new holes?

Allen:

We had to do it. We had to go drill new holes and they had to go and buy the tools because the concrete base has already been put up...

Gates:

Where was it put up?

Allen:

In Hampton, Virginia. Yeah. That's where Booker T. Washington is, the statue of Booker ... That was his very first installation.

Gates:

That was a big statue, too, wasn't it?

Allen:

Yes. It was. Either eight to 10 feet. It's massive. Yeah. It was.

Gates:

Wow. It sounds like you like to collaborate with other artists.

Allen:

Well, I like to collaborate. Yeah. I like to talk. Yeah. I like to know how they do things and, you know, I've visited studio and he got to talking about, you know, his studio is on Shelby Street, Shelby, and between Chestnut going toward the river. And when he was at Farmington, he was saying, telling them how he bought this building and how he cut the hole in the building in order to make his statues. And he was saying that he had, had to call an architect to make sure that

they didn't take down the wrong wall, you know, and because all his, like Booker T. It goes up into the second floor, you know. Yeah. It was that big. Yeah.

Gates:

How'd he bring it from Detroit?

Allen:

You know, you cut them in pieces, you make molds and cut them in pieces, then they weld them back together. Yeah. So that's, it.

Gates:

I saw on your resume that you've had a lot of exhibits. Some of them are about you and some of them are...

Allen:

Some are group shows. I've done clay and fiber shows. I did one at Spaulding University and I sold a lot of teapots there. That's when I was making a lot of teapots. And then they also have a piece that was purchased and hangs in Spaulding University's lobby. I have a piece there.

Gates:

Because of your relationship to that school or?

Allen:

Well, no. The man bought it and hung it there. That's where he wanted it, but it was purchased for them. And it's framed. And John Nation took a photograph of that. And that hangs in the lobby of the main office at Spaulding University. It's a triangle. Double triangles.

Gates:

I saw a piece where you had taken a ... found a drawing of a woman from a cave. What's that about?

Allen:

Yeah. That was an N-I-O-L-A. It was a night lady. And I drew that. I did that piece. I saw it in a notebook. I saw it in an architectural magazine and I drew it up. It was only about this big, and I drew it up seven feet on brown paper. I still have the actual drawing that I did. And then I stitched it all. And it's called the night lady.

Gates:

Where's that hanging?

Allen:

I don't ... I had a couple of pieces that have been stolen and I've had three pieces they've been stolen. And I, so now I have a deadbolt lock on my door over there.

Gates:

Oh, they took it from your place?

Allen:

Uh huh. But I had a couple of pieces, I exhibited that at Pyro Gallery. And that was with the lady, and also did it at the University of Louisville.

Gates:

I talked to artists over the years, like a basket maker friend of mine, and she talks about when she's working on a basket and she makes a mistake in it. Or she, no, sorry. This is when she was teaching somebody. Yeah. And the person she was teaching had made a mistake. She told her, take it all apart and start over again. Do you ever feel that with your art?

Allen:

Well, you do that. And sometimes, well, sometimes you learn by your mistakes. Sometimes you keep it, you finish it. Then you go back and make a second one. So that's what I learned in series. Everybody teaches different, but I would say, you keep what you, the first one might be wrong, but you keep that one and you correct your mistake. And then you keep on. Yeah. Yeah. Basket weaving is something, but clay is something that you can make, and then you can reclaim, but with a basket. You have to redo it because you, because the way of that, but on clay, you can put this clay in water and you can recycle this clay and you haven't lost anything.

Gates:

You still do that a lot? Making series?

Allen:

Oh, I still do series. I still do series and I break up stuff and if it doesn't work or I made a piece and, and I started putting an underglaze on it and it cracks. So, I throw it, throw it away. Yeah. So, you make mistakes.

Gates:

Well, some of the artists I work with, because I had a program at the Arts Council called the Apprenticeship Program. You ever had an apprentice working under you?

Allen:

No, never have. I might have had an apprentice, but I don't know I have apprenticeship because I take classes with other students. And so, you know, so, and you learn from other people, so you really never know that you're teaching, you know. You might be teaching and not know that you're teaching, but I've never actually had an apprentice. And I've never been an apprentice for anybody.

Gates:

What do these young kids think when you come to class and you're so accomplished?

Allen:

Well, well, I can say this. They respect me. And then if they do something wrong, I tell them how to correct it. And there every, most of the people that are, that have graduated from there since ever since the eighties I go and I support them. In fact, I'm doing a slideshow in September of this year of some of my past work to show them the new they have another clay group here in Louisville to show them some of the things that I've done in the past.

Gates:

So, you have your own little slideshow about your work?

Allen:

Yeah. I've got that. But they're all slides. I'm in the process of scanning slides now. And, but I make a PowerPoint. Yeah. Because I've gotten that already started.

Gates:

Yeah. That's funny because I often get slideshows about folklife in Kentucky and I still use a slide projector.

Allen:

Well, I have a slide projector at home and I got some, but a lot, you know, and I have slides, but some of them ... then I got a lot of it now that's digital, you know?

Gates:

Yeah, I thought I was the only person left in the world who was still using projectors.

Allen:

In fact, I went to U of L the other day and they've got an Epson scanner and they can scan 15 slides at a time. Yeah. But she scanned them two different ways. And when I went home, one, I'm staying scan as a TIFF file. And the other ones, they scan as a JPEG file. But the JPEGs, we did them at 600, but they're so small. And I'm going to Murphy's camera's store to see how they do them. So, I can go back up there. Wasn't high resolution, but the slides are only two by two. So, you only got, so you got such a small... I need to know how can you take that slide if I want to make them a four by three out of it? Can I do that? How do I do that? So, I'm always, so anyway, the person, she had never done it. So, she said, well, so we were learning together, but she had all the equipment as do about, I can go out there and do them, but she didn't, she had never really done slides.

Gates:

So, you go to U of L a lot then, huh?

Allen:

Yeah, maybe two or three days a week, I'll go by, I'll go to U of L two or three days a week.

Gates:

And make some pottery?

Allen:

Well, I might go. And I might just uncover something that I'd made or roll out a slab of clay or are just go into the studio because it was a ceramic studio. It has a lock on it, but we can go 24/7. So, you can go seven days a week, anytime you want to go. So, if I want to go and spend an hour, I might be the only person there. It might be three people there. In fact, I went yesterday, I went to the store. I'd been there Saturday. And I'd been up here. And then I went to the store, you know, Steven Cheat? Anyway, he's a potter, he's a part-time teacher there. And he wanted to know what was going on in the studio. He said, when you been there? I said, I was there the

other day. He said, oh, I said, yeah, I'm there two or three days a week just to see what's going on.

Gates:

Do you have to be a student to be able to get into the studio?

Allen:

You have to be, yeah, you have to be a student. And when I'm 65, I don't have to pay. So, I can go free of charge for classes. Yeah at 65. Yeah. You can take classes. And I'm always in a program. I got my master's there and I never ended. So, I never did finish. I just keep taking, take a class.

Gates:

Do you have a little space there that's yours?

Allen:

Well, I have a community space. I have my own shelf, everybody, the table, everybody does a like community table, and I do all slab work. So, you do your work and you put it on the shelf. Yeah. So yeah

Gates:

I mean, some artists have their own studios, the whole space is theirs.

Allen:

Well, I don't like working in a Up here. It's okay. Cause if you're not, if you're in a studio by yourself, you don't see anybody. Here, I might not know who you are, but you can pass by. You can wave. But I, but I'm not in a building by myself and you know, or you can walk around and you can see somebody or they might say, well, what are you doing today? But it's an interaction, but you're not ... I don't like being by myself. You know, I might be at the studio, but the studio, you might have somebody coming in, but it's not like you're there by yourself every day. I didn't not like that because you don't learn. Even though you might be a young student, you might learn what they're. They might be doing something totally different.

Gates:

And then some other artists need to be alone. Right?

Allen:

Yeah, that's right.

Gates:

But you like to be with people.

Allen:

Yeah, I like being with people.

Gates:

Well, you said you didn't want to talk about your family. I saw an article about you were taking care of your aunts?

Allen:

Oh, well I'm taking care of my step aunt. She'd be 98 in November and she ... my daddy was married to her sister and she died. And so, I still take care of her, but she's able to go downstairs. She lives at Treyton Oaks Towers. She goes and she eats breakfast. She has somebody to come give her a bath three days a week. She goes down for dinner. And last week they had a garden party. And I went to that. We went to that, but she's mobile. She, we go to the store, they go to the doctor. So, it's, you know, it's this, you do what you have to do, but it's, that's what, but, but that's a community. Yeah. Yeah.

Gates:

So, you don't see any drawbacks to work in community art areas?

Allen:

No, I don't. No, I don't have any barriers. No, because you can learn from everybody. And when you bring something to the table, just me, like right now, they're doing the ladies doing a series. Now I'll send you this, at 1619 Flux. And she's done doing an eight week series on bringing artists in. She has an art. Yeah. I'll send you that website 1619 Flux. And she's doing something called revitalization and she has ... One week, she did people talking about putting murals up on walls. How do you go about putting murals? And so she had somebody from the city talking about getting permits and stuff like this. Then one week, last week she had ... forget what she had last week. She had painters, but it's something different every week. And what can you bring to the community? And this week she's going to have business people. Yeah. But I'll send you that information because it's something it's a young, young group.

Gates:

15 minutes. [inaudible] Do you want to go about 15 more minutes?

Allen:

Okay. I can go. Yeah.

Gates:

Anything you want to talk about that I haven't talked about?

Allen:

Oh, I think we've covered a lot, but what I just feel like I really appreciate you coming, you calling me, asking me for an interview and you never know. I don't ask why we're doing it, but what is this actually for? What's the interview for?

Camera man:

I need to change the battery.

Allen:

The Kentucky Coalition for African American Arts was founded in the early eighties and with this organization it was actually a statewide organization and I received funding from the Kentucky

Arts Council to do the first African American directory. And I went out through the state, not I personally, but there were two people hired. James Miller was one. We went, we went down to Paducah. We went to Lexington. We went to Hopkinsville and went to other parts of Kentucky. And we put this directory together and it distributed... And then I ended up doing a second directory, I think in 1986 and 1987. And in addition to that, I'd conducted two, had two arts conferences. One was in Lexington and that was at the Radisson Hotel. And there was one here in Louisville that was at the Brown Hotel. And there we had panels. We brought in art and there was an art exhibit at the Lexington Arts Council and I exhibited work at that particular one, but, mainly in Louisville, we did workshops that were free throughout the community. And we brought people in and that's where I first met Ed White. And he came to a drum making workshop, with Balley McKnight. And that was when he was first introduced to drum making, at this workshop at Chester Street YMCA, because I did all of the workshops were done in the community.

Gates:

You said you brought somebody in that was a drum maker?

Allen:

Balley McKnight. And he lives in Washington DC now. And so, he was doing a class for me, and there were eight or 10 students, how to make drums out of PVC pipe. And that's how, that's how Ed White learned how to make drums.

Gates:

What was he doing then? Before then?

Allen:

He was a photographer, you know, he's a photographer, but that was his incentive. And in addition to that, the first public art project that was ever I think was ever done in the West end is Balley McKnight made a slit drum out of a large tree that was actually in Chickasaw park. And this was back in the eighties, but I did a lot of workshops and we did street fairs and stuff like that.

Allen:

How did you get into that?

Allen:

Well, Ken Clay had an arts organization called Renaissance Development. And the organization formed out of that, the Kentucky Coalition, formed out of that.

Gates:

Was Ken Clay an artist too?

Allen:

Well, he's not an artist, but he's an arts administrator. Yeah, he was with the Kentucky Center for the Arts. He was there. And so he had the first called Renaissance Development. And the first conference that I attended was one of the Kentucky Coalition of African American Arts was founded after this conference I attended. And it was outgrowth of that. And I met Priscilla

Cooper who worked for the Arts Council, met Donna Morton, who they're both poets and, you know, things happen, you know, and you talking about back in the eighties, however many years ago that is, it's hard to remember everything that happened, but you came together. And after we formed a group here in Louisville, we also met with a group in Lexington, African American group in Lexington with oh, I'm looking at him right now and seeing he's dead now. But the fellow who taught at University of Kentucky, I can't think of his name right now. I can't think of this man...

Gates:

I think of Juanita Peterson...

Allen:

Juanita Peterson was one of those, but there was a man, an elder man. But I can't think of his name right now, but I met with him. But the groups met, we worked together and it was like a group together. And we did things in them. And we had workshops here in Louisville and we had one workshop with GC Cox at the WaterTower where we learned how to make frames. So there's a lot of things that I've done over a period of years. And, and also in addition to this organization, I was also a fiscal agent for other organizations that got started in African American organizations here in Louisville.

Gates:

Did you ever work with Mama Eden?

Allen:

Mama Ya? Yeah. Yes. I, I was a founder, even though she, I helped her, we have fun. I was one of the founding members of the Arts Council of Lowell, along with her and Judy Jennings and Dr. Lee and Anthony, we were, and I was a treasurer of that organization and I, and I've had turned with her and with a lot of, a lot of her projects that she's done. Yeah.

Gates:

I used to have her at the festival.

Allen:

Yeah. Okay. Well, she's sick now. She has carpal tunnel in both hands and she's not hardly able to walk. Yeah. Yeah. So that's what I have been doing.

Gates:

Yeah. Those groups... those were in the eighties and they're still going strong. Some of them are still...

Allen:

Well, the Arts Council Louisville is hanging in because Mama Ya is a non-paid director, so you know, but she's not able to do what she did before.

Gates:

You see the...

Allen:

Do you know Holena Churn? Holena Churn is a dancer.

Gates: Oh yeah. How's she doing?

Allen: She's fine. Now she's a dance instructor for the Jefferson County public schools at and a teacher at the Lincoln School Performing Arts school here. Yeah.

Gates:

You think arts is important to African Americans?

Allen:

The arts is important to everybody. In other words, everything that you see is built on art. Architecture starts with a dot and a line and it goes from there. That's what it is. Art is a fundamental of everything.

Gates: Do you still live in the West End?

Allen: I still live in the West End. Yeah.

Gates: Has it changed that much?

Allen: We built my house there in 60. I haven't tri-level. I live within walking distance. The Chickasaw Park I can walk. The Chickasaw Park is about two blocks from there. And I'm working with a group of women called West Louisville Women's Collaborative and we've built a (inaudible) in the west end, there was a house there that I helped coordinate there where we do art activities at, in the west end.

Gates:

And you volunteered at the African American ...

Allen:

I did that ... And now I volunteered at...

Gates:

Is that the building where they used to have horses...

Allen:

No, that used to be where the trolley barn was.

Gates:

I just taught a class there once. I can't remember what the name of that was.

Allen:

Yeah, yeah. It was the Trolley Barn.

Gates: And you had exhibits there, too, right?

Allen: Yeah. I've had exhibits there. And I'm the volunteer curator and director of the Wayside Expressions Gallery, which is run by Wayside Christian Mission. And this is my 12th year there. We have a new exhibit every month or every month. I've had 12 shows every year.

Gates:

You're in charge of putting the show on?

Allen:

I don't hang the shows. I used to hang the shows but Randy Weber hangs the shows now. He's a photographer and he's, he's a development person there. He works there. But I bought the system that's used there, I bought the hanging system there. And when they moved there, Wayside Christian Mission was on Shelby and Market. And when they came in and renovated NULU came in, purchased that building. And then they bought the building that we used to be Holiday Inn at Stoffer's at Second and Broadway. And so that's where the maintenance headquarters of Wayside Christian Mission is there now.

It's a homeless shelter. Yeah. It's a hotel they have, they have the galleries on the first floor and the gallery is also used for church on Sunday. They have a restaurant there, they have meeting rooms, it's an actual hotel. And then it's a training and recovery center and it's the only place where husband and wife and families can live. So, but yeah.

Gates:

My wife would probably be interested in coming down and seeing that.

Allen:

Look up Wayside Christian Mission. Reverend Tim Moseley.

Gates:

How does the exhibit area work in the homeless center?

Allen:

Well, it's a great big room. It can seat a hundred people in this room or more. It used to be a dining hall for the hotel. And I have a hanging system. I have all the walls. I can show you some pictures on my iPad of how the gallery looks, but I have a new show every month. I have 12 shows a month, every year.

Gates:

And it's not hard to get artists to put something in a homeless shelter?

Allen:

Oh no, because the main thing, if you have a resume and you have artwork ... we do not show nudes, we do not show anything that vulgar. Nudes, nudes, and can't show nudes. You can't show anything with alcohol. No weapons, nothing like that. It's a Christian facility. So, you have children there, you have adults there and it's a hotel and it's a church. So, the gallery meets in the church. Yeah. It's worthwhile going to see. It's at Second and Broadway. But it's a new show every month. I have opening on the first Friday and the third Sunday. First Friday, I'm open from five to eight and the third Sunday from two to four.

Gates:

That must keep you busy.

Allen:

Well, yeah. And I do it all out of my house. And, but this is my last year. I told Tim, I'm going to be 86 in August. And that I was going to give that up in November, December. Yeah. Cause I get, I do, I create a flyer. I sent out all the press releases and you know, and every year in October and here in Louisville, they have the photo biennial every two years. And I'm getting ready for that by now.

Gates:

How did you get involved with this group?

Allen:

Well, oh, I got involved....You remember, who used to work for the Kentucky Arts Council and graphics, Crawford? He worked in, when y'all was over... the African American fellow, Crawford. Anyway, they had a meeting... Wayside. When they were getting the gallery and the lady who helped actually found it was working on a master's in social work. And she thought that that the artwork would be something that would engage people in the community. And that's how it really got founded. And the very first show that we had was at a building that's Shelby and Market. It's now got a restaurant in there now. And it's her name was Gail Williamson. And she did quilts and stuff like that. And so, she was the very first artists that we had. She, and I'm thinking it was Tim Moseley, Nina Moseley, we got it all started. And then after that people died, kind of quit and I kept on. So that's where, so, but I've kept it going for 12 years.

Gates:

Wow. Okay. Well, I think we're going to walk into your studio. Okay. Let's get it. We have to be quiet for the room tone.

Gates:

...To be in your studio. And this is in Mellwood Arts Center. You got this little spot where people can walk past you and say hi to you all the time, right? Yeah. And you work in here doing your textiles mainly, right? So, what's this?

Allen:

This right here, that was a painting that was drawn by Jones Zendor. That's in the book and this is on fabric. This has been traced. That's a digital print. That's been transferred to that.

Gates:

Okay. And you're working on Zora Neale Hurston piece right here?

Allen:

Yeah, this was already finished. Ready to hang. It's been on exhibit.

Gates:

That's a picture put on fabric. And then this part here, the stitching...

Allen: That's shibori.

Gates: That's shibori. Now, what makes that?

Allen:

In other words, I'd stitch it and pulled it up. And the white is formed because of what you call it stitch resist. It resists the stitches.

Gates:

So, some of it is dark. Some of is light. Why is it light?

Allen:

It just depends on how the stitches are pulled together.

Gates:

Yeah. You me stitch together like this?

Allen:

In other words, those stitches right there? Then you pull all those stitches up and tie them on both ends. That right there behind you? Those right here. Right behind you. That's folded and stitched.

Gates:

Okay. So that one over there, the blue one.

Allen:

All your patterns are, they have to be laid out. I have to space it out to where it is. So, all that's done on paper before I do that.

Gates:

And you hand stitch it and then you have to pull the stitches out.

Allen:

Yeah. You dye it. And then you got to wait till it's dry. Otherwise you tear it.

Gates:

So, this is Zora Neale Hurston and she was an early African-American folklorist and anthropologist. So what does the shibori part do for it?

Allen: Well, its just a border.

Gates:

It's a border. Okay. It works really well. I mean, I like it, are you happy with it?

Allen:

Well, yeah, it was in a women's show at U of L. And someone made plates to go with it. It was like a dinner.

Gates:

Huh. Okay. And you have some sketches there of things when you start first start on things. Like that one there. Yeah. What is that?

Allen:

This was... What was a making here?

Gates:

Can you kind of hold it to the camera for a minute? Can you see it?

Allen:

This was one piece I was making.

Gates:

So, what are those numbers there?

Allen:

These numbers here. I was trying to figure out ... I had to account for seam lines. Because this was a three-part. So I had to take in consideration where I had the seam. So, the seam was one inch. So, one part was 13 inches, two parts were 13 inches and one part was 14 inches.

Gates:

And where is that piece? Is it...

Allen:

I think I might have a piece here. Yeah. And this piece is a design. And like I said, I love triangles.

Gates:

You liked triangles. Yes. Yeah. Okay. So, is this a piece here?

Allen:

That's another piece. That's what you call... That's a wrap piece.

Gates:

Well, you can show him the ceramics there.

Allen:

I need to put the cloth out so you can see it.

Gates:

Okay. Put these over here? On top of here?

Allen:

Yep.

Gates:

Okay. So, this little shop here has everything you need. You have a sink down the hall. What do you use the sink for?

Allen:

I use the sink to dye.

Gates:

And how long you've been here? 10 years, you say?

Allen:

I've been here since they opened.

Gates:

So, all your fabrics are done here?

Allen:

Up here or U of L.

Gates:

And your ceramics is at U of L. So, these images on here...

Allen:

So, this right here was stitched... In other words, I stitched around it. First of all, I drew the circle. Then I stitched the circle. Then I pulled the circle up. Then I wrapped the circle with thread real tight and then dyed it. And that's why you got designs.

Gates:

So, on this cloth, he had all these done first before you dyed it.

Allen:

That's right.

Gates:

So that goes on a couple of feet. Okay. So, you had to stitch them or something inside there. Okay. Yeah. I'll get this. Yeah. You had to stitch all these circles and then kind of tied in like that.

Allen:

In other words, they came to a point. Then you wrapped them.

Gates:

And then you dyed it.

Allen:

It has to be dry before you take the stitches out, otherwise you tear the fabric.

Gates:

Oh, okay. Do you know what you're going to get before you do it?

Allen:

No, you don't. You know what you plan, but you cannot predict what it's going to look like.

Gates:

Then what were you planning with this?

Allen:

I wanted the circles and I wanted the design inside of the circle. See how these patterns are? You can't decide where these are going to do.

Gates:

Yeah. They're all different. Yeah. I mean, they almost look like animals to me or totems or people...

Allen:

So, you have to decide when you design this, that you have half circles on either side. So everything is laid out before I do anything. Before I stitched the first thing...

Gates:

And you have enough room in here to do all that?

Allen:

Yeah, you do it all right here.

Gates:

What about this piece?

Allen:

This was a piece that was done in three pieces. And it has triangles on it.

Gates:

Well, I guess... where these already shown?

Allen:

Yes. Everything in here has been shown.

Gates:

Wow. This is all stitched?

Allen:

No. These are two different techniques on here. This technique on here, on this one, you put it on one of those plastic poles back there. PVC pipe. I'll give you a smaller one.

Gates:

That was a small piece that went down to the bottom there. Sorry. Well as a PVC pipe.

Allen:

In other words, you wrap the fabric around the PVC pipe and then you crunch it ... your pipe might be as tall as that board and then you push it down.

Gates:

Into the pipe?

Allen:

No, outside the pipe, you push it outside the pipe.

Gates:

Kind of like that?

Allen:

Yes. And you push it down and then you wrap that.

Gates:

And so you didn't stitch this?

Allen:

These are three pieces.

Gates:

Oh okay. I see they are sewed together.

Allen:

That's what I'm saying is that you have to consider... See, and this is all hand sewn.

Gates:

So, do you have a name for this?

Allen:

No, I don't name anything.

Gates:

Why?

Allen:

I don't name anything. It's all Untitled. Yeah. But this, and then I had to decide where these were supposed to be. Because I want everything centered. How many inches from the top? From the bottom.

Gates:

So, in your mind, did you see this before you started?

Allen:

Yeah I saw it because I had to draw it out on paper first.

Gates:

That's beautiful. Was this shown at an exhibit?

Allen:

It's been shown a couple of times.

Gates:

But no title on it. When you do these kinds of things to do series too?

Allen:

Actually this is a continuation of a series. Diamonds are something that I like.

Gates:

It looks very tribal. It looks like a leopard skin or something. I mean, all artists are trying to communicate something through their art. What are you trying to say?

Allen:

I just like to see the beauty in it, you know, the aesthetic beauty. What do you see? In other words, you see a triangle. This is the diamond, but it takes two triangles to make a diamond.

Gates:

Yeah. All these little marks. And that's because you crunched it up?

Allen:

No, this is a stitch. Each of these are stitches.

Gates:

So, you stitched like that?

Allen:

Yeah. You make straight lines straight lines. So you have to see how the dots come right here. So you stitch across.

Gates:

Well.

Allen:

That's it. Do you want to see that red piece over there?

Gates:

This red piece here?

Allen:

That's another big diamond.

Gates:

That's on a pipe. Isn't it?

Allen:

Yeah, that's on a PVC pipe.

Gates:

That's just to hold it together?

Allen:

Let's put it that way. Let this fall down a little bit.

Gates:

Now this is all stitched too? And that's called the...

Allen:

Shibori. Stitch resist.

Gates:

Who does that in Japan?

Allen:

That's a Japanese technique.

Gates:

Is it a woman or a man thing? Or is it anybody?

Allen:

Women do it now, but it might've been a man's thing.

Gates:

So who introduced you to that?

Allen:

I was introduced to this in the fiber class with Lyda Garden at U of L. And there was a young lady there named Amy Jacobs. She had done it and I decided I wanted to do, but she did small pieces, but I prefer the long pieces.

Gates:

I mean, to me, being an outsider in this and not knowing much, these three designs that I just saw looked African to me.

Allen:

Yeah. But, like I say, I think about them as a math thing not as a cultural thing at all.

Gates:

Not a cultural thing at all. No, there's no African ideas?

Allen:

No. I don't, I don't think that no.

Gates:

That's interesting that I see that you are not even trying to show that. It's just what you're drawn to. But that's technique is not always in diamond.

Allen:

No, that's right. Yeah. But, but, but, but most of my work, diamonds and triangles, you know, or squares, circles, curves.

Gates:

Did you ever show any of your work to your old bosses down at the distillery?

Allen:

Yeah, they've seen my work.

Gates:

What did they think?

Allen:

Well, they all liked it.

Gates:

Did they try to make you do bottles of bourbon or anything? (Laughs)

Allen:

No, no, no. Not at all. Everything is based off of this., This is the primary technique.

Gates:

Can we look at your pots a little bit, real quick?

Allen:

This is a stencil. Quite a few things in here. Let me take this out.

Gates:

So these are pieces...

Allen:

Now, this was quilted.

Gates:

Quilted? Okay. It looks like x-rays or something to me.

Allen:

But this is another piece. Let me pull this one out. And that's got beads on it.

Gates:

Oh, it's got beads in the middle there. Yeah. And the triangles there. Okay.

Allen:

The main thing is all the triangles.

Gates:

It's beautiful. Can I show a couple pots, real quick? Teapots?

Allen:

I only got one teapot.

Gates:

Oh! That's all your stuff there too? Those aren't teapots...

Allen:

No, these are just... In fact, my thesis show was all those kind of pots.

Gates:

Oh, square pots. Or rectangles, I guess. Now, here's one of your teapots.

Allen:

This was from my thesis show.

Gates:

So, it's not only the pieces, but how you display them.

Allen:

And these were all on the floor and I do not have digital images of these.

Gates:

Is that a picture of them?

Allen:

This is a picture of them.

Gates:

It almost looks like a painting of them.

Allen:

These are 4 by 8 boards, painted black. And these are stenciled wall pieces, see right here?

Gates:
Beautiful.

Allen:
That's just a sponge right there.

Gates:
Well, I think this is good. Thank you for letting us in here.

Allen:
Okay, and I have this little beaded piece, if you want to do that one.

Gates:
That's all beads?

Allen:
That's all beads.

Gates:
How many of those did you do?

Allen:
I only did one of those. That took forever to do that one. It was 17...

Gates:
17 by 17 inches.

Allen:
It's on ultra-suede.

Gates:
Wow.

Allen:
So you see, everything has got a geometric pattern.

Tape cuts.

Allen:

...And they were spaced out in the gallery, so you could walk between them.

Gates:

What exhibit was that from?

Allen:

That was my thesis exhibit in 2002.

Gates:

At U of L?

Allen:

Uh huh, 2002. When I told people they were all little boxes.

Gates:

Did your professors help you design it?

Allen:

No. Did you get enough material?

END OF INTERVIEW