

Kentucky Craft History and Education Association, Inc.

Interview with Robin and Mary Reed

January 23, 2009

Interview conducted by Greg Willihnganz

WILLIHNGANZ: This is Greg Willihnganz interviewing Robin and Mary Reed at their home in Irvine, Kentucky for the Kentucky Craft History and Education Association, it's January 23, 2009.

WILLIHNGANZ: Thank you very much for doing this interview, we appreciate it.

ROBIN: You're welcome.

MARY: We do traditional Appalachian crafts, work with corn shucks, and make flowers, dolls, nativity sets, birds, floral arrangements, and then also making baskets out of the bark of poplar, willow, hickory trees...the most popular ones. Both of these traditional crafts date back hundreds of years to the American Indians, who taught the pilgrims to make these crafts. So, we feel like we are carrying on an age old tradition and trying to keep it alive.

WILLIHNGANZ: Wow, that's terrific. Robin...

ROBIN: Yeah. The baskets probably have been around since mankind's been on two feet. They've used them for packing materials and carrying firewood, and I've just gotten into the decorative end of the basket business. I do some functional baskets, woven and folded, and I peel all the trees myself, and harvest all my materials. The hickory bark comes off of the hickory tree of course, poplar bark comes off the poplar tree, and the willow's the same. And, they're all pretty much in different locations in this area. They're quite close from the river up to the cliff.

WILLIHNGANZ: Wow, okay. Tell me...tell me about your childhoods growing up. Did you both come from Kentucky or did you come here from someplace else?

ROBIN: Yes, we're both from Lexington originally, and we went to the same high school just different years. I was primarily brought up in the arts, as in music, and then, when I went to post secondary, I was at the University of Kentucky in architecture, and gained a lot of information through architecture on materials. And then, I didn't finish my degree, and ended up looking for a place out in the country to live, and to live what I wanted to work with.

WILLIHNGANZ: So how did you get into doing the baskets and all that?

ROBIN: Well. We actually...we started in candles and we had a free supply of wax at one of the cup manufacturers in Lexington. It was throw away stuff, and we were gathering it and bringing it down here, and filtering it. And, we started candles by pouring them in cookie sheets...pouring the wax in cookie sheets, and then coloring the wax in the cookie sheets, and then throwing the sheets back into hot water, and getting them soft enough to roll around a wick. And, that's pretty much...we were doing that as

a Christmas gift kind of idea and it just...everybody said, why don't you sell 'em? And, we got with Craft Marketing and they told us some...they gave us some guidelines and we took off from there.

WILLIHNGANZ: Wow. So, when you started out you, started out in Craft Marketing, right...when you were doing the candles?

ROBIN: Well, we probably...

MARY: I think Craft Marketing wasn't in existence yet, so we had about ten years on our own making crafts, selling them through shows, to shops. Then, Craft Marketing came along in 1981, the Kentucky Craft Marketing Program which is part of the Kentucky Arts Council, joined up with them, juried into their program and have been with them ever since, so twenty-seven years.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, you joined the Kentucky Guild for Artists and Craftsmen before that. Is that right?

MARY: No. Actually, we had not. We had been with Kentucky Craft Marketing long before we became involved with the Kentucky Guild. That came later.

WILLIHNGANZ: Oh, I see.

MARY: A little backwards compared to maybe most people, but hey, it was the other way around for us.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, how did you transition from candle making to the other crafts that you've done?

MARY: Well, making the crafts became a way of life, a way of supporting our lifestyle of living off the land. Even though we had both been educated at universities, when we moved to rural Eastern Kentucky there were no jobs available, so...and as you know, you've driven, we're quite remote, way off the main highway. And so, anyways, this was a way to make a living at home. And then, you took your wares out and sold them, but you didn't have to go out every day for a job. So, the crafts life...it became part of our lifestyle...the way of supporting ourselves off of the land. Candles were very large, big seller items through the 70's. In the meantime, we learned the traditional crafts of working with corn shucks, and the bark, which are very traditional to this area. They became more popular in the 80's. Candles kinda faded out. People bought them and put them on their mantels for decoration. They quit burning them, but today that cycles come back, and people burn candles again. But, anyways it was...you got...when you went to a show, and you had candles and baskets and corn shucks, and you saw that your candles, I mean your corn shucks were selling a lot more than your

candles. You kinda just...they kinda faded out. The candles faded out as the other items became more popular. Tradition is a strong market. It doesn't necessarily fade in and out. Tradition is tradition...it is there, it is history.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, what drew you to corn shuck art?

ROBIN: Well, we were primarily doing a show in Frankfort, Kentucky. It was called the Frankfort Expo. Is that what it was?

MARY: I think so.

ROBIN: The Frankfort Expo, and it was back in the 70's, and we would always look around at the other booths while we were doing the show...whenever the crowd was slow...and we would...one of us would get up and leave the booth. And, Mary came across a corn shuck booth, and she was fascinated by it. And, I'll let her tell you the story from there.

MARY: Well. We raised acres of corn to feed our horses and chickens...

ROBIN: Feed our horses...

MARY:...and had all these corn shucks available, and thought gee, I can make something out of these. I made my first corn shuck doll from instructions out of Mother Earth News, and it took me about eight hours of following those instructions, and at the end of the day I was very proud of it. But, as the doll dried...corn shucks are a fiber, and so you work with them when they're wet...and when they dry, that fiber shrinks. And, the doll fell apart and kind of went bong. And so, I said, I'll never make another corn shuck doll. But then, I started meeting other corn shuck artists, and talking to them. And, they would give me hints. And, I had one woman, Joan Curry, who was a corn shuck artist, and made a friendship with her through the craft shows, and she'd teach me a little trick and I'd go home and I'd play. And next show, I'd go, take what I'd done back, and she'd make suggestions. And, one of the things she used to do is, like on a flower, she would try to pull the petals out. And, if she could pull the petals out, then I wasn't tying it tight enough. Because, I said as that fiber dries it shrinks, and it becomes loose, and so when I teach corn shuck workshops that's one of the biggest things. You can't tie tight enough, especially when I'm dealing with kids, I always go back and reinforce it because there's nothing more disappointing, you know, being so proud of it. And then the next day, it falls apart, so I try to reinforce them for them.

WILLIHNGANZ: And, as you've gone along over the years, have you moved into other areas? Have you experimented with weaving or pottery, or any other of the craft field?

MARY: Well, I studied fine arts at UK, and also the University of New Mexico. So, over the years I have...I've done pottery, I've done jewelry, paintings, weaving with the bark, I weave baskets, we both do out of bark. We have...well and I weave garlic. (Mary laughs) We at one time grew three acres of garlic, had it juried into the Kentucky Craft Marketing Program, and took orders on it and sold it. I usually then, would spend about three months in the barn, as I cleaned and braided garlic, and turned it into garlic braids and wreaths. I sold it all over the United States. We've woven grape vines, honeysuckle. We have worked with most of...the majority of the time has been with natural materials that are available to us at...in our surroundings, in our environment here in the woods, gather moss for using in arrangements, cattails, weave with cattail leaves or day lily leaves, it's just a lot of experimental. The inspiration is drawn from ,the environment we live in, living in...within nature, the creek, we use the creek for soaking our bark anyway our inspiration comes from the beauty of the nature around us.

WILLIHNGANZ: You're pretty much dedicated to the country life, lived a fairly, what I would call, organic life. Would that be accurate (Willihnganz laughs)?

ROBIN & MARY: Yeah.

MARY: We've even been certified organic before.

ROBIN: Yeah. We were certified when the program first started up.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

ROBIN: And now, the program has gone to a national...and at the federal level program...and the paperwork is pretty horrendous. And they...they're subsidizing the dues now but the paperwork is pretty out there so it's a lot of work to keep up with the paperwork . We've...we sell everything here that's organic from gardens...from garden vegetables to...I sell organic straw and organic hay.

MARY: Mushrooms...

ROBIN: Mushrooms, sell bamboo and it's organically grown, too. Have about seven varieties, no ten varieties of bamboo that I sell, and I grow six varieties of basket and decorative willow trees.

MARY: We try to survive off of the land.

ROBIN: So, you have to be very diversified in order to pull that off, and we make due with what we've got, and just today I just sent off some...using technology, this instant email stuff. I just sent out a few pictures to two florists today...told 'em that the cutting season on the willows is getting ready to begin, so I'll sell all the stems off my

willow trees, and then I'll cut them down to about...I'll cut the stumps off to two inches, and then I'll get a new crop next year.

MARY: We use his willow boughs for weaving baskets.

ROBIN: And, I haven't learned that process yet. They...they make creels and stuff over in Europe out of these basket willows, and it's kinda...it looks like stick weaving, and I've used them in my rims, and in my handles on my woven baskets before. I just haven't learned the technique to do this...the stick weaving yet.

WILLIHNGANZ: What are creels?

ROBIN: Creels are like rounded bottom baskets that you can make for making lobster traps or donkey bags...

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

ROBIN: and they're kind of...they come down and they round out, so that they kind of fit on an animal. If you need to use them strapped over an animal they'll fit.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

ROBIN: On the back of an animal.

WILLIHNGANZ: How well did your education...your formal education prepare you for the challenges you met basically living off the land?

ROBIN: Oh wow, it didn't. (Robin laughs)

MARY: No, no, it was a learn as you go, day by day...a lot of books, a lot of reading, a lot of asking of questions to your local neighbors, who were born and raised here. We were both, you know, basically, you know, city urban kids, middle class. I had a small garden...my parents had a small garden in their back yard and my mother canned, but did not really prepare us for living with no conveniences, which is how we started out. We did have electricity, heated with wood, cooked with wood, drew our water out of the creek or out of rain barrels that we caught...caught water in. We learned to farm using a team of horses. It was...it was back to the land movement, homesteading, survival...and learned from other like-kind minded people doing the same thing, so you kinda had a unity together on that, and we learned to make sorghum molasses. What are some of the other things we've done? (Not real clear)

ROBIN: We've put up all of our food.

MARY: We learned to slaughter a pig by reading the book with one person reading the instructions as the other person did the step. So, we learned as we went. It wasn't something that we grew up with.

WILLIHNGANZ: Was this an organized community, locally, that you came into, or was this just people who happened to be on the land that you moved into...their neighborhood, and picked up from them what you could?

MARY: Yeah. More like that. It was not organized but it was...

ROBIN: We were part of...

MARY: ...a migration point I guess.

ROBIN: We were part of the back to the land movement, and there were several people that were in this area looking for land, and purchasing land, when we moved here. And, it came down to where we all had to ask each other questions in order to get by, you know. And, I mean, how did you do this? How do you split your firewood, you know, and we had to just give each other, you know, what works best for us.

MARY: Now, I was a girl scout...

ROBIN: And, I was a boy scout. I was a life scout actually. You know, I knew how to how to tie a...

MARY: We could make a camp fire. (Mary & Robin laugh)

ROBIN: I could tie knots and build fires.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, those are important things to be able to do.

ROBIN: They are.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, in the development of your craft work, did you basically learn this as you went, and sort of develop your own style? Or, did you study books to try and find a more traditional style? Did you borrow from other artists? Did you have mentors?

MARY: You start out with tradition, and there is...there's always a method, but then, after you've learned your basic skills, I always say the same thing. In a recipe follow the steps, 1-2-3, and then make it the first time according to the instructions. And then, you adjust it to suit your own personal taste or style, or I...preferences and it doesn't...it's not always the same. Each time you make it it's a little bit different, or it gets a little bit better. As your creative juices start to flow, then your imagination expands and new ideas come in and you try that. To me, it's an always growing and

evolving technique or method, you know. You've got to learn your basic skills first, and then from there, it's up to the individual's imagination. And, the more you do it, the more proficient your skills become, until you've totally mastered that art form. And, I think, a lot of time you find artists or crafts people will, at that point, they become bored with it. And, they move into the next phase, or to the next art form, because they have mastered this one medium over the years.

WILLIHNGANZ: So you did not go that route. You've pretty much stayed with your medium.

MARY: Well, we've done a lot of different things over the years, yeah right.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now. You got involved with the different craft organizations, Kentucky Craft Marketing and Kentucky Guild after you'd been doing your crafts for some years is that correct?

MARY: Yes. I like to say we started in the crafts before it was really...the beginning of the movement...early 70's was when we came in to it. There weren't a lot of craft shows in this area. We could just take an Indian blanket, and just shake it out on the city park, and just lay your wares out, and sell off of it...didn't have to be organized. Then, at that point then, people started organizing craft shows and advertising, and we started participating in those. At one point we probably did close to twenty-four crafts shows a year, which meant you were always on the road. You'd be on the road three or four days. You'd come home, hurry up, and make some new inventory, and then hit the road again. This was how you sold your wares. While you're at craft shows, then you're approached by shops...dealers, who ask if you wholesale. At that point, you have to make a decision on whether or not you want to wholesale to one, but that expands your marketing. They do the selling for you. From there...then at that point, I guess, we got the Kentucky Crafts Marketing...was developed, and we joined up with...joined into their program. They started hosting wholesale/retail trade shows that we participated in. Their advertisement went out to shop owners, to buyers. When you start wholesaling, your marketing expands greatly, it's not just locally. You can go statewide then it's your border states. From that...to the Kentucky Craft Marketing they did workshops, they taught us skills...

ROBIN: Marketing skills.

MARY: Marketing skills. They...a lot of...they held our hand a lot I think, encouraged us to grow, to make it a viable economic income for you, not just a hobby. This could be a full-time profession. We...they opened a lot of doors for us, helped us build that self-confidence. We started doing international trade shows in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Kansas, to where we were meeting with...if you went to

New York, you had the potential of meeting with over fifty thousand buyers in one week... international through that. We started exporting to France. We were featured in Elle magazine...

ROBIN: France, we went to France.

MARY: At one time, Japan, England. I don't know that there's a state that we haven't shipped our crafts to over the years. We were...we have supplied...probably one of the biggest things we probably did, is that we sold to QVC telemarketing. Now we have never had television in our life, and we still don't have television. And so, when they first approached us I had no idea...I thought they were yanking my chain, pulling my leg. QVC... you sell over TV...this is not real. What do these...how dumb do these people think I am? And, people said, "no man, this really happens". So, they took me to the hotel room, and put the QVC channel on and said, "Look. This is what they're talking about". So, QVC had never tried hand crafts before. They were, of course, more into giftware items, but this was Phyllis George Brown...had been talking to 'em, she was a big promoter of the crafts fair in Kentucky. And so, she was...brought them to us, and anyways. So, we said, okay, I will give this a try. Anyways, we had a...we determined...we sold them some corn shuck swags. That was what they were interested in, and then these corn shuck swags...anyways, we said, okay, that we can do 750 of them. That meant making twenty thousand corn shuck flowers...had six weeks to pull it off. We had about twelve people working for us making corn shuck flowers. We mortgaged our farm to finance it, and we worked up to about 20 hours a day for six weeks and pulled it off. We turned the barn into a shipping warehouse, had to rent cube trucks to haul all the boxes out of here...out of the holler, and stuff to get it to Lexington to the shipping ports, and stuff. But, that was a very interesting experience to do. It was that, that made us decide that we didn't like business at that level, that it was interfering with our lifestyle, and that we would curtail back a little bit. But, we sold to some national chain stores for a while, catalog sales...had it built up pretty big. But, when you live as remote as we do then it was...we were working twice as hard for that dollar as if we lived in an urban area where things were...

ROBIN: Access to shipping was easy.

MARY: Access, or to suppliers, or all those things. So anyways, now we just do what we can handle ourselves and...but after 27 years, no after 30...oh, I lose count...anyway it's a long time, we have been in business for 37 years...yeah, doing this...

ROBIN: Yes.

MARY: We are...I like to think that we are on the waning years of that, not building up, but tapering down to what is a lot more comfortable at this point in my life.

ROBIN: As far as QVC went, what we found out working at that level was that you become...you become management and you never make the craft again. You instruct other people how and when and where, and to do with the product each step of the process. And then, you have to run around and buy materials, and order them in. And then, you have to deliver them all out again, and it became...it was...it was relatively a no hands-on operation at that point. It was all telephone, transportation, and whatever.

MARY: Well, and you feel like you become a human machine, to when you make twenty thousand corn shuck flowers that all look the same. And, you lose that creative spark, so anyways, its...

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me some more about being members of the Guild. What was that like for you?

MARY: Well it's a wonderful acceptance, a stamp of approval that you have been able to pass their stringent jury standards to become part of a state program that is there to promote their artists and craftsmen.

ROBIN: They're fine artists and craftsmen.

WILLIHNGANZ: Did you get turned down the first time you applied?

MARY: Yes.

ROBIN: Oh, yeah. I think we got turned down three times.

MARY: There's very few people who ever pass it because it's...

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah. I've talked to probably dozens at this point, of members, and it seems to be a point of pride how many times you got turned down. And you came back anyway, just kept knocking on the door till you got through.

ROBIN: Well, and they would give you some quality control points that you would have to redo. And, you would redo those, and then those points would change just a little bit, just enough to just get you off the picture. And then, you'd go back home for another six months and you'd try again.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well. I'm sure that every jury, the juries on an applicant is different than the previous jury.

ROBIN: Yeah, they are.

WILLIHNGANZ: They have different members who may not even be people that are expert in your particular area. I don't know how many corn silk artists there are around. I don't know what that populous would be.

MARY: Well, it wouldn't have to just necessarily just be a corn shuck artist. It could be a fiber artist...someone who understands fibers, because corn shucks is a fiber. So is a basket. It...It's made of fibers, too. So, if you are a master within fibers you can relate. I have also served on that jury for about the last ten years myself, and it's...it's interesting. It's challenging to judge someone else's work, and then I have served for mentors...to those who haven't passed it, but are good enough that you want to encourage, you know, they're almost there. Tweak it just a little bit, and stuff. So give them that encouragement and make suggestions for them to try again.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, the mentoring program...is that fairly recent with the Guild?

MARY: Yes, with them as well as with the Kentucky Craft Marketing Program. Offering those who, as I say, they are almost there, they almost pass, they miss it by a couple of points, and each one does it a little bit different. And, I've served as a mentor for both programs, and its...you want these people to re-jury, to try it again. And I...to just tweak things a little bit sometimes. Maybe they didn't quite understand what it was being asked of them, and so they mis-submitted for that jury session, or something. And it...it's the same way when you try to jury into a craft show, the competition is very stiff anymore, and each...each show is looking for something a little bit different. The more you know about 'em...you know what they're looking for, the more you can target what you enter into it...you submit for that jury process. I don't know, but you don't necessarily always get into the show the first time around either.

ROBIN: Right, right.

WILLIHNGANZ: When...when you started up in the Guild, did you get into any of their programs, their marketing programs, or what not? Was that important to you?

MARY: Their marketing program is their shows. At that time they were doing two shows a year at the Indian Fort Theatre in Berea...

ROBIN: In Berea.

MARY: That has evolved. There are no more shows at Indian Fort Theatre. They do one in downtown Berea, and they have a new indoor show in, coming up this year in Western Kentucky in a convention center in the spring. So, that's a new venue that they're going to try. There's just...there's so many shows anymore. Competition is very stiff...which one you even want to do when you have so many multiple choices.

Thirty years ago there weren't that many shows, and, of course, there's a lot more artists and craftsmen today to fill those slots...nationwide even. We always found the further away from home we went, the better our sales were. So, when I would go into Connecticut or Massachusetts, New York...people would look at me and say, "Wow! You're from Kentucky". They must really be good..."you came all this way for a craft show". You know, so they wanted a piece of you. And, that's a sales technique. You're not just selling product, but you're selling yourself. So a piece of yourself goes with it. The average customer wants your story. How you...how you made it or how you came about learning that art form, because when people come into their home, and they say, "Oh, wow! This is...oh, I love this angel". You get to tell the story. "I met the neatest people. They came all the way from Kentucky. They live back in the middle of the woods". Whatever, but anyways, so, as I say, a piece of you...a piece of us is in everything that we make, and a story that needs to be translated to that buyer, and then that...its added value it makes it a lot more valuable. If not, you could just go into any store, Wal-Mart or whatever, and buy, and it just becomes another ordinary piece that doesn't have a story to about it. Yeah, I got this at Wal-Mart, but now this...yeah...I got...

ROBIN: Yeah. Speaking of stories...reach over there and get that basket. This is a sales technique that I use a lot, and Craft Marketing taught me this sales technique. And people always come up and ask what these series of holes is. They look like cigarette burns. And, this is the inner bark of the poplar tree. This gray's the inner and outer part together. So, I have shaved this off of the bark, and what's underneath that you can't see in the gray bark. You might see an itty-bitty pin hole in the gray bark, but this is the healing effect that takes place after the pileated woodpecker eats the bugs out from under the bark. And, I don't get much of this bark, but when I do, I try to show it off a little bit. So that's just a story that goes along with this basket, and it's a real...it's a real eye catcher to some people. And, the store owners, of course, come in and take the same basket. And, they can tell the story of how these little brown dots got on this bark. So that's...that's an advantageous to them and... (Talking softly not able to understand) ...

MARY: That's something that Craft Marketing has done for us as an artist or a craftsman. We are good at visioning, and creating, and working with our hands, and our imagination. But, we are not sales people. And that's probably the hardest part of our job as an artist...is to be able to sell your work so you can live off of it. So you can afford to make more, and they've...so they've taught us techniques. Another piece of value is, that every basket is signed, dated, numbered. It adds value to it, to the person. It's not stamped "Made in China" with that little sticker that you peel off or something. So anyways, those are some of the things that I give Craft Marketing, the Kentucky

Craft Marketing Program credit for doing for us...is teaching us how to do those skills. They worked with us to teach us how to export...

ROBIN: They taught us how to...they taught us how to do price points when we were selling candles.

MARY: Right, wholesale-retail pricing through many of their workshops. I know when we were exporting you have to deal with wire transfers. We live in a community where's there's three thousand people. We have a little local bank. And, we went to them, and they didn't have any idea. They'd never done that before, and so we learned together. I mean it was just putting one foot in front of the other. We know it's done. Let's try it, you know. Let's just go. So, it's just...it's a, you know, one foot in front of the other most of the time, and we learn as we go. It's not as though you come up against a wall and say, "Oops. Got to turn around and go the other way". It's you learn to climb over it or to tear that wall down and move forward.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, have you marketed any of your products through the Kentucky Museum of Art, or the Artisans Center here?

MARY: Yeah.

ROBIN: Yeah. We do...I do quite a bit. My business is through the Artisans Center at Berea, and I've sold some stuff up in Hindman at their Artisans' Center as well.

MARY: And, you're talking about the Kentucky Museum of Arts and Crafts in Louisville.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yes.

MARY: And, that program also started up at the same time that the Kentucky Craft Marketing Program did, with Phyllis George. And, I believe, we were the fourth person ever juried into that program. So, for years we sold quite a bit to them...did a lot of their corporate sales. So, we'd get large orders of baskets for corporate gifts and stuff. At this point we've not had a lot to do...involvement with them in recent times, and a lot of it's just because there so far away from us. And so, we've not really been involved much lately.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, you've also been involved Mary, with the administration basically, of the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen, and tell me a little bit about what that history of that organization has been like.

MARY: It's been up and down over the years. That organization, in like 1961, I believe...and it was kind of a partnership with the state of Kentucky and the community of Berea, with the college there. Anyways their thing...main goal was to be supportive of the artisans and craftsmen, and also education. They started out with a train museum, and that had exhibits in one train car and working...hands-on working studios in another. They had train directors, and these were people who actually lived and traveled on these trains. And, they took the exhibits into the community. It was a way of getting arts out there, sharing that especially in remote rural areas of Eastern Kentucky. Then fairs were developed at the...in Berea at the Indian Fort Theatre. This gave an opportunity for their member artisans and craftsmen to sell their wares.

ROBIN: They had a storefront in Lexington as well.

MARY: Yeah. They had a store front for a number of years in Lexington, again trying to promote their artisans, workshops, exhibits, now traveling around the state. I became involved as a board member in the late 90's, and I have served about ten years. I spent three years as vice-president, and another three years as secretary. I came onto the board, filling an unexpired term of a board member who had moved out of state, and so, served about seven years on the board total. And, from there, I have served about six years on an advisory board for them, just trying, so as new boards come on they have somebody that I can tell them a piece of the history, so they don't have to reinvent it or do it all over again, so there's some continuance to that.

WILLIHNGANZ: Looking at your history, it also seems like you've been on other boards dealing with the arts, and have had some here...I don't...it's Estill Arts Council, I didn't, I don't even know where that...

MARY: Estill and Irvine is in Estill County, okay, (Willihnganz laughs) and so I have always felt that, we've been in Irvine 35 years, and always felt that Irvine needed an Arts Council. And, worked for years talking it up, and finally we were able to organize one. I think it's about eight years ago, about 2000, with help through the Kentucky Arts Council. And anyways, we organized an Arts Council here. The mission is to promote and support the artists with...along with the community partnerships and to bring arts into the community. As a small rural community without public transportation, you have to go out to find the arts, except for some of the small local things here, so...anyways that's been our mission there. So, I was on that founding board to do that, and I continue to serve on that board of directors. Since we now have a community chorus, we do an annual craft show. We do an Artists' Spotlight, a couple of Artists' Spotlights a year...

ROBIN: And, we do that show at the golf course, the...

MARY: That's the Artist Spotlight...

ROBIN: Spotlight.

MARY: So that we're bringing artists into the community from surrounding communities as well, and just making arts available to our community. We bring in artists from throughout the state for performances, and try to do it at either no cost or very low cost. Grants enable us to bring arts and promote the arts here, and these grants come...the grants I'm most familiar with have come through the Kentucky Arts Council. A lot of their funding comes through the National Endowment for the Arts, which is our federal program. Anyways, it's...and it kinda helps filter that money down into local communities. That's where the federal government gives dollars to the state governments, and then the state governments give dollars to the local governments, as in each county, our community organization. You do have to be a non-profit 501C3. This is...you do...there is...it's a competitive application process. It's not money that's just given to you. You do apply for it. There does need to be a plan, a mission behind it. You are accountable for all those dollars. You do have to match those dollars with local dollars, so that you're getting community buy-in, whether it be through businesses, or through individuals. And so, to me, I see it as not a negative influence, but as a positive direction to assist and aid you in what your local mission is. If it had not been for those state dollars, that state program, that state support, we would not have an Arts Guild here locally. The Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen...they get dollars, they get grant dollars through the Kentucky Arts Council. It is a way that...to help disseminate federal dollars, and those state dollars, so that individuals are touched a lot more. And, not just large urban areas, which seem to have a lot more support for the arts. If you look at the city of Louisville or Lexington, where they have large universities which have dollars for arts and more, they're readily accessible a lot of times. In the early 70's and 80's, if we wanted anything cultural, we had to leave our own community for it, so, and then you had transportation costs, and a lot of people don't have or don't have...can't afford to do that, or so they're limited. We used to have to transport our children by bus into Lexington to see a play, or into the University of Kentucky, or Eastern Kentucky University. Today these grant dollars, through the Kentucky Arts Council, help us bring those plays into our local community, so that more children can see them. You don't have that expense then, of bussing out of town, which means you have to provide a meal. Which it just...you know, dollars are better spent that way. So, I say nothing but...no, I don't think of it at all as a negative influence.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

MARY: A lot of the...I am a community organizer. I like to be involved, I like meetings. Most people think I'm nuts, but I like meetings. I get a lot out of it, and I like

to do grassroots movements. I serve on the advisory...artists advisory board for the Appalachian Artisans Center, which is in Hindman, Kentucky in Knott County. I've been on that board since the conception of that. That was a state mandated budget item when Paul Patton was in, again trying to bring arts into the rural Eastern Kentucky areas, out of just the urban areas. Get that support out there for those artists in those remote rural areas. But, I've been on that board now for ten years, I think so. There have been other organizations that I've helped found, and incorporate. Some of them have served their purpose and are no longer in existence. And, that's a positive thing. It's the way I see it. They were there to support regional communities, and (unintelligible) what grew out of that was now each community has its own arts council. So, you didn't need a regional group so much. It was just kind of a stepping stone to get to that next level.

WILLIHNGANZ: I've heard it argued that promoting craft work is a way for us to assist the people who are in Appalachia, who don't have means to get themselves ahead economically. And, I've also heard it argued that it probably has no impact whatever on those individuals. What do you think the impact of craft work and promoting it?

MARY: People in Eastern Kentucky?

WILLIHNGANZ: Mmhuh...

MARY: I think it's huge, and if nothing else, it gives them pride. And, when you give somebody pride you enable them to grow, to get out of that slump. Eastern Kentucky has been slandered for a long time. In the news, they always show the worst of it, and I do think of it as a third-world country. It's very different, it's very unique, it has its own dialect, which is beautiful. The people have...there lives are so rich, because they have had to live off of the land, or get by, or make do with what is available them. One time, thirty years ago, we could not drive in this road that we live on. It's still a gravel road. We had to walk two miles in, or we had a team of horses and a sled, and we would walk in and hook it up, and then drive it up to pavement and pick up the supplies that we hauled in. It was not easy to access services, materials, and stuff. But take, for instance, quilting...it is a very traditional craft, but it was born out of necessity for warmth. People of Appalachia never threw anything away. There was a use for something. If it...if you wore out your overalls you didn't just throw them away, you could stuff a hole in your log cabin with it, or you could cut out the better pieces of material and start piecing it together and make a quilt for warmth. That was the beginning of quilts, and today we have beautiful designer quilts that are the envy of everybody, that cost large dollars. This was something that the Appalachian people did every day of their life, out of necessity, and it has become a very popular trend. They

should have a lot of pride in that. We put bottoms in chairs, out of hickory bark, that are woven; this was something that the Appalachian people did out of necessity. They made their chairs, they wove their seats. Baskets...they wove baskets so that they had a container to put their potatoes in, or to gather them, or to haul their milk in from the barn. It just, you know, the corn shuck dolls came out of, they didn't have...

WILLIHNGANZ: Toys...

MARY: A toy, it was a toy for their children, they were made that way...I said earlier that the American Indians taught the pilgrims how to make it. I still run into people who talk about how they played with corn dollies when they were children, and how they were made. Dye...you can dye them with natural dyes. Today I use fabric dyes to dye my corn shucks but...

ROBIN: You have used the natural materials.

MARY: I have used, uh huh...

ROBIN: You used the walnut hulls and the root barks.

MARY: Yeah, onion skins...

ROBIN: Onion skins.

MARY: Beets...

ROBIN: Beets...

MARY: A lot of different things. So it was there...they just...well just a rich culture and...so...is see, that when I came in and I want a...came into this area and wanted to learn these traditional crafts, and the fact that I can take them outside of Eastern Kentucky, and sell them, and people want to buy them, and that I've employed a lot of these people here, same way with the baskets. Sometimes, I think that over the years we've employed everybody that lives on the mountain, and from when they were young teenagers and needing a few bucks for whatever, and I've had senior citizens. And they take a lot of pride, they were excited that they were part of that, and that somebody thought that what they had grown up with and done every day of their life...that somebody else valued and was willing to pay dollars for.

WILLIHNGANZ: Wow, maybe you could show us a couple examples of your work there.

MARY: Well these are some of the flowers. This is a daffodil. This is a dogwood flower you can see that like, I have dyed. This is a natural corn shuck here I have dyed yellow for the daffodil, dye pink for a pink dogwood, the green for the leaves.

WILLIHNGANZ: You use glue to hold those together?

MARY: No. They're tied. I use a strong quilt...like a quilting thread. Each individual petal is tied...hand-tied on, so it's secure. I can't pull it out. It's stuck in there. If you squeeze what I call the hip...you can't squeeze it. It's very hard. That is another test to see how well it is tied together. If it's soft, it's not tied very tight. The stem, this is a wire that has been wrapped with floral tape. This is kinda my work station in here. These are bundles of died corn husks. I have a dye pot on my wood heat stove. I heat that water up to boiling point, put my dye in to it, then add the corn shucks to it and let them...I dye 'em at least a shade darker than what I want, because when I take them out and they dry, they're gonna be a little bit lighter than that. Then, when I go to work a corn shuck I have to wet it, and stuff, but I've got baskets back here filled with the dyed corn shucks. These are small angels. These evolved out of...I had a lot of scrap left over from making my larger dolls or angels, and the flowers, and so I started using the scraps to make these smaller ones. And, they became such a popular item that now I have to make scrap to make 'em, and I'm averaging about seven hundred or so a year of these...this is...I'm gonna say that the small ornament angel is the most popular item that I have at this point.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, how do you get them to stand up like that, they...?

MARY: I use a curling iron, and I love these modern inventions. At one time I used to hand curl everything around my finger or a pencil, to get the curve in this, but today I use a curling iron and I shape that. I do go out in nature and I'll look at a daffodil. Around this area they call 'em Easter flags, because they come up at Easter time. Different communities, they're jonquils, they're buttercups, they're daffodils, and I find it interesting when I go into different communities or states...what do you call this flower (unintelligible-mumbling) call 'em but I study them. I'll take them apart. I make patterns that I cut out of cardboard or plastic for the petal shape, and then I cut out a lot of pedals and tie them onto the stem on that. This, this corn shuck doll here, she has a broom, and I grew the broom corn. The stem of it is a twig from, I believe, it's actually a redbud tree, that I went out and cut the stems off of. I do not have any faces on my dolls. That is very traditional. The American Indians believed that if you put a face on a doll, that a spirit would enter that doll's body, and you didn't know if you were going to get a good one or a bad one. So to protect yourself, so to protect yourself, you did not put faces on your dolls.

ROBIN: First moved here we would hang out and strip willow trees down by the river, and then we would cut these coils of bark off the tree. And then, we'd hand shuck the outer bark off, and then take scissors, and cut these strips. And then, roll these strips up and hang 'em in the barn. And then, we'd have these basket parties where we would all get together and throw them in a swimming hole, throw these rolls in a swimming hole. And then, we would sit around the swimming hole, and we would fish out these rolls of bark, and weave these baskets. And, of course, we're using this one to store canning rings. But, this is one of our first baskets here. This basket's probably, I don't know, thirty-five years old.

MARY: Could be.

ROBIN: And, this is another one about the same genre. I believe we made this one while we...

MARY: It's dated I think.

ROBIN: This one is...

MARY: Does it have a date on the bottom?

ROBIN: This one is...I don't see a date, if it's on there it's...yeah it's on there...

MARY: It's just faded.

ROBIN: It says Mary Reed, I don't know...

MARY: This one says '85 here. I don't think one...

ROBIN: I think this one... (Missing part of sentences they are both talking). This one's not even dated. But we...I believe we made this basket primarily, right after we got into the juried session of Craft Marketing, and this one is about the same genre this ones about, that says '85. That's '85 on that one. And then, I've taken my share of workshops. And, I took a white oak work shop from some excellent basket makers in West Virginia, and they taught me how to...we took this all the way from the tree. In fact, we went out into the woods, harvested the tree, the white oak tree. And, we brought back four logs that were about five inches in diameter. And, they were about six feet long. And, we rived all of the materials out of these logs to make these baskets. That work shop, and that work shop, lasted about five days. I have sixty-two hours in this basket. It's my first white oak basket I ever made and I, let's see I dated that and it is a...2004. So I made this five years ago, four and a half years ago. And then, I went to another work shop in Cincinnati or in Northern Kentucky, and we used traditional reed to make the baskets out of, and the guy teaching the work shop ran out of materials.

So, I came home and my wife was dying corn shucks. And so, I took some of these 1/8 inch reeds, and I threw a bunch of them in the water she was dying corn shucks in, to give the basket a little bit of character, and then I had to make my...I had to make several of the ribs, and I had to make the wrapping on the handle out of willow bark. So, some of the ribs are made out of white oak, and of course, the handle is wrapped in willow bark. So, I used some of my own materials to finish this basket up. This is called a melon basket. And then, as you can see, this is another one of my traditional poplar bark baskets. And, this has the inner and the outer bark both on it. The gray, of course, is the inner and outer bark together, and then I have the...just the straight inner bark as a complimentary color to the gray. And then, all my stitching is done with the willow tree that grows on the river...on the Kentucky River. It's called the black willow, and that's what these baskets here on the table...our first baskets...were made of. And we had, when I first started making folded baskets, we had coils of the weaving willow bark in the barn that we had for years, and so I decided to start using it. And, soaked up some of it and started trimming it down to about 5/16 of an inch, and got a, got a leather punch, and started punching holes in the poplar bark, and then started stitching my baskets together. These pieces of bark are razor cut on the edges, and then folded, and then slots are cut, and then the second piece is woven through that.

MARY: This was 25 years of participating in their shows. They gave us an Emeritis Award which gives us lifetime juried status with their program with them.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's terrific.

MARY: And their awards are all handmade. They have about three different artists that participated in this. They had a woodworker, a glass person, and a jeweler who did the findings on it.

WILLIHNGANZ: Ok, well, thank you very... (Tape ends)