

KENTUCKY CRAFT HISTORY AND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, INC.

Interview with Fran Redmon
Interviewer is Greg Willihnganz
September 23rd, 2008

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

Redmon:

We were talking about the creation of the Artisan Center and it had its own board, once it got started and the state was very much involved with the purchasing, you know, of the land, which I think they actually went on to buy from Berea College. I think at one point in time, Berea College was going to lease it to the state, but that there were some complications there. So, I think they ended up buying this land that the college had held onto out there by that first interchange coming into Berea. And they were really trying to keep from having a lot of commercial development out there so that there would be a more attractive entrance into the city because the second entrance is very commercialized. But it was an interesting thing because all along the way, I kept thinking this is never going to happen. You know, I just kept thinking. There's no way that all these people are going to come together, but it had the support of so many people who just happened to be in the right place at the right time. And that's how things happen. I mean, that's how the Craft Marketing program started. When the timing is right, it always seems like things just fall into place. I think we had the right leadership in state government. I think we had the opportunity, you know, I think, you know, Cheryl ... people that could make a difference and keep moving this thing along. It was very exciting. We went over, I remember this, our staff went over when they were setting up, they were under the gun, you know, get the building done first and go through all that part. But when they were actually stocking for the opening day and some of us went over the day before and helped set up the displays because they were ... It was crazy and a couple of us left and one of my staff members, I think she stayed all night setting up the jewelry, you know? It was just intense. So we were out in front of the Artisan Center and the tents and all the dignitaries there and it was hot. It was July. But I just can remember feeling like, wow, you know, look how far we've come. It was huge. I really felt like it was a huge thing to finally accomplish, to have this place in Berea, focused on crafts. That was going to be there for, you know, tourists going up and down that major highway. So I think it was a big day for all of us in the craft world to see something like that happen. And, you know, West Virginia had done it and you know, when they opened the Tamarac Center, they were getting, you know, all of a sudden our publicity kind of dried up. Everybody was talking about Tamarac and it was kind of hard because we had been out there in the limelight for a long time with what had been going on in the state of Kentucky. And now a lot of states are looking at doing ... Tennessee's got a project underway and a lot of people have paid attention to that. So, but each one's unique. I think Kentucky has its own unique look, flavor. And I love that they brought in a local architect that looked at it, the building's relationship to what they were trying to...the story. And I don't know if you know, but the buildings are done out of natural stone, a lot of natural materials. And they were designed to give the look of sort of like small out buildings that you might see on a farm. And in the early days, a lot of buildings were made out of stone. They've described it as a village of sort of small buildings, even though they're connected from the outside, it looks like a series of small, separate buildings where you might have a barn and a blacksmith's shed or something. So it's subtle, but you know, it was important to sort of have the building relate to what the story of the crafts were a lot of natural materials and wood and metal and stone. So I was really proud of that too, that the committee had that insight.

Greg Willihnganz: Yeah, I think it's a wonderful design.

Redmon:

...and selected the right kind of architect in that setting to ... And I think they've done very well. You know, I asked Victoria recently, how things were going in terms of sales. Was the economy affecting it at all? And she said, it's really hard to know because they've had a lot of road construction right there where they're redoing that road and it's been a ... the signage is kind of

not real good. And, it's a little confusing when you get off the highway. And she said, she felt like that that was affecting,

Willihnganz:

Yeah. I had trouble finding it when I stopped and they have a large, I was surprised, big stone sign that isn't in front of the center.

Redmon:

It's because they moved the road. When they redid it, the entrance used to be over there. They were eventually going to move the sign, but they had to redo the entrance, and I don't think that's high priority, you know, I think they're trying to get the road finished and then they'll worry about the... which is sad. That's a little unfortunate.

Willihnganz:

But I was surprised when I got into it, how it does wind around and go back and I love the cafeteria and the outdoor seating. And you know, you really can make that a destination stop, which is nice. It's very, very nice.

Redmon:

And it's well done. It's very well done. And Victorian her staff are really, really good. Yeah. I was asked early on, could you think of somebody who might be a good person? Immediately, that was the first and only person whose name I thought of, and it was great that they ended up...

Willihnganz:

Wow. That's terrific. Well, a lot of these ideas, I think we can steal and still make them our own.

Redmon:

Exactly.

Willihnganz:

I was shocked to learn that the Kentucky horses that we do in Louisville, I don't know if you've gotten any of that influence here, but they do these, you know, life size horses that they paint.

Redmon:

Oh yeah. Right, right. Yeah.

Willihnganz:

You go up to Chicago, they started it with pigs some years ago.

Redmon:

And cows. Somebody's done cows and ...

Willihnganz:

Thought it was pigs in Chicago, but it could have been cows.

Redmon:

Somebody did cows. I know they did pigs too.

Willihnganz:

But, you know, so our horses are prettier than any of them, I'm sure. (laughs).

Redmon:

Horses are great.

Willihnganz:

Horses are terrific. A lot of that stuff goes in there. It's really interesting. Okay. See, what else did I... How much did you work with Crit?

Redmon:

Well, I worked with her directly very closely during the years that she was there pretty much four years, maybe a little... give or take a little bit. I reported to her, you know, worked with her when Governor Collins would come to New York or when she would come to our Kentucky markets. We were involved... the Department of the Arts was very much involved with the Governor's Derby Breakfast. And we did some things with the Southern Governor's Conference. I remember setting up crafts for when they had that meeting in Louisville. The NCAA one year we a showcase in an empty store on Main Street as part of the NCAA when the basketball tournament came in. So there was always things where they were tying the crafts into other areas of state government. We would often purchase gift items for dignitaries when... We wouldn't purchase them, the economic development cabinet would purchase them, when the governor was traveling overseas on his economic development trips, they would take things like dulcimers and Steve Powell glass and duck carvings, and julep cups and throws and baskets. And then when the Derby guests would come in, it was, economic development. That was a big promotion and they would do these nice gift baskets. And I can remember one year at Berry Hill when we had the table covered with these nice baskets and the throws and all the things that we would put in there. So there was a lot of effort made to sort of tie these things in whenever we could. I remember tourism would have what they would call fan tours, and they would bring magazine editors in, travel writers, and they had a big luncheon one time up at the Spendthrift Farm in Lexington. And we went into that beautiful, gorgeous room and crafts as centerpieces on the tables. So there were always things like that going on. We did a store for the, this is in later years, but we've done gift shops for the, National Arts Conference, that was the National Assembly of State Arts Councils. And we've done it for the preservation conference and different things like that. So, kept us really busy, but yeah, I worked very closely with Crit. She would bring the governor to the market, which was great. She would walk around and visit with the artists. And we would have her as a speaker for reception or a dinner and those kinds of things for artists who probably had not received a lot of attention or even respect, in their life to have a governor come by and compliment them and speak to them or want to buy something. It really meant a lot to them to have that recognition.

Willihnganz:

Now, when you speak of bringing the governor to the market, was the market held like...

Redmon:

When it started, we were in Lexington, it moved around, we were at the, Horse Park the first year. And then we did a show in Louisville at Freedom Hall or the Fair and Exposition Center, which is now called. And then we went back to Lexington at Heritage Hall for a few years. I think we were there from like '84 to '87, something around there. And then eventually we moved it to Louisville and that's where it stayed.

Willihnganz:

And this was an annual event?

Redmon:

It was twice a year for the first three years. It started in '82 and we did it twice a year. We did a few shows in downtown Louisville, and then we eventually ended up out at the fairgrounds or the Fair and Exposition Center. And we grew out of the West Hall, which is on the other side. And then when they built the new south wing, we were very lucky to go into that space. But yeah, it started at '82. In 2006, when we celebrated the 25th anniversary, it was actually our 26th year and our 29th show because we had done it twice a year for a few years. So now it's been going on, there's been more than 30 Kentucky Craft Markets. Another change that happened around the time that we moved into the South Hall or shortly before that we began to introduce the other product categories. The Department of Agriculture had come to us at one point and said, we would really like to be part of this event. And one of our target audiences for the show were the state park gift shop buyers. And we knew that in visiting out the state, that was one of the projects that we worked on with Crit. The tourism slogan was O' Kentucky, and then it was Pure Kentucky. I think this was the Pure Kentucky. We traveled around to all the state parks for several years, visiting each store and developed these Pure Kentucky sections within the Department of Parks. That was one of the initiatives that Crit felt very strongly about that we, we needed that representation.

Willihnganz:

Do each of these stores have their own individual buyer?

Redmon:

They have individual buyers. There's some central buying of certain things that they all sell. And eventually when Crit became ... I think she was Secretary of Tourism and the Economic Development Cabinet wrote a strategic plan and they included a tactic that related to promotion of the crafts. And we got together as part of that tactic to rewrite the guidelines. There was a committee that rewrote the guidelines for purchasing of merchandise in the state parks. And it looked at everything. It looked at books, it looked at music, it looked at how they addressed native American products. What types of general merchandise, there were certain criteria that said, you know, everything that's purchased, even if it's commercially made, it needs to reflect positively on the state. That things shouldn't be made overseas. And I don't know that that issue's ever been totally resolved. The guidelines were written. And we developed specific ones for crafts, which what I remember is that anyone juried into Kentucky Crafted that the buyers could purchase from, but if they bought local crafts, there were certain types of things that they had to consider. That they could or couldn't include. But yes, independent buyers. And for many, many years, they were encouraged to come to the Kentucky markets by the administration to, you know, purchase. There were some years when the budgets were lean

and they'd say, well, not everybody can go. Only the ones, you know, only the resort parks or your budget is limited or, or whatever. And we initiated at that time with Crit, we started an awards program for the state parks to try to recognize the ones that were doing a good job. They were selling the most, or, you know, whatever their percentage, we had several categories and those awards continued. We eventually started giving awards to other buyers or retailers from ... We did a Kentucky award and an out of state award. Anything we could do to encourage and support...

Willihnganz:

What's the out of state award?

Redmon:

Well, because we had buyers coming from outside of Kentucky, we'd do three categories. We'd do one for a Kentucky State Park, one from a Kentucky retailer, and one from an out of state retailer. And that's quite a list. There's some buyers who were very loyal to the show that would from out of state that would come almost every year.

Willihnganz:

You know, a concern that I've heard voiced is that the whole thing that Phyllis George did with going to these big stores and lining up these massive contracts for product, changed the nature of handcrafts, or had a negative effect. Do you buy any of that?

Redmon:

If you listen to the folklorist who contend that the crafts come out of a community, and it's a tradition that's passed down within families or community, and that's the authentic work. But if you talk to Gary Barker, when I think at some point these crafts probably would've died out when people no longer or needed to make them for their own use when products that they were making became commercially available. I think eventually that a lot of them were practical and functional items that people had been making, which probably, you know, gradually disappeared. And I know that I've heard, it said that certainly when the, um, craft co-op started and they were producing product, that they were marketing eventually. Yeah. The market influenced what they were making. So I think it's inevitable that the market has influenced what has been made, but also I think the market has preserved the craft because it might have existed certainly in some places and some families may have carried on, but, you know, I just can't imagine that it would be preserved to the extent that it is if we hadn't had opportunities to continue its growth through the marketing.

Willihnganz:

Yeah. You look at broom-making and you wonder, would this have continued?

Redmon:

Baskets, a lot of the woodworking, the woven rugs. Those are the sort of traditional Kentucky items that have been carried on. There's a lot of work in the state, a good percentage of it now that it has no traditional ties. But the fact that Kentucky has become a state known for craft and because there were pockets of it being produced longer than maybe it was in other areas of the country because of Appalachia and the lifestyle there that sort of the, and the rural lifestyle that

we sort of preserve things longer in our state. We've seen it be able to continue and, you know, the contemporary work is thriving because that was in place before. I think that the traditions and the heritage are sort of what created these support programs and the contemporary artists have found a more welcoming environment now in the state of Kentucky, that might not have existed if we hadn't had such a strong history and tradition here to build on. So while the traditional work is what a lot of the people outside the state are drawn to, we really have some very, you know, talented and well respected contemporary artists, doing very original work in their own right, that's getting quite a bit of recognition. I think it's all tied together. I don't like to, you know, I don't like to separate art and craft and I don't like to separate, you know, this is traditional and this is contemporary, or this is folk, or this is authentic. You know, it all changes over time because people are influenced by changes in society and the world around them. You know, how are we going to just freeze it in place and time and expect it not to be, not to ever change. I just don't think that can happen. But, you know, I know that there was criticism, you know, of what went on in the Brown administration. I was a little naive because I was a young employee in state government and I had been pulled out of basically where I'd started working. I started as a graphic artist, kind of got pulled into this program. And, you know, I know that there were probably some hurt feelings from members of the Guild because they felt like there was money going into this program that could have been used to help the Guild, when it was struggling. But I also think the state government was able to do things that the Guild could have never done and would've never done.

Willihnganz:

Well, that's an interesting point though. There was a shift after the Guild finished in '67 with the Guild train that went around... There was a real shift and the state agencies started doing exhibitions around and sponsoring exhibitions, as I understand it, during the seventies. Throughout the state...

Redmon:

I'm not as familiar with that.

Willihnganz:

They were traveling exhibitions, I believe, that's part of what she was talking about.

Redmon:

Well, I know one thing that we tried to look at when we would evaluate artists' needs and talk to them about what types of things would help them. For many, many years, when we would evaluate the Kentucky market, whose primary focus was the wholesale side of things, bringing the buyers in to place the large orders, we would sometimes have artists who would say, why don't you do a retail show? Why don't you do it at another time of year? So we can get some retail. We felt like, you know, we had the Kentucky Guild fairs, which had a strong reputation. We had the Berea craft festival. We had other events like St. James and things around the state that were well established. So we did try to look at how we could do things, fill a void, do things that weren't being done, maybe serve artists that weren't being served in other ways, so that we were not duplicating services. And that has sort of done, you know, the way that the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft has developed the type of work they do, they have served one area, the Craft Marketing program found its focus. The Kentucky Guild has another focus. So I think we tried a lot and I think the craft organizations in the state in recent years have worked together as well to communicate, um, to network, to partner, you know, to be aware of what each other was doing to work together when it made sense. For many, many years, Kentucky

Crafted and KMAC hosted an annual conference. We presented the Rudy Osolnik award together. That was a really nice partnership. We had some other, you know, partnerships with the Guild along the way. So, you know, my experience after a few years had gone by and the dust settled that most people came to accept and, and respect and value what state government had been able to do for crafts in the state. We learned it was pretty unusual, as I've gone around during the course of my career and since I've left, other states are still very interested in what's going on in Kentucky and Kentucky has become a model, for a lot of the work that other states have developed since we started all of this. Not just we, with Craft Marketing, but going back, as you said, many, many years to what came out of Berea College and, and the Kentucky Guild and all the people that each thing sort of fed nicely into the other and has created a nice hole, because now we have the Artisan Center and Berea. Yeah. We have Artisan Center in Hindman. We have the School of Craft and we have Artisan Heritage trails. These are all things that didn't exist that have built on kind of a momentum of interest and support from not just the Department of the Arts and state government, but recognition from the Tourism Cabinet and Economic Development in the governor's office. Department of Education, all people sort of seeing this. I think it's a source of pride for Kentucky, for every Kentuckian just like the horses or whatever. We, we have a great pride about, I think our, our arts, our heritage, our culture, whether it's our arts or music or whatever is something that we're all inherently proud of. And most of us can relate to it. I think that's the reason craft has such a kind of feel good way about it, that most of us at least know a grandparent or a relative or somebody back in our history that we can connect to that. A grandmother who quilted or you know, whatever it is, we all have a connection to that. And I think we like to see that continue because certainly this generation doesn't know about it or recognize it or...

Willihnganz:

No, I'm afraid they're into a different perspective on life.

Redmon:

Yeah and it's a whole part of history that...

Willihnganz:

Yeah it's scary. You said something in your first interview, you made an inference to Kentucky being one of, if not the leading state, in terms of promoting craft work and marketing and whatnot. Can you name two or three other leading states that are doing great programs?

Redmon:

Well, North Carolina, they have a program called Handmade in America. And it's had a really good different focus from what Kentucky has done. They have gotten tremendous recognition for their program. I worked with the state of Nebraska. They have a quasi government program that focuses as much on their food products as they do their crafts. I'm just thinking about states who have formalized programs. There's a program in Missouri called Best of Missouri hands. Who's one of the groups that came and participated in our market. We worked with a group out Montana that started a program sort of modeled on what Kentucky Crafted did and the School of Craft. They're providing a sort of educational piece with it and then marketing them after they go through a curriculum. Let's see, Tennessee has a strong Guild. Florida has a strong Guild. I'm trying to think of the states that we work with. Pennsylvania has done some work in the tourism development. They're doing the trails. In fact, I'm going to be going up to talk with them in November. I was trying to think Maine at one time had a really nice program that was promoted by the state. They did a nice catalog. So there's quite a few, but there's not many.

Georgia has started a Georgia Made Georgia Grown program. And they've looked at Kentucky very closely, in what they've gotten some support from their tourism cabinet. So many other states are doing this, but there's not very many who are set up the way... I don't really know of any... that are set up exactly and have functioned the way the state of Kentucky has, which is fine because everybody sort of has to look at their resources, their assets their strengths, what's the natural fit within their state to make it work. But the interesting thing is that a lot of them are looking at it and recognizing the value of it and seeing that... and it happens a lot in states where tourism, you know, again, that history and the culture is a rich part of their they're tourism and what they're recognized for. So I think it's going to continue. I hope it will.

Willihnganz:

What are you doing now?

Redmon:

I'm doing a lot of work for KCHEA. (laughs)

Speaker 3:

Gee, what a surprise. (laughs)

Redmon:

And I became a member of the board of the Knott County Art and Craft Foundation, which is a community that has developed an Artisan Center called the Appalachian Artisan Center. About 10 years ago, this came out of a program called the Community Development Initiative. Governor Patton had a program where he would allow two communities to apply, or several communities could apply to be two communities that would receive priority funding for the state. And the county of Knott did an extensive plan. And they decided that they would build their community, redevelop their community, on the idea of an artist-based economy. They would look at the heritage and the culture of their region. Out of that, they did get funding and were able to develop the School of Craft, which is part of the Hazard Community and Technical College and the Appalachian Artisan Center. So I've been on the board there, vice chair, for that group. And in that time, I'm also a program chair, they have opened up two ... one building with artist studios, and they're getting ready to open up another one that will have 25 spaces. They have a center where they sell and market the crafts, it has a cafe. They're promoting crafts in the region and trying to develop artists through the School of Craft. And then this studio space works as an incubator. So once they've graduated before they actually go out on their own, you know, without having the resources to start up a business, they can go in in this environment, which studio space is available and the tools and equipment, they need to sort of build their business and then eventually go out on their own and the ideas, they will continue to rotate new artists through these studio spaces. And then begin to build that community as an artist community, a little of the way Berea has become, and it will become a tourist drop. That's a long term prospect. And it's taken 10 years to get quite, quite a ways.

Willihnganz:

Have you been to the Mellwood center in Louisville?

Redmon:

Yes, I have.

Willihnganz:

What do you think of that?

Redmon:

Well, I haven't been to it recently. They were getting the studios open and they had some of the spaces. I mean, I think it's a great model. It's, it's...

Willihnganz:

It's shocking to me. It's simply shocking to go there and see how many people are drawn there. How many different artists have little setups going there. The growth is just terrific.

Redmon:

And that's a trend that's happening around... There's a one in Ashland now. The model for that is the torpedo factory in Alexandria, Virginia. And I went there many, many, many years ago and it was an old factory that they did this very thing. They turned into artist studios and it's just fabulous, and when we went, there was tons of people there. A lot of traffic. The other thing I'm doing is I'm working on a part-time basis for national organization called the Craft Organization Development Association. And that's a membership group for craft programs around the country. Their primary activity is to have an annual conference and we became an official nonprofit, I think about six years ago and hired a managing director and raise money to do this conference. So I'm gonna be helping coordinate the 2010 in CODA conference that will be held in Savannah, Georgia. And then I'm going to be doing a presentation in Pennsylvania. I'm sort of available, to go out and talk about what we've done in the state of Kentucky, for groups that are, you know, starting out programs or looking for ideas, not actively promoting that, but the opportunities seem to, you know, pop up now and then. And I'm listed as a KPAN advisor for the Kentucky Arts Council. It's the Kentucky Peer Advisory Network and the Kentucky Arts Council does a training program. And they will train peers who can go out and work with organizations or artists in organization development or business development. And for, you know, a fee they will pay you to go in for a few hours and work with a startup group or someone who's, you know, struggling with a particular issue. Haven't actually, you know, been called out on that, but I'm on the website, so...

Willihnganz:

Well, it's good that you're busy. Okay. I think I'm out of things to talk about. I don't know if you have anything else you'd like to contribute or comment on?

Redmon:

Well, I don't know, there's a whole lot about the Kentucky Craft Marketing program and we talked a lot about the market and the New York shows. There were some other activities and programs, but, a lot of that is documented in the material that I gave you. We sort of touched mostly on how it got started and sort of where it's been. I mean, the program grew from, at one point, there were two of us to, when I left, there were, at the peak, there were eight employees. Now that has changed, it's somewhat been integrated into the Arts Council and there's a Kentucky Crafted program, which is the juried portion. But the other activities have been somewhat absorbed into the overall Arts Council activities. So there's another shift in how it's being done, but they're modeling the work that we did with crafts across the other disciplines for other visual artists and writers and performers. So in a little bit, it a way it's, it's definitely continued on and expanding so...

Willihnganz:

Well, it would be interesting to see what the ramifications are. Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.

Redmon:

Thank you for your patience. I don't know how you do it.

END OF INTERVIEW