

Kentucky Craft History and Education Association, Inc.

Interview with Richard Bellando

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Interview conducted by Greg Willihnganz

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me, tell me some of your history personally and then let's talk about the Guild as well.

BELLANDO: Alright, well, in 19-, I guess this was 1961, I was a senior at Berea College and I was interested in ceramics; it was in the ceramics, part of the ceramics program in fact my work assignment was to work in the ceramics lab making pots. And it was then that both my wife, Lila, and I were student, became student members of, of the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen. That meant that we weren't necessarily able to, to sell our work or, but, but we were supportive student, there was a, there was a membership for students who were interested in the Guild per se. That's when the Guild was really, well, I say really started. It's when there was a lot of energy to get people involved in the guild. The Berea College had a several couple people, Rudy Osolnik and Lester Pross they were interested in the, in developing the Guild as was, were a number of other people throughout the state; folks at Murray played a big role in it, the folks in Louisville were involved, but a lot of the, a lot of the support came from educational institutions. U.K., University of Eastern Kentucky University, Morehead, so because those were the centers where there were crafts being taught and, and students were you know, I mean they're, that's where the crafts people were coming from. So the universities played a huge role and schools, the Louisville Art School was involved in it, the University of Louisville, also Mary Spencer Nay who was a painter there was also involved in, in the, in the Guild; served on the board of trustees. So it was, it was that kind of energy. Now after I graduated in '62, we taught school for awhile, in 1966 they were looking, they were looking for a director for the Guild. Up until that time there had not been a director. They had the Guild Train which had a director who, that was, that was the emphasis and that was the only program that the Guild had that was, that the public could identify could see you know, that was the outreach for the Guild. This train, I guess Jerry told you or they've told you how that came about. Mrs. Minish's husband was with the L & N Railroad.

WILLIHNGANZ: Actually he didn't give me much of it. He's the third director of it.

BELLANDO: Yes.

WILLIHNGANZ: But he didn't give me much of the history of it per se at all which surprised me.

BELLANDO: Well, well in, in about 1962 and I don't know the dyn-, the personal dynamics I do know that Virginia Minish and let's, we'll call her Mrs. Minish because I think it was, I don't know if it was Virginia, her husband was a, had a some sort of management or he was a vice president of the L & N Railroad.

WILLIHNGANZ: Uh huh.

BELLANDO: And so, and she came up with the idea that the train, that we should have maybe a train to go through, throughout the state to show fine works, fine crafts and fine works of art and it should have a demonstration component with it. So they

gave, the L & N Railroad gave the Guild a baggage car and a passenger car. The passenger car was used as the exhibit space and the baggage car was used as a place for the director of the train to sleep and to stay while he was on the road, well, they were not on the road, but I mean while they were stationed or where they were parked and then there was an exhibit car in that as well. I mean a, excuse me, a demonstration car; they had a pottery wheel and some lathes and things like that and even a small loom I believe. But anyway the, the, the, this was the first real program that the guild had was the Kentucky Guild Train. Now coupled with that was the state's involvement and this was under Ned Breathitt I believe was the Governor at that time. They, they supported that effort and I don't know whether they gave money for the refurbishing of those cars and the purchasing of the equipment. I know a lot of the equipment was donated, but they, those cars were refurbished here in Berea behind the industrial arts building. At that time there was a siding that went right up to the back of the industrial arts building because that's where the steam plant was, so they used to bring coal in on these hopper cars and dump it there and then take it out. So that's where it was refurbished, but the state at that time saw an opportunity or they were convinced that they, this could be an economic kind of, this could have economic impact in the, in Eastern Kentucky; that this car that they and you know, crafts might be one of the ways that folks in Eastern Kentucky could get jobs. That was an idea that, that was not only prevalent in our state, but also the you know, when the war on poverty was enacted a lot of the programs considered using the native talent which, in the crafts to promote jobs. The Peace Corps had the same thing when they were trying to use primitives, primitive crafts of, of third world countries to sell them in the market place. And there had been some successes over the years and that kind of thing, so the state supported the operation of the Guild Train financially by because although L & N would move it from place to place there had to be a director had to be hired and you know, you had to have money for exhibits, so and that was done through the department of commerce. Well, now let me flash back being as this was going on the first Guild Train, as I said that was the only real program that the Guild had and it started to and, and but, but because there was no real director of the Guild membership started to, to diminish and there wasn't a, there, there wasn't an ongoing program for the rest of the membership of the Guild. Now I don't know if that makes sense to you or not.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well it sounds to me like and correct me if I'm wrong here, but it sounds like essentially the impetus to get the Guild going was to get this train on the rails?

BELLANDO: No, the impetus for the Guild was to have a state wide organization for artists and craftsmen to sell their work, okay, that was the, that was the impetus. The Guild Train was a, was a, not a byproduct of that, but the Guild Train was an idea that some of the incorporators in, in Louisville had to use the Guild as a conduit to run to, to, to, to operate this, a train. I mean the Guild wasn't formed first, I mean the train wasn't, was kind of an after thought as, as a program of the Guild. So there was this, the Guild to sell to have a state wide guild and a lot of that came from the Southern Highland Guild because a lot of members of, of Kentucky Guild were members of the Southern Highland Guild so there was a, you know, that was an interest in, in getting

the Kentucky Guild started. So, but the, that was the only program that the Guild had. And the reason I say that interest waned a little bit because when I was hired as a director in 1967 there were hardly any membership lists, there were hardly any members.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now you were hired as the director of the Guild or as the director of the train?

BELLANDO: As the director of the Guild.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

BELLANDO: And I'll tell you why that happened and how that happened. During the years that the state funded the train, there were periods of time when there wasn't any director. Periods of time that the, that they, in the interim from one director to the other there was monies that had been put aside and saved because there wasn't any program going on. All I remember is that the department of commerce said to the Kentucky Guild at that time which was head quartered in industrial arts building, in other words that was the office in Berea said that you're going to lose that money, that money's going back to the state if they don't do something with it to, to encourage the craft movement in Kentucky. So the Board of Directors said well let's hire a Director of the Guild and we'll have a craft fair and you know, we can, you know, that's how we can get this, you know, how we can use that money. So they had this money and they had to hire somebody and I, and through the council of Southern Mountains they had a there was a program that went out and searched for talent or for people who would come to the region for jobs in, in the Appalachian region. And for some reason they got in touch with me and I was teaching school in New Jersey and to, to apply for a position at the Guild. Now, they knew I was interested in woodworking and ceramics; my father had been a, was a cabinet maker all his life. They knew I was involved in promotions too because we promoted out folk trio in Gatlinburg, TN for several years in a row that was very successful, so they invited me, as I said, to come down for an interview and in December of '06 and they hired me in February of '07, I came down.

WILLIHNGANZ: We're talking about '67?

BELLANDO: I'm sorry, yeah '67. I went for an interview in December of 1965, I mean '66 and in 1967 I came down as the director. I was hired in that, during the interim it took me a month to say goodbye to my students.

WILLIHNGANZ: And then you moved here to Kentucky?

BELLANDO: I move here to Kentucky by myself. Lila was pregnant with our son James, so and she came down later, but my charge immediately, they hired me, but my charge was to start a craft fair in Berea and the best time they thought to have it was May of that year, so from February to May I had to put a craft fair together. And it didn't seem like a big deal at that time to me, but I told them that I would have to have a free

hand. I could-, if I saw somebody that we you know, that I thought ought to be a member of the Guild because of their quality, you know, that I was going to have to bring them in because there was just a handful of people, like I said, there wasn't even a hardly a membership list. But we put together a fair that was very successful the first year and it was forty-five craftsmen and got a lot of support from state government Department of Public Information at that time did a movie of Ray Harm promoting this craft fair in Berea and they showed him. I got a lot of Public Service Announcements through radio and TV in Lexington and in Louisville and, and then I got a lot of support again from the Universities. They, they tried; they told they tried to get their people like potters and jewelers and silver, you know silversmiths and weavers to come and participate in that fair. I mean it was like a head of the department would come and say, "You ought to go to Berea for this fair they're coming up with, you know, and, and then it was the booth fee was nothing and it was like twenty percent of all your sales went to the Guild to help promote the fair. Then the next thing after the Universities, there were a few local, a few craftsmen's, craft folks in the mountains that in Eastern Kentucky that I had knew, that I had grown to know and identified with several other people like from the Council of Southern Mountains they said you should you know look at this chair maker or look at this basket maker, look at this weaver and I went back and I even though they weren't members of the guild you know, I said we're going to show your work to the standards committee and I just got a standards committee up (laughter – Bellando) and we okayed them you know, but they were all good people. And the other thing that happened, the other way we were able to get people, we had a lot of, of Appalachian volunteers, the war on poverty, you know co-ops; they just sort of heard of it, the fair, and they wanted to come. And they were the Jackson County Quilters from McKee here the Grassroots Craftsmen, Breathitt County, Kentucky Hills Industry, you know, that, that so they came as, as center members because that's, that's how you got, there was a center membership and an individual membership.

WILLIHNGANZ: So if you're a school or?

BELLANDO: Yeah, if you're a school. Like for instance, Churchill Weavers was a center member because there were more than one, there's more than one person producing the craft.

WILLIHNGANZ: I see.

BELLANDO: So, so that's, that was the first fair and it was, it was rained, it was not rained out, but it was, it was a deluge.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah this is the one I think if I'm recalling right that Emily Wolfson told me about.

BELLANDO: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: And Fred Shepherd.

BELLANDO: Yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: The two of them together I've got them on tape it's hysterical and they're talking about the rains coming down and these people having their work washed away. Some of them had watercolors that got destroyed.

BELLANDO: Yeah. I was, I was I tried to, I, I made, I didn't make, make light of it. I tried to, I tried to be positive when I was out there saying you know, it's you know, it's you know, it, it's this is one thing you have to expect when you're in the spring and you have an outdoor affair blah, blah, blah, but you know, it was,... a lot of people got angry and said they weren't coming back and that really bothered me, but.

WILLIHNGANZ: This was also somewhat primitive conditions too?

BELLANDO: Yes, yeah actually, actually what we did is the only thing we did is we got local people to, we made banners, out of, huge wonderful colored banners, out of burlap; different colored burlap we sowed them together. And it was very colorful out there in the green and the and everything looked great because you know, it always does outside because of that natural light you know, colors just you know, bounce, bounce off of everything and they you know and, and the pottery looks great, the wood looks great, the weaving looks great, the photographs look everything, but we, but it was it, it was kind of devastating and to a lot of people, but the fair was a success. We had our, I think there was five thousand people there the first year. (*actually 1500 attendees),

WILLIHNGANZ: Wow.

BELLANDO: And, and, and, and then the Department of Commerce really got excited. It was Susan Black at that time she was the head of that craft development for the Department of Commerce, she got very excited about it and thought that you know, this was we were off to a great start and we had money in the coffers kind of because of the fair. And we didn't have any rent to pay because we were paying, you know, I forget what I was making I forget, but it was twelve thousand dollars or eleven thousand dollars, I forget it's not important, but so we were, we knew what we could live off of and we then we supported the Department of Commerce. We went to the, you know, because they bought a large space at the Kentucky State Fair and we, you know, we did those kind of promotions to help, but our real focus then the next year was two things; number one was to get tents made and two to try and, and develop a membership. And the membership of the Kentucky Guild is really kind of a strange group. This is the only organization that I know of throughout the country that tries to combine artists and craftsmen. And as members of our board, one of the members of board Bob Evans from Paducah, Kentucky said, and he was an artist, he said, "You know by our nature we are not joiners. Artists do not join, you know." He said, "So, you know, I don't know why we're even here." So, but, but the thing about it is which was exciting, the artists added a dimension to the fair that no other that there wasn't another, there not no, but there wasn't another fair that I knew of except maybe Saint James

Court Fair that had a combination of artists and craftsmen. When we were teaching in New Jersey, Lila we would go over to Greenwich Village to do the Greenwich Village Art Show, but it was, and it was artists you know, peddling their wares, but there wasn't very many crafts people, but there were a lot of artists. So, but and we had artists here at our show because we went and we cajoled and begged them to come because it was important to me. It was important because people who were quilters are interesting. You see these cross, you see people looking at color and quilters looking at the color from paintings and, and it being exciting about those colors. And then you see, you know, wood workers who are contemporary you know, almost sculpture, sculpture workers woodworkers like Bobby Fallwell who was who graduated from The School of American Craftsmen in Rochester, New York, at the Institute of Technology; he was teaching at Murray. Well he, he was talking to William McClure about how William was splitting these shingles and watching and how William was able to make the grain work for him. You know, so it was a cross section it was really a neat thing that was happening; the dynamics. People started to feel like this was an organization that had something to, really to give and had, and it had potential for real growth. So Ed Brinkman who was then the director of the train left the organization prior to the fair; just prior to the fair. So it's, it was during that I guess that same year, well I'm trying to figure or think of when it was that Jerry Workman was hired. And Jerry was the last Director of the, of the train. And I'll tell you how that happened (laughter – Bellando).

WILLIHNGANZ: Are you sure he was the last director?

BELLANDO: Yes, uh huh. The last director because at that time Louis Nunn was, was elected pres-, was elected governor. Louis Nunn was elected Governor and he took a wide swathe of all the programs. And they were going to cut the budget from the train. They weren't going to support it anymore and although in those early days it took a lot of money to run the train. A new set of, of brake shoes were like twenty-three, twenty-four hundred dollars, you know. And, and we used to get these bills from L & N you know, then you know, after a while the companionship (laughter – Bellando) shifted you know, because we were a little bit we were kind of a pain because we were putting, they were trying to put these cars in the middle of freight cars going to Eastern Kentucky, you know. So, so, so we had to, we had to watch our pennies as far as the maintenance on the cars were concerned, but it was expensive. So we could not fund the train without state money and Louis Nunn pulled the plug on it. We went up to the Govern-, we had a meeting with his finance group and they said, you know, the governor just doesn't think that program's worth salvaging, keeping. And Jerry was director of the train that year, so it, so that was, that was the end of that. I do not know what happened to the train to be real, to those two cars to be real honest with you. I know all the equipment was taken off. And but I don't know what happened to the cars. Probably scrapped because then we were then it was about time for us to do the second craft fair and we were involved. And we kept Jerry on; Jerry continued to be on the payroll because of the craft, because of the fair coming up. So he, he was involved in helping, helping me with getting some of this stuff done. But these, all the, all these, the tents that I decided we should have were kind of simple canopy tents, but they were very colorful. I was able to get the, there was a company in Ohio, I think it was Ohio or

Indiana, that made circus canvas, you know, it was and, and it was beautifully colored. We had yellow and red and blue and yellow and green and red and all different kinds of combinations. But we, what we did is we, we a lot of it we just sort of cut up in our living room when we lived on Lorraine Court we had people come over we had a tent cutting party. We cut up the, you know, we cut up the lengths and the scallops that went around the edge and, and, and I and then we had some help from Jess Wilson who was the, who was with RECC, Rural Electric Co-operative; he helped get help us, helped us buy some two-by-twos and then I drilled them and put (laughter – Bellando) and put spikes in them for the, so that they would go through the uprights and things. So, but, but, but we finally and the tents were a big, well I don't know if they were a big success, but they, the people just loved them because they were so colorful and they were spread out through the, through the, through the fair grounds. I don't know if I'm going, I'm trying to.....

WILLIHNGANZ: No this is a wonderful history. This is terrific. This is what I need. This is great.

BELLANDO: I, I'm going from year to year so that was the second year. The third year coming, towards the end, at the end of the first, second fair which was in May which was very successful as I said and which fact I think I even we might have some 8mm movie.

WILLIHNGANZ: Oh that would be priceless.

BELLANDO: Of, of, of that fair, but I'm not sure. I have to, I have to go back and look at; my mother and father came down and took some 8mm stuff and maybe that's in there.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah, if you could find that the sooner the better cause that stuff does deteriorate, but we could get that converted for you.

BELLANDO: But anyway, I had an opportunity to do a pro-, a study for an economic development group that was part of The Council of Southern Mountains; Loyal Jones got me in touch with these people because they were again interested in, in, in developing jobs for, for rural Appalachia. And one of the gentlemen involved in this was a man who started a company called Iron Mountain Stoneware in Abington, Virginia and it was pretty successful program. He, he, they wanted me to go and find out more about the southwestern crafts. So I, they sent me out to do a report on the crafts of the southwest; basically Native American Craftsmen. You know, a lot of Indian baskets, rugs, jewelry, and then there were of course crafts people who had settled into places like, what am I trying to think of, Santa Fe and it was totally different. But they had, but their, they had a big there were, their market was collectors for Indian rugs and baskets and jewelry, you know turquoise jewelry, squash blossoms and all those things and, and they also had other artists or crafts folks who were weaving and making pottery and things like that. But the emphasis was on the Native American and I did this report and I sent it to them and they, they were very pleased with it and it got, and

they used it in their, as part of their program, but what happened is when I did that for them, they became interested in what I, we were doing with the Guild. And so you know, you know how can we help you; how can we help you know. Well, I said, "What we really need is a retail shop. We really need a retail store. That would really put, put us over the edge, you know, it would give us visibility." And the Southern Highland Guild had a retail gallery in Louisville, but they lost the lease at one of the malls, it was called The Guild Gallery.

WILLIHNGANZ: How long did they have that, do you know?

BELLANDO: I think they had it for maybe four years. I'm not sure; three or four years. And it was a very good, you know, it was and I could probably see if I could find out for sure by going back to the Southern Highland Guild to see if anybody knows the minutes. The man who ran it has just passed away, but I could find out maybe a little bit more about it. But they had a guild, gal-, so we went, we went to, to Bob Gray who was then the Director of the Southern Highland Guild and said would he mind if we used the name Guild Gallery. He said, "No that's fine." But they wrote a proposal to the Public Welfare Foundation, this other, this, this group that I was, I had worked with on this study of Southwestern Crafts and they, they, they knew the director and the, and the ladies who owned the foundation and we got money to, for the rent for three years and enough money to help refurbish a building that we, we, we rented in Chevy Chase Lexington. Marilyn Moosnick who was at that time a TV personality and who knew a lot of folks in Lexington, made the contact for us and we, it was, I forget the gentleman's name I think it was Rosenberg who owned the building and he cut us a good deal on the rent and we and that's how our the store started. But again it was all grass roots; Jim Foose designed the, the sign. My father cut, cut out the letters for us in New Jersey and sent them down and we went in and used what was there and started I (laughter – Bellando) remember we got a, we, we got a cash register from a, a gas station register (laughter – Bellando) (laughter - Willihnganz). People said, "Well that's a gas station register." And I said, "Well you know, it's pretty cheap and that's, that's how we got it." So we worked there. We had a lot of help work there. We painted the ceiling black, you know, to lower it, to make it more intimate and, and, and we opened up a week, two weeks before Christmas and, and did very, very well with it. And, and I just I wish I could remember the lady's name who was Francis, but I can't remember her last name; she was the manager of the shop and was the manager of the shop for a number of, of, of years after that. After the May fair, that third fair, the shop had opened, we had the May fair I decided I was going to, going to leave the Guild. But I do want to, I do want, I do need to say something here that the that all during that time in the last two years I was with the Guild which would have been '68 – '69, we did workshops and we did workshops in you know, wood carving, weaving, coloration, but that was through grants from the Kentucky Arts Commission. Jim Edgy was director then and the reason I say that is that we had a lot of support from people like the Kentucky Arts Commission. And I mean, to say that we, to not mention them in the history of the Guild would be, would be wrong because they were very important in this, even in support they liked our graphics, they liked what we did, we and in the Guild Gallery again we had artists and we had craftsmen and, and, and that was an effort you know, people would go, come by

and help out and do you know, do work and we used a lot of rough cut lumber and stained it, you know, because it was inexpensive. And, and, and the shop I think was very successful for a number of years. But I decided that I was offered an opportunity to be Assistant Director of the Berea College Alumni Association and I wanted to make more money. I, I felt I needed to. Lila was teaching and I knew the Guild really couldn't afford it. They probably would have paid me if I pushed, you know. I don't know that, but I, I think they probably would have. But we, we wanted to buy a house. We wanted to own a home and we were riding down right on the street here, Lorraine Court, and so I took this position with the, with the, with the, with Berea College and Gary Barker who had been Director of the Southern High-, who had been worked at the Southern Highland Guild took over my job as the Director of the Kentucky Guild. He, he was the man who started the fall fair. When I was director it was only a spring fair, that's one we started and I did the, the, the three spring fairs. And when I left the Guild I felt really good about it because when I left the Guild we'd had the Public Welfare Foundation, we had rent for three years free, free rent, we had at that time twenty-five thousand dollars in the bank, and, and so I felt that I, I left on a, on a good note. I felt I left you know, we had a good standards committee, we had good members on board, you know, and the board was had, had was committed to you know, to have a great organization, a good organization. And it flourished for awhile and.

WILLIHNGANZ: What was your membership then when you left?

BELLANDO: Gee whiz you know that's a good question I don't even know. It wasn't huge; maybe between three and four hundred people. I'm just thinking, I'm trying to think about you know, when we sent out stuff how, how, how, how much we sent out and, but that was not exhibiting members, that was, that could be.

WILLIHNGANZ: Just members at large?

BELLANDO: Members that could be exhibiting members, members at large, you know, I mean just people who wanted to support the organization. But the dues were only three dollars I think (laughter – Bellando). Or maybe they were ten dollars I don't know it still wasn't a great deal (laughter – Willihnganz). Now I did not, I didn't put, put out a newsletter. I didn't put out; we didn't put out a newsletter. We just you know, we wrote, you know, because there wasn't a whole lot that when we had, when we had a workshop we sent out an announcement that we were going to have a workshop. But those were all you know those were totally sponsored by the, the Kentucky Art, Kentucky Arts Commission, so that, that's about my history with the Guild. I mean in a personal history with the Guild. I stayed at Berea College for a number of years and then Mrs. Churchill wanted my wife to come to design for her to work for her and Lila was then teaching art, she was teaching at the University of Kentucky. She had a stint there for a year. But she, Mrs. Churchill, said on the way out after Lila said, "I don't think Mrs. Churchill will be interested in, will be able to buy it." She said, I mean, "Be able to work here then." Mrs. Churchill said, "Well and in (unintelligible)

