

Kentucky Craft History and Education Association, Inc.

Interview with Marlene Grissom

January 30, 2009

Interview conducted by Greg Willihnganz

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. This is Greg Willihnganz interviewing Marlene Grissom for the Kentucky Craft History and Education Association. It is January 30th 2009. Thank you Marlene for doing this interview with us. We appreciate it.

GRISSOM: I, too.

WILLIHNGANZ: We are interested, of course, in a number of things that you have been involved with. We are looking at the history of craft and development in this state, Kentucky. And some of the things that I see is, from 1984 to the present, you have been involved with Kentucky Art and Craft. Could you just start by telling us how that started?

GRISSOM: Evolved? Let's see. I had a gallery in the building that Al Shands and Mary Shands, and I owned...609 West Main. And I was listening to people talk about the Kentucky Museum...well, at that time the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation. And they sounded like they needed a home, and at that time I decided I really would like to go into urban design as well as selling art. So, I was actually giving up my physical space of the gallery and dealing privately. Which I still do, but I thought this could be perfect. I mean the lights are there. Everything is ready for another gallery to move in so we...I approached them, and they were interested. And then, of course, I went on the board, and things evolved from there. But, it was the first time they had a physical space in 1984. And they had been alive and well ever since. We moved recently. I think it has been about 4 years ago, and I was...raised the money...most of the money for the building that they are in now. ...and which is 715 West Main. A good block down the street. They have about three times...we have about three times the space we did before. So it worked out nicely.

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me about how that, that whole group came into being, if you know it.

GRISSOM: Well, Phyllis George Brown, at that time, and Mary Shands was very involved in the craft movement in Kentucky. And they...I mean much more so than I was. I was more in the fine art area and they were more involved in the craft...fine craft area and some folk art. There was quite a few folk art people at that time. Both of those people started this organization basically, and did a superb job. Not only was it wonderful for Kentucky, but they marketed it outside of Kentucky. So Bloomindaes started selling some of the craft work, and then some museums have...were introduced to Kentucky artists. Like the Kenny's...no Kidney...Kenny, and several of the other more famous ones. So it was a great way to showcase Kentucky craft throughout the country. Actually throughout the world. I think Japan was very involved...and other countries. So and they were extremely active at the time. Which they still were...I mean, still are to a point, but. And Phyllis, I think, has written two books on craft and quilts and that sort of thing. So, I mean it's still very much a part of Kentucky. And this...we have a new Executive Director, who's doing an excellent job. But it's still the fine craft of Kentucky. We expanded to, a little bit to a regional, we have shows that are

regional, and actually some international shows. So we bring art in so people of Kentucky can see what's going on elsewhere.

WILLIHNGANZ: How much of a training function does KMAC have at this point?

GRISSOM: Training as far as training artists? To market? We do have a very good program actually of training artists how to market their own goods. Because many of them have absolutely their own wares, or own crafts. They have no idea how to do that. Many of them are from Eastern Kentucky, and they've had limited amount of schooling. So we are very, very involved in teaching them the ins and outs of marketing. And, helping them get to the next step. And, how can they price things. That's a very important part of marketing, also getting them to different galleries throughout the country. The Kentucky Art and Craft was just named one of the top eight galleries of the country. So it's a very exciting, yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: I didn't know that. Wow that's terrific.

GRISSOM: We have some very, very fine choose. That's what I was named, the difference between art and craft. Some people think craft is more functional than art. But a lot of people...it's a very fine line. I mean we have...years ago...I guess it's been about six years ago now, I had a fabulous art...I mean glass exhibit that...I mean, it would be held at the Modern. It was such a fabulous show. But again, is glass a craft, or is it a fine art form? That's a big question.

WILLIHNGANZ: In those early years, when you were forming this organization, obviously there was a need for standards and some kind of evaluations of things, of things that came in. How did that process evolve?

GRISSOM: We had a jury. I think there were four or five people on it. I mean, I think right now the museum has approximately six hundred artists who they represent. So it's...there are more artists in Kentucky than you might think. But, this was an international show, and there were people...but it was still juried. It, it was just so successful. It was wonderful. When the economy was a little better too (laughing), so. It was a very economically successful show as well as so very pleasing to the eye.

WILLIHNGANZ: Was it developed, the organization developed specifically to encourage craft and art work within the State of Kentucky?

GRISSOM: Exactly. That was their main goal and it still is. That still is our main goal. We just felt that reaching out we do better for our artists, and the artists not only meet other artists from other states and the region. Mostly regional, and also they get a chance to participate in shows with artists from different places. And, we feel this is important too. Or else you become very provincial.

WILLIHNGANZ: Can you tell me about how this organization has been impacted by, or has impacted other craft and art organizations like the Kentucky Guild for Artists and Craftmen and LVAA?

GRISSOM: Right. Well, LVAA...I was involved with that. People...actually not LVAA as it is today. It used to be called the Louisville School of Art. And then the Arts Center Association. It was on the campus of U of L. It was more of an art school. It started out as and it was a super art school. We had teachers from all over the world, and they were just very special. And then, when U of L needed that space for other buildings, we moved out to Anchorage, and had, was there for a number of years. I think what happened was when U of L...I was not involved at that time, but when U of L went into a state system, the tuition dropped considerably. And our prices, I mean because we didn't have that back up...it became difficult to exist. So, there was only one way we might have been able to, is if we became a commercial art school. Which I still think is needed. Would have fitted that part of the programming. In fact, U of L could do that today. I think it would be a very wise addition to the art scene.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now AI told me that there has been talk recently of bringing LVAA and KMAC back together.

GRISSOM: Well, in programming we thought of doing some different things that might bring us things of how we could work together, and maybe some back office type things to be able to reduce cost. So far we've talked about it, but nothing has firmly been established.

WILLIHNGANZ: How has the program at KMAC changed over the years?

GRISSOM: Well, I think we have various...I'm trying to think of how to phrase this...programming...programs. And, we have the exhibits. We have what we call the shop, the sales gallery. Where we sell art that are also...we also try to get things in that might work with the exhibits. And, our education programs are essential to our total programming. We have...we go into the school systems but we also have people, children and adults coming into the building. 715 West Main Street and again we work very closely with the exhibits. So, a child sees an artist in an exhibit that. Wow! This is fabulous. We try to help them emulate that artist.

WILLIHNGANZ: When I've been there I've seen that there's at least one floor that is set up for classes.

GRISSOM: That is correct. That's the third floor.

WILLIHNGANZ: And, what sorts of classes are being held in there?

GRISSOM: Well it's, it's every type of art form. For young people, and like I said, adults drawing. Most three dimensional though, which is a craft. Most craft is

three dimensional. Although we are doing...we are selling some two dimensional work now. But at one point, I would say it was 98% was three dimensional works.

WILLIHNGANZ: Al also told me, and I was kind of surprised by this, that at one point there was actually a movement to take the word craft out of the title. And, in fact, for awhile...

GRISSOM: That was probably me and I'll tell you why. When I was raising money the word craft became almost Pajarito. I mean you drive through North Carolina and its arts and crafts...arts and crafts...and they are selling brooms and aprons, and things of that nature, and that doesn't fit into a museum type of establishment. So I...and they did change the name in New York. And they raised a lot more money so, that, my antenna went up and I thought well there were two things I thought would work. I thought if you put art and contemporary craft, or just say art. Well, we used the word art and design in one naming. People didn't feel comfortable with that, so we took it back to Museum of, as long as the word museum was in, Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft. I would like to have seen it, although it would make it longer, Kentucky Museum of Art and Contemporary Craft. I think that gets the arts and crafts out of there. People tend to do it; it's just one of those things. Arts and crafts. And when you think of arts and crafts you think of hobby shops, and things that aren't of the caliber that we have at the museum.

WILLIHNGANZ: How...how do you think Kentucky relates to other states in terms of its productivity of craft work?

GRISSOM: I think we're actually in a region where craft, art and craft, if you want to use the words without the s's, is very visible. I mean, North Carolina has a very wonderful program. Georgia, Tennessee, and this part of the world is known for its art and craft. I think Kentucky has done an excellent job, and I think it is only going to get better. People are very interested in this subject. Not only is it an art form, but its history. I think that catches a lot of people's imagination and interest. So, I think that it's only going to get better as the years go on, and as I said, right now, you know, financially it's a bit of a crunch. But, I think that hopefully in a year or so, when this goes away, and we become more affluent again, I think the program will even be more enriched.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now you mentioned Phyllis George's involvement of the, the?

GRISSOM: Lois Matheus and Mary Shands.

WILLIHNGANZ: And the energy that came in when she started focusing attention on it. My understanding of the history of this state really in terms of crafts, is that at various points governors or their delegates have gotten interested in the craft movement, and put some energy towards that, and during the 60's the Guild had the artists train.

GRISSOM: Yes.

WILLIHNGANZ: Going all over the state to talk about crafts, and to encourage people. Maybe you can comment a little bit about what the influence of state government has been towards the...

GRISSOM: Well, I think it's been huge. Especially during the Brown administration when there was such keen interest. And, that was in, I guess, the late 70's. Perhaps, yeah, early 80's I think it was. Because the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation, at that time started in...not started in 1984...it started about four or five years before that. But it had a physical home in 1984. Which is, I think, is important because it does give you...it gives tourists a chance to see what was going...what's going on in Kentucky. And there's one near Berea. There's one, very attractive, yeah, very, very nice. We do have some of the same artists because there, you know, are so many artists. I think we're...you know...I think both of the places are very high quality. Ours is a little different because of the exhibit we have. It's more of a showcase than store. Where this museum has six to nine exhibits a year, gives you a feel of different medias, as opposed to just having a showcase of different artists. So it, their different...but I think for instances...if we have a show of glass, or if we have a show of ceramics, it gives...it's pretty much in depth. So, it gives a person who comes in a very, I think, in-depth experience. Which I think is very good when you want to describe whether it's a painting or whether it's a bowl...a beautiful bowl or whatever. You want to see more than one or five. You want to see quite a few. It's more educational.

WILLIHNGANZ: How do you think the St. James Art Fair has impacted arts and crafts in this State?

GRISSOM: Well it's a hodge podge. I have judged it, but it is, it's a mixture of things. There are some good things, but there are a lot of crafts. I mean, arts and crafts, if you use the plural, I think, in the show. But people love it, and it's still a way to get people involved. I think that is healthy.

WILLIHNGANZ: It is however a lot of out-of-state arts.

GRISSOM: Yes, yes, more and more I think. Because people always think that the grass is greener. You know, the person from Kentucky goes to Tennessee's. Somehow people think that's wonderful, the fact that you are out-of-state, and vice versa. But yes, to answer your question. I think there are a lot of out-of-state artists. And people buy. It's very successful.

WILLIHNGANZ: I was interviewing Mary Reed, who is a corn husk artist. Takes corn husk from her farm, dyes them, cuts them, forms them and shapes them into these various figures. All sorts of different things. She does brides, and angels, and various human figures, and other things as well. And, she said that the value of her work tends to go up the further she goes from Kentucky.

GRISSOM: Kentucky. Yeah. I can believe that (laughing). I really can, and people, well...first of all, I think people see the work fairly often if they are interested in art at all. And they think, "I've seen this. I have a piece. I'd like to see something done by somebody else maybe from elsewhere". So that's how that mentality thing started, and you know, if you want to have a total collection of art and craft, I think you might want somebody who is really good from Tennessee. West Virginia has a fabulous center I think it's called...I forget the name, but it's a really fine center. So, you might want one from here, one from there, and then you start developing a collection.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, it's interesting that I had somebody comment on one of my interviews, that if you'll look at the difference between Lexington and Louisville...in Lexington, it was more a question of the artists getting up and forming up organizations like the Guild and whatnot. And Louisville...it's been a situation where we had a lot more corporate support. The center, or the fund for the arts, was set up and all that. Tell me what you think is the importance of the fund for the arts, and how do they make determinations on where to fund different aspects of the art scene?

GRISSOM: Well, I'm on that board, and I'm on the executive committee for a long time. I think it's, it's a necessity in this town to have a fund for the art. A lot of corporations don't want like twenty organizations knocking at their door, so the umbrella system of the fund for the arts goes to see somebody at corporation, and says, "If you give this much to the organization, we'll see that it's disseminated wisely throughout these member groups". That gives them one phone call, one visit, and a lot of people like that. So it's worked quite well, and it's in its 60th year now...so. It started more with the orchestra, with the performing arts. It's still very heavily weighted in the performing arts. But it does help the visual arts that the two organizations, the LVAA and the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft are members.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

GRISSOM: But I think it's a very strong organization and last year, I think, even with the weakening economy, they were one of the best in the country. If not the best, they might have been the best. So it's been pretty impressive.

WILLIHNGANZ: That is impressive. Well, how do they make determinations between how much money they are going to invest in the performing arts, and how much in the visual?

GRISSOM: Well, there is a committee. They sit down and look at all the numbers, crunch the numbers, and see who needs what, and why is that person...why is that group asking for "X" amount of dollars. They do like to make it on a need, but also on merit, so it's a combination of aspects that bring them to their decision, whatever it is. One hundred thousand here, fifty thousand here, whatever. So, but they've done, they've kept many organizations afloat. Especially during bad times. So they're an important aspect of our city life, I think.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah, they certainly are. Do you think we're doing the job that we need to do in terms of encouraging arts in our schools?

GRISSOM: No. I don't. I think unfortunately, when money gets tight, the arts are the first thing to go. Now we do as I said. We have programs that bring suitcases...we have suitcases with miniatures of the various themes of what you might say craft: glass, wood, ceramic, fiber. And we...this goes around to all the schools, or as many schools as we can get to within our budget. It's been very, very successful. Extremely successful...and the more money we get, the more we could go to different classrooms. Because, we have to teach the teachers as well, how to present this to their children, to the school children. Its people love working with their hands. I think this is something that relates in everybody. When they see something very well done, they want to emulate that. And, they have to be taught in many instances. Some instances, people have more of a feel and somehow, sometimes they have ability they didn't even know they had. I think a lot of people all of a sudden think, "Oh my gosh, how did I do this which is wonderful?" You know? And then they have a life, they have something, especially when you work with the challenged person who has no idea that they could do anything. I mean their IQ is limited and their self esteem is very limited. Give them an opportunity to work in clay, or in wood or fiber, and they actually do something with it. I mean their faces light up. You wouldn't believe it. It's wonderful. It's really wonderful.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now this is the LVAA program you're speaking of?

GRISSOM: No. I'm speaking more of KMAC, but LVAA has the children for the arts programs which are very, very good. They, they teach mostly gifted students. But, these are people who normally wouldn't have the opportunity to go on. So, it's a wonderful program.

WILLIHNGANZ: I guess I didn't realize that KMAC was sending people out into the schools.

GRISSOM: Uh-huh. We do that as well.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's terrific. How long have you been doing that?

GRISSOM: Years. I think we have, we have been in business now twenty-four years, and we've been doing that almost the whole time. Maybe twenty-two years.

WILLIHNGANZ: Wow.

GRISSOM: And some of our fundraisers have gone especially into those educational programs.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, has KMAC seen pretty much a steady increase in funding or?

GRISSOM: We have. We have a little few blebs like this year. Although we did a very...we did have a very good Christmas. Which we were all, I think everybody was surprised if anything was good this year. It's been such a rough economy. So yes, we've been very pleased to see this. We're always looking for new fundraisers so we can enhance the programs we have, and start new ones. We are very interested in education.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you think it's pretty much an innovated group, or is it just become fairly stable in terms of what it does?

GRISSOM: No, I think we are very innovative. Especially the exhibits where we want to make sure they are diverse, and make sure they are inclusive of Kentucky, as well as other areas as I talked about earlier. We also want the sales gallery to incorporate as many Kentucky artists as we can have. You know, in the space we have. But we do special showing at Christmas and that sort of thing to bring more artists in. We are very interested, as I said, in the education programs. They are very important to us. We also, which I didn't mention, have a permanent gallery of people who have left this collection. Which is another wonderful thing, because somebody might not know of this folk artist but we have it in our gallery. That's, its, it's a very educational process.

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me a little bit about art and public spaces.

GRISSOM: Well that, the art, now it's called MACOPA. Now its Mayor's Committee in Public Art, which I'm on that as well as the Art in Public Spaces, which is the old group. I guess that was fifteen years, twelve or fifteen years ago. That is try...we're trying to coordinate the art that is already in the city, and also, well, I guess, we're trying to get cooperation if they build a new building. Minneapolis has a one percent rule. We don't have that, to give one percent of the total cost of the building to a piece of sculpture or something artistic. We try to work this into the cityscape. Which is very important to have major pieces of sculpture. Right now, for example, on the waterfront, we have Tony Smith, which is on loan from the Kentucky Center. It's a huge signature piece. It's a big black hulking piece out there. Another one, that Sally Grounds' grandchildren and children gave in honor of her, I think it was her ninetieth birthday. A Charles O'Berry sculpture, which is a bronze. And then we have the Flock of Fins, and which I don't know if you ever heard of Marvin Finn who's a craftsman who's of really some note. And, I think he died when he was like ninety, ninety-two, and he did these wonderful colored birds and different animals...make-believe animals, and we have twenty-seven of them reproduced in metal. They will...they are not there...not...they are being refinished, but they are going to be put back where they were in the park, and they are going to be put back on Witherspoon Street. The children just adore them, and they are just these colorful whimsical animals of all different sorts. He uses paint...yellow, red, you know, all kinds of colors. And there...he always worked in wood, and these, to be outside, are metal. They are gravitated metal but that is...now MACOPA is very much involved with that. Seeing that

they were fabricated, getting the money to fabricate them and re-do the exterior, so they can stay on the outside for another probably five years.

WILLIHNGANZ: And you have Ed Hamilton's?

GRISSOM: Yes we do, and that's...I was just going to talk about that. The Lincoln...permanent Lincoln exhibit...but that's going to be fabulous. It already is. We have the amphitheater, the trees, I mean everything about it is just first class. And Ed's Lincoln is Lincoln when he was younger...without the beard, when he did visit Kentucky, so it's very authentic. And then, we have four brass reliefs that also depicted the era of his time, which will line up on the one side, and I think it is going to be a fabulous exhibit. I'm, I'm very pleased with the way it's going. We plan to open this exhibit June 4th. So.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's exciting. Is he going to have it ready by then?

GRISSOM: Yes. And the trees are being planted. We had a little lapse with this weather, but, yeah, he'll have it. Yeah, everything will be ready by then.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's terrific. Yeah. I was sort of disturbed driving here down Main Street to see the number of trees that were lost.

GRISSOM: I know. It's, its really unbelievable. I think so. Of the evergreens...are going to be...they won't bounce back. So.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah. They won't.

GRISSOM: It's a shame.

WILLIHNGANZ: So do you think we're doing good things in this city?

GRISSOM: I think we are. You know, you should never be satisfied, as you know. But, I think things are moving along as far as arts are concerned. I think the Speed Museum is another obvious big player, the biggest player in the visual arts field. They are thinking of expanding, and I think all this is good for everything. I mean, once an art facility improves, it is good for the other art facility. And Louisville has quite a few galleries too for its size, which is good also. They sell art and craft side by side. You know, that again, that word, what's art and what's craft. But they do, and I think people appreciate both. I mean actually, when you think about it, when an artists, a true artist uses a craft, a painter has a craft. So its very much one works on the other. So I'm always...that question always comes up because people know I'm very involved with the art part of the community. But, I'm also involved with the craft, so I get a lot of questions about it.

WILLIHNGANZ: In your develop...involvement with water front development, how does that merge with all of these other things?

GRISSOM: Things I've done? Well, there's is a lot of design in the waterfront, and I help with the art aspects of it. I do fundraising. I do a lot of fundraising. So.

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me what your views are on the Museum Plaza project.

GRISSOM: Well, I think it was very ambitious, and I wish it would happen. But, I think I don't know what's going to happen right now with the economy the way it is. It's hard to; it's really hard to get money. To get a loan, basically, even if you want to buy a house, it's difficult. So I think its going to be an upscale battle, uphill battle. But, I think that eventually they will proceed, and it might be scaled back somewhat, I don't know. I really don't. I think they want to build the sixty-two stories, but I think it would do wonders for this city. Absolute wonders, and I think and of course, for Main Street. They want to put a museum in that also, so once again a first class museum would be very welcome. I hope it happens.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, we will see.

GRISSOM: Yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah. The university has been pretty involved with the campus putting a glass workshop there.

GRISSOM: Well, they have one actually, the Elizabeth Crestman on First Street. I think it's First, yeah. I think that has been successful. Its nice having this come downtown. I think its great to have all this activity downtown, and when you think of Main Street...it's just a spectacular street. I don't think there is any place in this country that has a street like Main Street, with all the museums.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah it's quite a collection put together.

GRISSOM: Cast iron fronts, yeah. It really, yes, which is the third largest in the world. I think Russia, Moscow, New York City and Louisville, Kentucky.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well that's interesting. I hadn't heard that.

GRISSOM: Yeah. So, and with all the museums, and working another wonderful thing, I think, is having the modern with these old buildings, with these old warehouses. It's tremendous the look that can be achieved. I think KMAC really; the architect did a wonderful job. The...it's a wonderful...because you have the old being tactual you know in a craft and art organization. You have the wood...a lot of old wood and brick, and you have the new look. We have a glass wall down there, and some other highlights that are brand new, so...so it's a really wonderful combination. Of old and new.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Well, I don't know that I have a whole lot more to ask you at this point.

GRISSOM: Okay.

WILLIHNGANZ: Any other comments you would like to make about arts and crafts in Kentucky?

GRISSOM: Well I hope this succeeds. This organization, because I think there's always room for one more, and I think their aspects of looking at the history of craft in Kentucky, and the educational part of that is a very important aspect. And, I think it would be very, it would be wonderful to have it...another organization that does that. I mean because we are more interested...both organizations...Louisville Visual Art and Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft are more interested in the present. So it's, I think its always interesting to have facts on the past, because that's how you get to the present.

WILLIHNGANZ: We have such a rich history.

GRISSOM: Yes, we do. Yes, we do, and to document that I always think is very wise. And school children...it would be wonderful for them.

WILLIHNGANZ: Absolutely. Okay. Well, thank you very much.

GRISSOM: You're welcome.

WILLIHNGANZ: I appreciate it.

GRISSOM: That's fine.