

Kentucky Craft History and Education Association, Inc.

Interview with Crit Luallen

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Interview conducted by Greg Willihnganz

WILLIHNGANZ: Thank you for letting us into your home and letting us interview you, Crit. I appreciate it.

LUALLEN: Thank you.

WILLIHNGANZ: Thank you for taking the time.

LUALLEN: Sure. I'm delighted to do it.

WILLIHNGANZ: I have some questions here about your tenure basically, as the Commissioner of the Department of Arts, and I realize this is not a period that happened yesterday (laughter—Willihnganz). You may have trouble recalling some of the things here, but whatever you can remember will be very much appreciated. The questions here are actually...were given to me by Fran Redmon. So, they may sound like someone who knows your background, and she does apparently (laughter—Willihnganz). Crit, what about your background brought you to the Department of the Arts?

LUALLEN: Well, it's, an interesting path that I have taken, because I have a liberal arts degree from Center College with a studio arts major. My mother was an artist. My grandmother was an artist. I had artists on both sides of my family, actually, so I always assumed I would have a life and career that involved the arts. Then, I took a turn after college into politics, and I became involved very accidentally in the political arena. I went to work with Wendell Ford and his U.S. Senate campaign in 1974, right after I graduated from college, and I was literally working in the mailroom of the campaign. Several years later, my work had continued in politics, and around state government, and I had the opportunity to work in Governor Martha Layne Collins' administration. I had worked in her campaign for a year and a half prior to her being elected, and I was very interested in serving as Commissioner of the Arts, because of my background and interests in the arts, and also because at that time, the Department of the Arts provided all of the communications backup to the governor's office. It had as one of its divisions...it had photographers, graphic designers, special events planners, and writers and journalists who worked with the press for state government, and that's the kind of work I had done for Governor Collins. So, I was able to convince her that I could keep doing that part of the work, the communications that backed up her press office and her administration, and also be in a position where I could do what I really loved to do, which was to work with the artists in the state, and to work on the programs that supported the artists in the state. So, it turned out to be a great combination for me that just happened to work out in a way that was very, very satisfactory, both for the governor, because she got the things that were important for her that she wanted me to be focused on, but it also allowed me to get involved in the arts.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's terrific. How critical was it for the Collins administration to continue the focus on Kentucky crafts that had begun under the Brown administration?

LUALLEN: Well, Phyllis George Brown, under the Brown Administration, had put a real emphasis on crafts for the first time in Kentucky. And, because she had this very high profile nationally, and this incredible aura of celebrity that, that really turned heads wherever she went, and she was able to attract a great deal of media attention nationally as well as in Kentucky, her emphasis on the crafts was a huge leap forward for Kentucky to, to move crafts to another level of the national mindset, and have people think of crafts seriously as an art form, and also have Kentuckians who had traditionally produced crafts think of them as a real economic opportunity. So, Phyllis George Brown had done that, had really elevated crafts to another level. And when Governor Collins came in, we believed it was very important, Governor Collins believed it was important, and as her Commissioner of the Arts, I believed it was important too, to build on what the Brown administration had begun. We decided to take the program over to a little different level. We began to focus on finding wholesale markets for Kentucky crafts. Phyllis George Brown had focused on trying to get retail outlets to focus on Kentucky crafts, to put them into high end department stores, both in New York, as well as, we had one, one initiative in Japan in that administration. We looked at it in the Collins Administration from a little different perspective. And we said, how can we open up more markets for producing craftspeople so that they can sell at the wholesale level, and we would that way open up more opportunities for more craftspeople to sell more products. And we began to work with the existing craft staff. Fran Redmon was there at the time. She was terrific. And, there was a great team on that craft staff, and they actually reported to me as Commissioner of the Arts. And, we were the first administration to take a group of craftspeople to the New York Gift Show, as an initiative to try to put the craftspeople directly in touch with wholesale markets. The New York Gift Show brings together buyers from all over the world, all over the nation certainly, and all over the world, who place orders for particular items. Many are mass produced, but it had a growing niche of handmade crafts, and we got involved with that on the ground floor. And, we took a group of Kentucky craftspeople, and coordinated the exhibit, and planned the exhibit and the outreach in a way that really put Kentucky on the map in that arena. Governor Collins personally attended that first show and each of the shows where we took Kentucky craftspeople. So, we put a real emphasis in the Collins Administration on how could we take what the Browns had done, move it to another level, and open up additional markets for Kentucky craftspeople. We combined with that a real effort to, to begin to give craftspeople opportunities for additional education and training in business practices, and sales and marketing...how to really make their work more of an economic stimulus for their families, and for the areas where they worked. So we, we had a sort of two-pronged approach, bringing along the craftspeople and moving them to a level where they were prepared to sell more

crafts, and do that from a business like perspective, and working to open up more markets...and we had a great deal of success in doing that.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you have measures of what the success was?

LUALLEN: You know, it's been a long time. I knew the numbers then, but we had numbers that Fran could produce for you from her records as well, I'm sure, that would talk about the sales we had...dollar value of the sales, and what that meant to the families that were touched by the program.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now. The Department of Art that you were the commissioner of...how long had that been in existence before you took over as Commissioner?

LUALLEN: Well, the Department of Arts was created by Governor Brown and his reorganization, and I think it had been about two years...two to three years in existence as the Department of the Arts. It had had a different form before that and he had restructured some different agencies and moved things around, and created the Department of the Arts, and the first commissioner under Governor Brown was Lois Mateus. And, I had worked with Lois and knew her well, and knew her work. She had worked closely with Phyllis George Brown in her work, and then Governor Collins appointed me to serve as commissioner. And that Department does not exist in that same structure any longer, its all been moved around again. But, Crafts Marketing has stayed consistent through all of the various restructuring. It has just been moved into different places.

WILLIHNGANZ: And I will be interviewing Lois. I believe it will be next week. (laughter—Willihnganz).

LUALLEN: Good. Good.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, I'm making the rounds (laughter—Willihnganz), as it were. Why was it important for the State Government to support this effort?

LUALLEN: Well, of course, crafts means so much to Kentucky in so many different levels. They have an incredibly historical significance, because many of the traditional crafts forms in Kentucky grew out of our original pioneer settlement of this part of the world. Kentucky was...was one of the real edges of the westward expansion, and...and many of the pioneers who settled this state, settled here. They developed their own craft traditions out of necessity, initially, if you look at some of the things like the wonderful quilts, the baskets, the things that we now revere as art objects were originally utilitarian. But, because we were a state that was very well-known for its independent, pioneering spirit, we had a number of families who staked out land and settled in rural parts of Kentucky, and the craft traditions grew from what was originally their need for handmade items to help with their lives and, and their livelihood. So there's a

historical significance to the crafts. There's also a, an incredible artistic component to how crafts have evolved over the years because each of those utilitarian items also has an aspect of beauty and an aesthetic quality that I think has grown in appreciation over the years. And, as we have seen our craft forms evolve into more contemporary crafts, you can certainly see a dramatic evolution, aesthetically, to what is now considered part of the craft movement in Kentucky. So there's the, there's the artistic side with the historical significance, and I think the component that was added at least in more recent years, beginning with the Browns, is, if you look at Kentucky's economy, and how we evolved as a state, there are many parts of the state that really can't compete economically with new knowledge-based jobs and technology-based jobs, and who need to build on their inherent strengths and natural strengths to try to look for ways to strengthen their local economies and the crafts movement. Moving the crafts into a new era where they were seen as something that could actually be appreciated and sold around the world was seen by many, Governors Brown and Collins particularly, as economic initiative that could touch parts of Kentucky that might not enjoy economic success other ways. And, even if they were enjoying economic success in other ways, this could certainly augment that and be a part of Kentucky's future economy. And, I think that potential is what really drove those governors to lift it to a new level, and rather than just having sort of private collectors who would go out into the nooks and crannies of Kentucky seeking out crafts, have state government be sort of a catalyst, and an enabler to bring those crafts to the marketplaces and to new audiences.

WILLIHNGANZ: As you worked to develop the craft program in the Department of the Arts, what were the issues and the challenges you faced?

LUALLEN: Well, there were a number of different issues that we had to address. I think there's always a tension between the purists who see the craft as a, as an art form and those who see crafts as an economic development. And that, that tension had to be dealt with, and we had to achieve a balance, that we were never compromising the quality of the crafts for the purpose of selling more crafts, for example. Or, that we were never pushing craftspeople in to levels of production that would have affected the quality of the product. There was a constant tension in there between that sort of artistic perception of crafts and the economic potential of crafts. I think another challenge we faced was that craftspeople themselves, who are just an incredibly diverse and wonderful group of people across Kentucky, are artists, and they are very independent about how they feel about their work. And, they certainly didn't want to ever be put in a position where they felt like they were getting compromised in any way as to the quality of their work, and we were careful to never do that. In fact, you know, we created a, a jury process bringing in true professionals in the field and, and never allowed personal politics, or the political process, or any sort of pressure from the state to affect who was included or considered to be part of the jury program in crafts. We tried to be very careful about how decisions were made about inclusion in the program, and I think that program now is still seen as a

national model. The juried crafts program that allows for Kentucky craftspeople to be rated and considered worthy to participate in the state program. I think too, some craftspeople, our other challenges, is some craftspeople really weren't interested in learning about the business side of this. They just wanted to do their work, and it took a little cajoling often to convince them that if you want to be able to do your work, you have to also be knowledgeable enough to make a living at it so you can keep doing it. And, we had a lot of people who did make that transition, who were doing crafts at night and on the weekend, while they had a day job to try to support their families. And, we were trying to take them to a level where they knew enough about the business side of it that they could actually make a living at it. And, that took some convincing sometimes to get people to that stage, because typically artists aren't as interested in that, in the business aspects of the whole process.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, they certainly aren't, and it surprised me how many of the artists I've interviewed have day jobs, and they only just do this on the part-time, and they do beautiful, terrific work. But, they haven't mastered the business aspects of it enough to actually do this full time. They're working toward that, but yes, it's a critical factor. Were there any particular conditions or attributes about the state of Kentucky that naturally lead state government to become involved in supporting the crafts initiative?

LUALLEN: Well, Kentucky has one of the most well-respected and unique craft traditions in the nation, and I think its partially because of this early settlement of the state by the pioneers who came here, especially through the mountains of eastern Kentucky, and settled and became a very indigenous group of folks who exchanged their traditions, and built on those conditions in a fairly sheltered environment. So, we have a very rich, varied tradition that is, has a historical context, which is a part of what our image is in crafts. But also, we added on to that, that has sort of spawned additional, younger generations of artists who built their own new contemporary approaches to building on that, that tradition. The Guild in Berea really is seen as the preeminent national organization, nationally, as a state organization. Let me say that again. The Guild is seen as the preeminent state organization to really foster a supportive culture for its local craftspeople, and the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen preceded any state focus on this. They really were a, a, a group of, a self-governing group of craftspeople who decided that this tradition was so important they needed to ban together...think of ways they could help each other, and to help grow the craft traditions.

WILLIHNGANZ: What...when you were able to involve Governor Collins in the initiative? What impact did that have?

LUALLEN: Governor Collins took a strong personal interest in the crafts program, and as the Commissioner of the Arts for the governor I had direct access to her to brief her, and be sure she understood the value and the impact

of the program, and how important it would be for her to get personally involved. So, every time we asked her to get personally participate, she was there. And, when we took the first group of Kentucky craftspeople to New York to the New York Gift Show, she came. I have wonderful photographs of that first trip. And when we would do those New York Gift Shows, we would also plan a whole series of events around it. For example, we would do a luncheon for editors and publishers of magazines who focus on travel and the arts and culture. And, we would invite a group of editors and publishers to a personal luncheon with the governor, where she would highlight the crafts tradition in Kentucky, and those kinds of things were critical because when you have the Governor personally involved, people do listen, and participate, and respond to the invitations. So, Governor Collins took it very personally. She came to all those shows every year that she was Governor. She also...she also highlighted crafts at every opportunity that she could. I remember a luncheon that we did in California, hosted by Arm & Hammer, and she...it was an economic development luncheon for CEOs of companies who might consider investing in Kentucky, and she had me...I was there with her, helping her plan and organize the event. And, we shipped two cases of Kentucky crafts out there to decorate the tables with, at this very elegant luncheon for some of the top CEOs in California, because she thought it was important to highlight Kentucky's unique culture and heritage, and to leave a very positive image with potential investors in Kentucky. Every time she traveled to Japan, which was numerous times, she was the most successful governor at, at recruiting Japanese business to Kentucky. Every time she traveled, she took a selection of Kentucky crafts to give as personal gifts to her Japanese counterparts, and to business executives, and gift giving with the Japanese is quite a tradition. You know, there's the whole protocol about making sure the gifts are at the proper level for the individual you're meeting with, and we spent a great deal of time making sure she took the right kinds of things that would be appropriate in Japan. And, she never missed an opportunity to personally promote the crafts tradition, and the economy of the crafts community being strengthened. I don't...I can't think of a single thing I ever asked her to do or suggested she do that she didn't jump and do.

WILLIHNGANZ: Wow. That's terrific. You know, Fran pointed out something that was kind of interesting to me. She said that a lot of governors...when there's a change in the leadership the state will not continue programs that have been initiated by previous governors. And, given the strength of Phyllis George's presence and the initiative that they launched, its impressive that we have so consistently supported crafts in this state. Do you find that remarkable?

LUALLEN: Yes. In fact, governors in Kentucky have a tradition of abandoning whatever the initiatives were of the previous governor, especially if it's seen as something that was sort of a personal priority of that governor, or governor's spouse. And...and remember in Kentucky, until recently, we've only had four-year terms for our governor, so I think that's been one of the things

that's historically set us back in Kentucky. Because, if a governor picks an issue and he really focuses on it and makes it a top priority, and then four years later, traditionally, the new governor would abandon that initiative and go off on another direction. In the case of the crafts, that didn't happen. I think Governor Collins recognized that Phyllis George Brown had a particular strength with her celebrity status and her media savvy. She had a particular strength that elevated crafts in the public eye, and I think Governor Collins thought that what she could do as a real economic development governor...she could try to think of ways to build on that public awareness that had been developed by the Browns, to take the whole issue of marketing of the crafts to a new level, and our approach was little more low key and not quite as publicity oriented. We got a great deal of publicity, but we didn't quite have the pizzazz that Phyllis George Brown had. We were trying to deal with that from a little different perspective with, a business like approach.

WILLIHNGANZ: After Governor Collins took over, did Phyllis George remain active in promoting the arts?

LUALLEN: I think Phyllis George always maintained an interest in promoting the arts and culture in Kentucky. She, I think, continues today to participate in any way. I know, you know, she founded, helped to found the Kentucky Art and Craft Foundation in Louisville. And, she saw that as part of her legacy because it became a private, non-profit entity that moved on and, and maintained a real focus on high quality crafts in an effort totally separate from state government. And, with their gallery in Louisville and the other efforts they've done to support Kentucky crafts people, I think that's an important part of Phyllis George Brown's legacy.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well. I will be interviewing her too later on at some point here. Hopefully I'll have my game together a little better before I get there (Laughter—Willihnganz). What were the most significant outcomes for the crafts program during your term as Commissioner of the Craft Department of Arts?

LUALLEN: I believe during the Collins Administration we created a whole new level of sophistication among the craftspeople, as it relates to the business potential of their work. We specifically opened up new wholesale markets. We developed new relationships for hundreds of craftspeople with buyers, both through our efforts out of state, and also through the growth of the Kentucky Craft Market in Louisville, and its wholesale day, where we bring buyers in from all over the country to see our best Kentucky craftspeople, and their work on display. And, I think through those four years we literally sold millions of dollars worth of crafts, that was money directly going back into the families, and communities of Kentucky craftspeople. But in doing that, I think we, we elevated the business acumen and the understanding and sophistication of craftspeople, thinking of their work as an economic tool that could help them make a living for themselves and their families, and help other craftspeople.

WILLIHNGANZ: What other state agencies were involved in supporting the craft initiative? How were crafts integrated into other state government events and activities?

LUALLEN: Well, one of the important initiatives that we worked on when I was involved in the Department of the Arts, and later under Governor Jones, when I became Secretary of Tourism...in both of those administrations we had a strong emphasis on cultural tourism. When I was in the Arts, we were working closely with the Tourism Cabinet and the Parks Department, for example, to encourage visitors to Kentucky to see the crafts studios; to visit Berea; to visit the Arts and Crafts Foundation; to visit these areas where we knew they would find and see quality crafts either being made or being sold. So, we were integrating images and tour information into all of the tourism promotional activities. We also had a very aggressive effort, when I was Commissioner of the Arts to, to upgrade the Kentucky state park gift shops, and have them focus on Kentucky arts and crafts, rather than just the cheap souvenirs that are always featured. So, we were...there was a lot of work involved in that administration to do outreach to the Tourism and Parks folks. And then later, I had a little more clout to make some things happen in that regard when I became Secretary of Tourism, because I had all of the parks under my purview then, and we did have a very successful effort then with the Crafts Marketing staff actually designing our state park gift shops, and how they would be...how crafts would be merchandised there, and how crafts would be spotlighted there. And, that was a very successful effort. And, we put even more emphasis then on cultural tourism, trying to market to our national tourism audience the image of Kentucky as a place that you could come, and really see and enjoy a particular heritage that we were so proud of.

WILLIHNGANZ: You're certainly an eclectic person, but I don't quite understand the transition from Commissioner of the Arts, which I can get, to Secretary of Tourism? What was the attraction there?

LUALLEN: Well, I've had a, I've had a very varied background. I, again, when I was Arts Commissioner, we not only were working on all the programs that fund and support the arts in Kentucky...and this is...all of the arts funding goes through that agency for visual arts or performing arts...community arts activities all across the state, as well as crafts. We had a strong visual arts program. But, in addition to that, we also had all of the part of state government that supported the governor's office in its communication strategies. So, I have a long background and career that has touched on communications strategies, and marketing, and promotional activities. So, all those things combined led me to, after the Collins Administration, being recruited to Louisville where I headed the economic development effort in the Louisville areas. They were starting up a new initiative. And, I returned to Frankfort after serving as President of the Greater Louisville Economic Development Partnership at Governor Jones'

request, to become Secretary of Tourism. The main reason he asked me to come back and do that, is he was trying to gain support for 100 million dollar bond issue to support renovation of all the state parks. And, he needed someone with economic development credentials to sow that notion as an economic development investment. And, I traveled across the state for him, and secured the support for that bond issue, speaking and meeting with groups and repeating over and over the message that if we invest in parks, it means economic growth and prosperity for the parts of the state that can benefit from that type of tourism. So, there was a linkage from my background in promotions, communication, and marketing, to my efforts in economic development in Louisville, back to this effort to successfully gain the \$100 million investment for Governor Jones in the Tourism Cabinet. Now, that leads you to the next interesting question is, "Now how did I get to be State Auditor?" (laughter—Luallen).

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, if you want to go completely off the reels, yeah (laughter—Willihnganz). How did you do that?

LUALLEN: Well, interesting turn of events. At the end, toward the end of the Jones administration, I was Secretary of Tourism, and I had successfully led his effort to gain that funding for the parks. And I, that meant I had traveled to over 70 counties. And in the first year that I was in that job, I had worked with legislators in every area of the state to try to secure that passage, and try to negotiate how the money would be spent. I had structured that whole bond issue in terms of how we had set the priorities for the funding, and how it would flow, and how it would be spent in the ways where we had the best return. So, because of that experience, Governor Jones asked me to move over and become Secretary of the Finance Cabinet. He had a vacancy there, and needed someone to step into that role. And, I had worked very closely with him in all of the financial aspects of that parks initiative, so I became Secretary of Finance Cabinet. That gave me a very good perspective on the broader issues affecting the administration of state government. Because the Finance Cabinet handles all of the debt management for the state, manages all of its investments, manages all of its capital construction projects, sale of bond issues that finance capital construction, and it owns and administers all of the properties across the state that the state is responsible for. So, because of that experience, combined with my previous experience, then Governor Patten came in and asked me to come over to his office to be Deputy Secretary of the Cabinet, a job I did for six months and then moved up to Secretary of the Governor's Cabinet. That's like the chief operating officer for state government, where I was responsible, day-to-day, for the administration of state government. But also, more importantly, for the administration of his policy agenda...helping the governor keep his policy agenda on track...helping to development legislation, and a plan for passing and enabling that legislation. So in that job, which I held for seven years, I worked on every major aspect of public policy that, that touches the state. I played a significant role in his higher education reforms, for example, in 1997, his early

childhood initiatives, initiatives in mental health, education, Medicaid...just about every aspect of government where you have a serious public policy focus...it was my job to keep all of that on track. So, in that role, I really learned and grew in just about every area of public policy that touches state government. When I decided to run for state auditor, I made a decision that I would look at that job from a perspective of my background and experience. Oh, and also, while I was in the governor's office as Secretary of the Cabinet, I served concurrently for a time as state budget director. So, when I made the decision to run for auditor, by then I had more financial management experience than anyone who had ever run for auditor, as budget director, Secretary of Finance, and Secretary of the Cabinet and made a decision to take that background experience, run for an office, where I thought I could use my job, use my experience in government administration...especially the financial management side, and use that as a way to try to elevate the state auditors office, and get it involved at the higher level in many of these public policy leaders.

WILLIHNGANZ: You may be the only woman I've ever met who works harder than my wife (laughter—both).

LUALLEN: I don't know. She's working pretty hard.

WILLIHNGANZ: She's working pretty hard. That's a fact.

LUALLEN: She's got her hands full (laughter—Willihnganz) taking care of Jim Ramsey every day.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's the truth. How were you able to get to continue to support crafts in your latter positions? Well, you sort of touched on this.

LUALLEN: Yeah. I did. I mean, every job I had after I left the Department of the Arts I was in a position...I was in a little higher position where I could be sure that the crafts program was supported...be sure that it was funded. For example: in the governor's office...that seven years that I spent under Governor Patton, that's when we funded the Berea Artisan Center, which has become a remarkable showcase for Kentucky crafts, and also what we hope will be a gateway to Eastern Kentucky for visitors who would stop there to learn more about Berea, learn more about the other craft facilities...studios in the east. Because I was in a role then, where I could have a significant impact on the governor's budget, I was able to influence the successful funding and construction of the Berea Artisan Center. So, every job I've been, in I've tried to use my real interests and understanding of the arts to be sure that I could help influence from that perspective, from whatever position I was in, being sure that there was support being given.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, do you think this...the success of the Kentucky Craft Marketing Program played a role in the ongoing development of more

recent craft initiatives across the street, across the state, such as the Artisan Center or the School for Craft?

LUALLEN: Yes, there's no question. There's no question that the Kentucky Crafts Marketing Program elevated crafts to another level of respect and credibility, and really reinforced the notion that a successful emphasis on crafts can be an economic stimulus. And, I think that's why it was successful to fund the Berea Artisan Center in Berea. I think the Crafts Marketing Program had really elevated crafts to a new level. The school in Hindman was a particular focus in the Patton administration, because Governor Patton, coming from Eastern Kentucky...and I worked for him then in the governor's office...believed that Eastern Kentucky would have to build on some of those traditional unique strengths, like the crafts tradition, if it was going to have a, a viable, economic future; that tourism was important to the future; that building on our crafts tradition was important to the future, and that certainly education was important. So, that crafts school was part of what he saw as sort of a model community approach to how an Eastern Kentucky town could build on its traditional strengths to build a better future.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. What do you think the overall impact has been on the State over the last 25 years, due to the success Kentucky has had with its craft programs?

LUALLEN: I already answered that one too, but I'll give it another shot. I think the Crafts Marketing Program has done two or three things. It certainly has elevated the respect and credibility that are given to Kentucky crafts around the nation, which has helped to reinforce a positive image of Kentucky that in some cases may have been much more positive than the stereotypes people have of our state. It's had a direct economic impact. I mean, there's no question that millions of dollars have returned to the families and the communities where these craftspeople are working, because of the successful state effort to make crafts more of an economic influence in regions of the state.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Based on your familiarity with State government, do you feel that it will continue to be supportive?

LUALLEN: I believe the tradition now of State government supporting crafts has been well established. I think its moved way beyond what is seen as anyone's sort of pet project, and I think its seen as a viable program that deserves support, and I believe it will have continuing support.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. I think that's all of my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add?

LUALLEN: I don't think so. We hit it all.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, that's terrific. Thank you so much.