



June 2, 2020 Transcript

Merry Ryding and Marilyn Blackmore of Art in the Wilds are interviewed by PA Wilds Ambassador Kate Kennedy of the Kane Area Development Center.

Kate: Hello, this is Kate Kennedy from the Kane Area Development Center, serving as a PA Wilds ambassador for The Wilds Are Working series. I'm here today with Marilyn Blackmore and Merry Ryding from Art in the Wilds. Welcome, you guys. We're glad to have you with us to share how you are pivoting your organization during these uncharted times. So thanks for being here.

Marilyn: Thanks for having us. We're in here.

Kate: Yeah. You guys have done some really interesting things that are very new for you. So let's go ahead and start by just telling people who are the Arts in the Wilds. Tell us about your organization, what you do and who you are.

Marilyn: Well, certain wilds is the outdoor juried fine arts and fine crafts show Kane. And we are there usually on June 27th and 28th, the fourth full weekend in June. And we have usually 40 artists with about 6,000 patrons who come to the show every year. We have food vendors, artists, demonstrations, and we have a student art exhibit that is high school kids from around the area. Our attendance and parking are all free, some of it. Any families can come to the show, and we are non-profit. We're powered by a committee of very strong people to help. There are 14 of us who work together as volunteers

Kate: So it's a nonprofit, volunteer run art show. How long have you been doing this?

Marilyn: Well, this is our 14th year.

Kate: All right. I don't know if you said this, but I know it is a juried art show. Could you describe what that means so that people listening know exactly what type of art guides feature?

Merry: Sure, I'll take that one. Juried basically means we get applications in and then they go through a process. We use three jurors each year and we change the jurors, and then we use a blind jurying process where the jurors do not see the names of the artists who are sending in their applications. They go through and they and we have a bunch of categories that they rate the artists on. And then we go through and try to balance the show with their ratings. And we just try to make sure we have a variety of mediums, a variety of price ranges. Balancing the show is probably the trickiest part of it.

Kate: All right. That's one of the things that makes Art in the Wilds so great, I think, is that you have such a variety of different types of art there. And it's partially due to the jury process. And I know it's a huge turnout every year. And, you know, we're in Kane, PA and, just curious, why did you decide to start this here in Kane in the PA Wilds?

Marilyn: That's mine, I guess! Well, I grew up in Kane and had been playing around with trying to promote art in Kane area. And so I had done some things with my twenty 29-year-old-teacher of first grade. So I did some things in the school. We did a curriculum and we did a celebration of the arts. But one day one of my friends called and said, well, wait, I should back up, because about 2003, Governor Ed Rendell divided the state in two different areas. And we were part of the Pennsylvania Wilds, which is a twelve-and-a-half county area. So it's really huge. But my friend called and said, 'I would like for you to do something in Kane with the arts. And I have some seed money from the family endowment.' So I said, 'well, what do you want?' They said, 'It's up to you.' So that's where we got started. I went home and my husband and I, he is a former marketing professor, so he knew about marketing. And I had to be really organized to be a first grade teacher. So we thought we could put our heads together and come up with some things. So we had a lot of research. We went to a lot of shows and decided that an art show was what we wanted, but we really wanted to be high quality art. So we wanted education to be a part of that so we could educate people in Kane.

Kate: Yeah, and it is such a well, like I said before, attended and just really high quality art show right here in the middle of the Allegheny National Forest in the PA Wilds, which can be surprising for some people. But we know people come from far and wide to attend this every year. So good job. Thank you for getting that started. And I know it's a ton of work to plan for. And then all of a sudden this year, we have these COVID-19 restrictions. What did you decide to decide to do? And what was that process like for you to pivot your show for this year?

Merry: Well, I guess I'll take that one. That's me.

Marilyn: She's done all the work!

Merry: We spent a lot of time really agonizing over the decision. We had to think about how do you respect the most vulnerable? You have to think about are the patrons as well as the artists, you know, being in a crowd like that and then being in the confined space of their tents? And then, of course, listening to what other venues are doing and how others are shutting down. We decided to cancel the live show and instead go virtual. So that's what we have done. Do you want me to expand on that?

Kate: Yeah! Well, first of all, when did you make that decision?

Merry: It was the first of May, Right?

Marilyn: Yes.

Kate: So about a month ago you decided to shift to a shift from doing this live art show, which takes a lot of work, but you're very familiar with it, to putting it all online.

Merry: Right.

Kate: What did that entail? I mean, did you have any downtime, or was it something that kept you busy?

Merry: Downtime? No.... We had to hit the ground running. What I did was I put it out to the artists. We had 40 artists that had been juried in the previous month. So going with that same group of artists, we said, 'we're going virtual.' I asked them to send me nine pieces that they would like to promote. And I set up a page for each artist. So 40 pages and each artist has at least nine, well ... some of them have not quite nine pieces. With the prices, you can click, you scroll down and you can click on their website or their email and send them a message, because we wanted that. We wanted people to deal directly with the artists. We're not handling any of the money. The money is all theirs. So if you go to our website, ArtintheWilds.org, at the top of the page, it says Virtual Show. Click on that, and it will take you to the launch for the artists. And if you scroll down, you will, as you can see there, you will see each of the artist's tents, and click on the tent to enter their tent and then browse through their stuff and buy stuff. Send them a message. Say you want this or you want that. And we really hope that this will help them out, at least with promotion. A virtual show can never replace a live show. It just can't. And we know that. But we hope it can help them a little bit.

Kate: What a great idea and what a lot of work. How did the artists respond to this idea?

Merry: Actually, that's been probably one of the most rewarding things because they've been great. Some of the artists have sent me messages saying all of their shows have been canceled. And these are people; they rely on this. This is their income. This is how they make their living. And some of them have had all of their shows canceled. And so they've been so grateful that we've been able to do something. That's actually been the best part of the whole process, is hearing from them and listening to the gratitude.

Kate: My perception of you guys has always been that you're very artist focused and artist friendly. I'm sure it's just one more step of proving that to be true about you. But what about the customers or the people that usually come to the show? How do you stay in touch with them? How have you let them know that this year's going to be different?

Merry: Well, we are still doing advertising because we're advertising for people to go to the website. So we're still advertising. We still have posters that we're going to be putting around. We are still putting out rack cards. Our blogging person, Jackie, has put together a great show program which will go into newspapers.

Marilyn: Social media.

Merry: Social media, of course. These days, that's how people get their information. So we're going to be Mattie and Jackie are going to be putting out social media posts, trying to drive people to the website and then ultimately to the artist's sites.

Kate: That's awesome!

Merry: So we're doing it all.

Kate: **Yeah! And so typically, it's just one weekend, that Saturday and Sunday, the last weekend of June, or the fourth weekend of June. How long will this virtual show run?**

Merry: It went up yesterday. So it's up now all the way through summer, and it'll go through Labor Day. September 7th, I think, is Labor Day. So it will go through Labor Day.

Kate: That's great. So it's a longer period of time for people to go and check out these different artists on your website.

Merry: Right.

Marilyn: And I'd like to add a little bit more to what Merry was saying about how we can help the artists. One way that we did that was a lot of the artists had already sent to us their booth fee. They pay \$150 booth fee. Which, in the world of art, is very, very cheap. But we decided we were able to pay back their booth fee. So I think that was a big help to the artists.

Kate: Sure. Yeah.

Marilyn: The other thing is that we already had money from our very loyal sponsors that we get, and our two two grants that we get from Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts and the Kane Area Development Center (KADC). So we asked for those for advertising. So we are able to use the funds that we have received to advertise for the artists. And the other thing is I did some research about other shows in the area and what they were doing and most of them just canceled or postponing, but we're trying to go the extra mile to help our artists.

Kate: **You certainly are. It's an amazing concept and the fact that you put it together in one month is incredible. Merry can breathe easy now. Are there any progress?**

Marilyn: No!

Kate: Not till September 1st! Are there any programs or resources or organizations that you found helpful that you'd encourage other small businesses to check out?

Marilyn: Oh, my goodness. Yes.

Merry: You can take that one.

Marilyn: The tourist agencies, the TPAs (Tourist Promotion Agencies), the Allegheny National Forest Visitors Bureau has been with us from day one and has been very, very, very, very helpful, along with the PA Wilds, PA Route 6, Chamber of Commerce, and one I'm missing.

Merry: ECCOTA.

Marilyn: ECCOTA, oh yeah!

Kate: What does ECCOTA stand for?

Marilyn: Excuse me?

Kate: What does a ECCOTA stand for?

Marilyn: Elk County Council on the Arts. That's Elk.

Kate: So, a pretty regional group that has really come together to help support you promoting the new way of doing your show this year.

Marilyn: Right. Every year.

Kate: And we kind of touched on this gratitude that the artists have expressed that has been really inspiring to you. Are there any other moments of humanity or inspiration that have touched you during this time?

Marilyn: Got anything?

Merry: Well, for me, as I've talked to people telling them what we're doing, what my main goal is, is what I'm hearing from some people, that they're actually going to go check out these artist's sites and buy something from them. Please. I'm going to do a shameless promotion for one of my favorite artists, Bonnie's in Ridgway.

Kate: Well, that's great. And I think that's one of the things I've heard across the board, is people stepping up to make sure they're intentionally shopping local. And it sounds like it's kind of carrying over into your show as well, maybe intentionally buying something that they might not have otherwise because they want to make sure that this is something that's supported. That's awesome to see a community come together.

Marilyn: And it's also inspirational to see all the community giving, making donations to help people who are having rough times. It's so good. I think we're being close to our families and our friends and watching out for one another.

Kate: Yeah, well, excellent. Is there anything else that you guys wanted to share that you didn't get a chance to yet? Covered it all pretty much?

Marilyn: I would just like to touch on a few of our sponsors who have been very, very loyal to us over the years. And that would be, this year, the Cleeland Endowment, Julie and Ed Malmstrom, Northwest Foundation. Rich Gas and Zook Motors. Just want to give them a little plug for our major sponsors here.

Kate: Yeah, it's nice to have that support and to be able to share your gratitude for them as well. So. Well, thank you guys so much. So ArtintheWilds.org is where they can find this virtual show. And good job. I really applaud you guys for making the decision and then doing something different instead of just canceling. I think that was a really creative solution that might not have come up any other way except for during this time. So nice work. I hope it goes really well for you. And thank you again for your time today. For those watching the questions and answers from this interview and other resources for small businesses in the PA Wilds can be found at WildsCoPA.org. There you can also apply to share your story. Take care. And thanks again.

Merry: Thanks, Kate.

Marilyn: Thank you, Kate. Bye!

Kate: Bye.