



## July 21, 2020 Transcript

*Sara Frank of the Elk County Council on the Arts is interviewed by PA Wilds Ambassador Tina Solak from the Cameron County Chamber of Commerce & Artisan Center.*

**Tina:** Hello, this is Tina Solak from the Cameron County Chamber of Commerce and Artisan Center serving and a PA Wilds ambassador for the Wilds Are Working series. I'm here today with Sara Frank from ECCOTA, which is the Elk County Council on the Arts. And welcome, Sarah.

**Sara:** Hi.

**Tina:** We would like to have you here with us to share how you are working amid these uncharted times. So first of all, Sara, how about giving us your location, the number of employees, just some basic information about ECCOTA.

**Sara:** Sure. So we are located in downtown Ridgway, right across from the courthouse. We operate a sales gallery here with about 60 artists who sell their work. We have two full-time employees. And during the summer months, for about four months of the year, we have two interns that do our summer programming.

**Tina:** So why operate a business like this in the PA Wilds?

**Sara:** Why not? It's the perfect place for it. So this organization predates my existence. It was started in 1984 by a group of artists who really had a passion to share their art and to create an outlet for artists to get their names out there and engage the public in everything that the artists around here have to offer. You know, what originated as the [PA Wilds] Artisan Trail did wonderful things for the region. Most of our artists here are Wilds Coöperative members. And, you know, we are we are a juried gallery, which means that each artist has to go through the process to meet our quality standards and presentation standards, and being juried into the Wilds Coöperative is a big part of our consideration as well, because we know that they've already put the effort in to market themselves in the region and really fit into the culture and, you know, what people expect from the area.

**Tina: So we're all dealing with COVID-19 in our own different ways. What exactly has ECCOTA done? Any different types of events that have created or not been able to be held due to COVID-19 restrictions?**

**Sara:** So the short answer is we have had to change everything. Literally, the day that quarantine started, I had a new employee scheduled to start. So she did her job working from home. We had to cancel our gala fundraiser, which was supposed to be about two weeks later, which, you know, as you know, is just a really beautiful celebration of art. It helps us create some funding for our programs through the summer and through the fall. And we had to cancel that, unfortunately, and we had to put a pause on all of our summer programming. So every summer we do a week-long visual art camp, which is kind of an experience where they start with a small idea and the beginning of the week, and it builds into a bigger project by the end of the week. It's a really, really fun visual art camp for all ages. And we do a theater camp, which is also a week long, which is a full immersion into learning the show on Monday and doing a final performance on Friday, which is incredible too -- super intimidating for me, but it's incredible. So we've had to pause all of that. So in order to still engage with the public from a distance, we came up with the idea to do "Take and Make" project boxes. We launched those about eight weeks ago, I think. And it was, you know, anything from Shrinky Dinks -- the first one we did was like a little shrinking package, which is just fun and cute and nostalgic for a lot of people, to mini weaving looms. We did ice dyeing, and those have really been a hit. People have really enjoyed just a little bit of interaction that we've had with them, some video tutorials and stuff. But they've been able to do things on their own and keep themselves busy, which I think is really important. And another thing that we just implemented, it actually just got installed on the sidewalk yesterday, is our new sidewalk art swap. So I've had this idea for a really long time to kind of borrow inspiration from the little libraries that have gotten so popular. For quite a few years now, I've wanted to do like a mini art gallery where it was accessible all the time. People could just come and take and give what they want. And I found a company in Harrisburg that recycles old newspaper boxes. They saved them from going into the landfill. So I got one of those. We customized it with some vinyl. And there's some artwork in there today for people to take. We've had a few customers already who have really enjoyed it. So, you know, engaging from a distance, just getting creative and doing what we can to keep people occupied. But it's been really hard.

**Tina: Absolutely. Every business has a unique twist, and those that are most successful in the PA Wilds and across the state, across the country, are those that are thinking outside the box. And listening to how you're doing the twist on some of your programming, it also sounds like, well, maybe the summer was geared more for children. You're now engaging all ages with, you know, Make and Take and the portable art gallery.**

**Sara:** Yeah, that's exactly correct. In the summer, we always focus more on children and through the rest of the year, we have more classes for adults. But it has been kind of fun to engage with everyone this year. And we have a couple more things up our sleeves. Before the before the end of the summer here, you know, for everyone. We also did a chalk event where we invited people to come share their art on the sidewalks downtown and just doing little things that we can do to keep everybody safe. Of course, meet all of the requirements for social distancing, but still offering some fun stuff.

**Tina: I imagine the ECCOTA is still open for in-person purchases. What can a customer or even a future artist expect when they walk through the door as far as precautions go?**

**Sara:** So right now we are limiting the number of people who we can have in the gallery. It's not a huge space and there are already three of us here. So we're limiting it to about five customers at this time. And we are all wearing masks. We're requesting that people wear masks. Because we do engage with children and elderly populations, we just want to keep everyone safe, keeping as many precautions as we can in place. And we have a beautifully decorated plexiglass up above the counter. So we figured if we had to do it, it should be pretty. But, you know, just doing the basics that everyone else is doing right now.

**Tina: So do you have a moment of inspiration that has helped you through these tough times?**

**Sara:** So I have to say, I think one of the best things has just been the feedback that we've gotten from people just saying, you know, "keep, go and keep keep doing what you're doing." And as you know, we are a partner with the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts as well, to do arts and education residencies, which are, by nature, in-person residencies. So we had to pivot those very quickly to being online to be able to function online, which is tough. And we've gotten a lot of really good feedback from people who said, "I had no idea that you did this. I didn't think this was applied to me. And I have enjoyed this so much." So that's been really nice. Just kind of broadening people's horizons as far as arts engagement online, which is tough. So tough. And, you know, creating that awareness that we do more than just function as a store.

**Tina: And Pennsylvania Partners in the Arts is very important to the PA Wilds, their funding for not only keeping, you know, locations such as yours up and running, but also the individual artists. And I know just speaking from down the road in Cameron County, a lot of unique ideas coming forward for future funding rounds. And I'm sure that you're hearing that yourself.**

**Sara:** Yeah. It's actually been kind of nice, especially with the Arts In Education having to go online. There are a couple artists who haven't really made the time, I guess, to do in-person residencies, and they're finding that doing it online really does appeal to them. And that's something that may continue in the future. So we're just trying to get creative. You know, like you said, there's some fun stuff coming up that we're trying to do.

**Tina: Absolutely. So tell me also a little more about some of the artists and how if an artist is interested in coming to your facility, how they go about that process.**

**Sara:** Sure. So we have all of that information on our website, which ECCOTA.com, as you can see on your screen. And so we ask for just, you know, that they meet basic quality requirements, and that it's something unique that we don't already have in the gallery. We're always looking for new stuff. We'd love to get some wrought iron, some more fiber art, some different two-dimensional stuff. We're just always looking for some variety. But, you know, the jury process is not intimidating. A lot of people think that it's very scary and that they're going to have to stand in front of us and be judged. But, you know, we just ask that you drop your artwork off with a quick biography and you know a little bit about your process. We love learning about the

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process. And that's something that our customers ask about most often is, you know, about the artists. They want to know where they're from, how long they've been doing art, how they do it ... they want to engage that way. So as much information as you can provide. We love seeing new stuff and we're always welcoming new artists.

**Tina: And then once they're in, do you have a process for them refreshing their items? Do you have a process for how long they are involved with your location?**

**Sara:** I'm not too strict about swapping art. You know, a lot of stuff sells so quickly that we don't have to ask them to come in and swap out old things. So I am always asking our artists to bring in new inventory when things are getting low. I really keep tabs on what we have in stock so that, you know, they have the opportunity to sell. And so that our shelves aren't looking bare. It's always important to have as much as we can in here. You know, we just keep tabs, keep in touch with everyone. They're all our friends.

**Tina: So what are your hours? Have they had to change since COVID?**

**Sara:** So we were restricting our hours a little bit so that we were closed, except for, I think two and a half days a week just for our protection. And just because there wasn't that much foot traffic anyway, so we gave us an opportunity to rearrange a little bit to do some deep cleaning and really to dive into planning without interruption, because it was tough going into the summer not knowing what exactly we could do. You know, we had a plan, a backup plan and a backup plan for our backup plan, basically. And in the end, we ended up just saying we're going to wing it anyway. So, yeah, it gave us some time to rethink everything. But right now, we are open six days a week, nine to five, Monday through Thursday, nine to six on Friday, and ten to two on Saturdays. And our hours do vary seasonally. But they're always updated on Google, Facebook and our website.

**Tina: And speaking of social media, has that changed how you are working and how you are drawing people into the facility?**

**Sara:** Absolutely. We've done a lot more on Facebook. I've gotten into doing some videos and just kind of changing the way that we interact with people, because I think they still want that human connection that you don't get just by posting some text ads or just doing a newspaper ad.

**Tina: And any other words of wisdom to artists out there? You know, a lot of our artists also go to shows and go to events and the majority of those have been canceled right now. So any words of wisdom to those artists?**

**Sara:** Keep going and know that we're here to support you. That's what I kept telling all of my artists. Anything that they need, just let us know and we'll try to help you any way we can. I know it was really devastating when

we kept seeing that all of the shows the summer were being canceled. It's tough. We're here to help. And I've been sharing grant information that I've come across that may apply to them. And, you know, any resources that I can give them. We're here to cheer them on and support anyway they need us to.

**Tina: Thank you so much, Sara, for taking time. And for those watching, you can find interviews like this one and other resources for small businesses in the PA Wilds it's at WildsCoPA.org. And there you can also apply to share your story. And who knows, it could be myself or someone else actually interviewing you. So everybody, take care from the PA Wilds.**