

**Oral Memoirs
of
Trish Thompson**

An Interview Conducted by
Mark Miller and Autumn Reisz

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History Harvest

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University of Central Florida Public History Center

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Interview Histories

Interviewer	Mark Miller and Autumn Reisz
Transcriber	Autumn Reisz

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the Public History Center, University of Central Florida, Sanford, Florida.

Project Detail

Creative Sanford, Inc. is a non-profit organization created to manage *Celery Soup: Florida's Folk Life Play* community theater productions. The original idea for the Celery Soup project came from Jeanine Taylor, the owner of a folk-art gallery on First Street in Sanford, Florida. Their first production was *Touch and Go*, which took several years of planning. The play focused on how the people of Sanford overcame obstacles throughout their history. Some of these stories include the fall of Sanford's celery industry, the Freeze of 1894-1895, and the closing of Naval Air Station (NAS) Sanford in the 1960s. Richard Geer and Jules Corriere, partners from Community Performance International, were in charge of assessing oral histories, converting them into scenes for the play, and writing original songs. Director Geer also used an all-volunteer cast from the local community, many of which were not experienced actors.

During the process of producing the show, Creative Sanford decided to rehabilitate an historic building, the Princess Theater, which was located on 115 West First Street and owned by Stephen Tibstra. The Creative Sanford offices are housed in the Historic Sanford Welcome Center, located at 203 East First Street. As of December 2013, the Executive Board for Creative Sanford included President Brian Casey, Vice President Trish Thompson, Treasurer Linda Hollerbach, Secretary Dr. Annye Refoe, and Founder Jeanine Taylor. The Board of Directors consisted of Cheryl Deming, Juanita Roland, Wendy Wheaton, and Dr. Connie Lester, a professor of history at the University of Central Florida. Honorary Board Members included: Glenda Hood, former Florida Secretary of State and Mayor of Orlando; Valada Flewellyn, a local poet, author, and historian; and Jackie Jones, a local entertainer and arts advocate.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Trish Thompson is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 11, 2013.

Abstract

In an interview on October 11th, 2013, Trish Thompson, current vice president and former president of Creative Sanford, Inc., discusses the inspiration for, creation of, and the development and evolution of Creative Sanford. Thompson also discusses some of the financial and other challenges that Creative Sanford has faced. Creative Sanford is a community organization that collects group oral histories from Sanford residents and uses portions of these

University of Central Florida Public History Center

A RICHES Project: Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences and Stories of Central Florida

interviews to write, produce, and perform plays for the community.

Trish Thompson

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Mark Miller and Autumn Reisz

October 11, 2013

Sanford, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Reisz My name is Autumn Reisz, and I'm here with Mark Miller, and we are asking the wonderful Trish [Thompson] a few questions today about *Celery Soup*[: *Florida's Folk Life Play*] and Creative Sanford[, Inc]. Um, if you just want to take a second and introduce yourself and we'll get started on the questions.

Thompson Okay. I'm Trish Thompson and I am, um, former president of Creative Sanford for four years now, and vice president, and theater manager. Um, when we do our interviews we tell where we are and what the atmosphere is. So I'll say we're in my office and, um, the atmosphere is quiet and we only have an air-conditioner going that could possibly interrupt.

Miller Okay.

Thompson So I'm ready when you are.

Miller Alright.

Thompson Start asking!

0:00:41

Celery Soup and Creative Sanford, Inc.

Miller Well, thanks. Okay, um, what is *Celery Soup*?

Thompson Okay. *Celery Soup* is *Florida's Folk Life Play*. It's a story that is comprised – a play, excuse me – that is comprised of story gathering which we have done, which is a lost art, and we, uh, get them from the citizens of Seminole County[, Florida] and hire a playwright. They put the stories together and that becomes *Celery Soup: Florida's Folk Life Play* and we've done three performances, um, with the first one being *Touch and Go*, the second one being *Made - Not Bought*, and the third one being *Remade - Not Bought*. And, um, there – it went over so well, we're – we're just – we're real happy with it and we're already in – working with the playwright to get another one on the road for next year. So, uh, Creative Sanford is the umbrella organization. We are the producers of *Celery Soup: Florida's Folk Life Play*.

0:01:46 **Mission of Creative Sanford and Celery Soup**

Miller Oh, very nice. Um, uh, what is the mission of *Celery Soup*?

Thompson Uh, the mission of Creative Sanford – now you’ve got to know that we are the 501(c)(3) – Creative Sanford is. The, uh, actual production is *Celery Soup* – that’s the branding – is *Celery Soup*. It’s always *Celery Soup*. Every year the name of the play will change, but when they say, “What’s happening with *Celery Soup: Florida’s Folk Life Play?*” You know, then you tell ‘em whatever the new thing is that’s happening. Um, I’d have to read you our mission.

Miller Oh, alright. That’s fine. No, that was excellent.

Thompson Yeah.

0:02:28 **How Celery Soup was founded**

Miller Yeah. so, um, how did the idea for *Celery Soup* develop?

Thompson Okay, the idea for, um, *Celery Soup* was, through our, um, person – the – the people that we knew in Colquitt, Georgia. And so Jeanine Taylor, our founder, went up there, met the people, saw the show and, um, and decided to bring it to Sanford when she moved her, uh, business here. And it was to help the economy and, uh, that was the first thought was that, you know, it was going to be an economic driver, bring people to Sanford, and of course help her business and other businesses in town. And she got the mayor and other people interested and they went up, saw the show, said, “Yes. This would be great for Sanford,” and that’s how it came to be in Sanford.

Then we spent three hard years with interviewing people and getting the community to understand what we do. We hired, uh, uh, *Celery Soup* – I mean, excuse me, *Swamp Gravy* – to come to Sanford and teach us how to do the interviews. Uh, they gave us the booklet that we use and, uh – just on a side note – uh, Freddie [Roman-Toro] who is – was our intern this spring, he rewrote it and updated it and got it where, um, it would fit in more with the RICHES [Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences, and Stories of Central Florida] Mosaic Interface that we’re gonna be using with UCF [University of Central Florida]. [phone rings]

0:03:50 **How Celery Soup adapted the Swamp Gravy model**

Miller Alright. How did you change the *Swamp Gravy* model to fit the needs of Sanford?

Thompson You know, that’s really interesting, because they’re – was that your question?

Miller No. That’s not.

Thompson Alright. [laughs]

Reisz But Mark [Miller] really liked it.

Thompson Yes. Okay. Now when you're interviewing, you know, you might not want the subject to know that you [laughs] – so you're gonna learn along with me, um, the um – we been – what was the question again? I'm sorry.

Reisz Um, how did you change the *Swamp Gravy* model...

Thompson Oh, okay.

Reisz To fit Sanford's needs?

Thompson *Swamp Gravy's* model – 2,000 people – very small town, very isolated – and they had to draw from churches and, uh, they went way outside the area to bring people in and they had to bus them in to, uh, to come to the play. And everyone in the community was involved in it, because, you know, 2,000 people and you're puttin' on a production with a hundred people, you know, that's – that's almost everybody in the town, at one point or another, has been in the play.

So for us, we're in Central Florida. we compete with [Walt] Disney [World], the I[n]terstate-4 corridor. um, we wanted to reach out to The Villages. that's very difficult to reach out to The Villages, because they already have so much, um, entertainment and what have you that it's right there at their fingertips. And they don't come to Orlando very much. We found that out through the United Arts [of Central Florida], uh, president at that time, Margot Knight, that it was very tough to get The Villages, and so we've made so inroads into that and we do have one person who brings people in from there, but it's, you know – that is, – that is harder.

For us, we're more sophisticated. Um, the area there was – you could do just about anything for, you know, nothing, because there were no regulations and no, you know – the city didn't make 'em do this and that. So when we started, we had a lot of legal and financial, um, and city rules and regulations that we had to comply with. And I would suggest to anybody who is gonna to do something like this: do not cut corners on your legal and your – those kind of responsibilities in – in getting your, um, work-up with your city, so that your – you know, you're not gonna get, quote, "a free ride," but, you know, you'll have a good working relationship with the city, if you comply with what they want done. So...

0:06:29

How has Creative Sanford and Celery Soup evolved

Reisz Um, how has how has Creative Sanford and *Celery Soup* – how has it evolved from when you first started the program?

Thompson Oh my goodness. It has really evolved. When we first started we wanted to put on a show, Okay? One production a year and we were gonna – oh, someone was gonna give us a building. We've gotten a whole big song and dance of, you

know, where you were gonna put it on. Well, we couldn't find any place that would allow us to put it on. And the one theater that was in town, it was: number one, 500 seats 450 to 500 seats. And it had the fourth wall, which of course we didn't know anything about, but it – the fourth wall was an invisible wall between the audience and the cast. and so, um, the community theater, one of the things that they require is that it is community involved and, you know, so it's, um – it's theater in the three-quarter is what we have. We don't – we ended up renting a space.

So number one, we have rent now and it's not a free space. And so when we rented it, we had to sign a lease. And when we signed a lease, that changed – I mean, it was like the before and the after. The before lease and after lease. [laughs] Because then we became a theater, and the theater has to support itself. So you can't have one play in the fall and the spring maybe – two plays – and maintain a theater. You know you got your rental. You got all your utilities you've got to pay. So we had to have other shows.

So we first started with a group that wanted to have a home and they were called "The Princess Players." And so they put on five performances during the year and, you know, we produced them. And so we did make money through that and were able to pay the rent, but so now after three years, since 2010, we made another big leap in that we realize that the theater was as important as *Celery Soup*. If we don't have the theater, we're in the same boat as everybody else, with searchin' for a place to put your thing on and it's gonna cost you a tremendous amount of money to be that little person who's begging for a place to have a show. And after being in the theater, we didn't want to go back to being in a gymnasium or someplace like that.

So we co-op the theater and we have three organizations that co-op with us and they own the theater for those periods of time. So that helps pay the rent. Phew, there's something here. So that pays, you know – that gets our rent paid.

So then as time goes on, in the next year or two, we will be able to do some of the other things in our mission that we are not able to do now and, uh, the – the quantity that we would like to do and that helps other organizations that don't have money that give them a place to showcase their art. Um, we've done art openings. We've done, uh, concerts. we've done, uh, with the Humanities Council – with the *Dreamers and Schemers* and they've asked us to come back in 2014 and do it again – standing room only – uh, we do *The Holocaust* with the Holocaust and Interfaith Council. So we're making all these organizations that are becoming partners with us – that they're doin' it this year, that maybe next year, you know. and we'll find places for 'em to rent the theater to them for a minimal amount of money – cover the expenses – and they're able to put something on and we're able to provide the community with different kind[sic] of art – all different types of art.

So we're doin' *Celery Soup* now. They'll be doin', uh, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Grease*, and the co-op people are doin' these things. One of them is a school, so they do things through the summer. and then in August, I believe it is, we're goin' to do *Spam-A-Lot*. So it will be our first time to do, um – produce a Broadway show. And it's a Tony Award-winning and that's what we want to do. So we'd like to do *Spam-A-Lot* one year and whatever the next one, as soon as the rights open up. We want to do the most recent, like I believe next year *Wicked*, off-Broadway – you know, from Broadway – will be open.

So this is a goal that we want to bring quality entertainment that people can afford to go to Wash – New York [City, New York] or Washington[, D.C.] or wherever. They can see really quality work, right here in Seminole County. They don't have to go to Orlando. They don't have to go to the arena, you know, and all that kinda thing.

0:11:36 **Conducting oral history interviews**

Miller Excellent. Um, so how do you collect the stories for the plays?

Thompson Okay. Uh, we advertised. We had the Swamp Gravy Institute come down and we had a whole group of people come in and learn how to do the interviews. and then they'd ask their friends, "Can I interview you?" So it started out friends of the people who are to interview and moved out from there. We went, um, Serenity Towers, which at that time was called Bram Towers, and we did practice interviews with the older ladies and gentlemen and – and, uh, the – it was kind of a learning experience for everyone. And then we also, um, then put ads in the paper.

And when we first got started we did a thing called, uh, *Talks from the Stalks*, is what we called it – like a stalk of celery. And, uh, the newspaper¹ was nice enough that we would put in little excerpts from interviews that we'd done. And so they'd do a little blurb – we'd hopefully have a picture of the person that spoke – and then a little piece out of their story. And then it would be the quote advertisement call to tell your story. So that's how – that's how we got started, with just grass-roots, asking your friends, and moving out into the community.

0:13:01 **Gaining acceptance from the African-American community**

Thompson And the most difficult part was being accepted by the black community, because there was a lot of, um, [sighs] negativity in both directions, in that, um, the black community was told that we were exploiting them by some people, who, for some reason didn't understand what we were doin'. There's a fly in here. Um, and then there was some on the other side that didn't know how to relate to the black community. So it was a give-and-take and over the last six years.

¹ *The Sanford Herald*.

This year we were invited to Hopper Academy. Um, this was the first year we had been so lucky to have two reunions” The Hopper [Academy] and then the Crooms Academy [of Information Technology] we’re going to do in December. So that’s the, that’s a real plus for us to be able to have made the inroads into the black community – that they trust us.

And, uh, if you know anything about Sanford, we’ve just gone through an awful trial² that brought up a lot of really bad memories from a lot of people – black and white. And, uh, it’s just, uh – it’s just a miracle that we’re such a good community that we overcame the outside pressures and didn’t succumb to anything that they wanted to [*laughs*] – they wanted us to have a riot or something. I don’t know what the media wanted, but, uh, they didn’t get it, because we’re not that kind of a town. We’re a good town. We’re – we’re working together.

And I think we have helped over the last six years to help the community realize that, you know, all that outside stuff that made ‘em appreciate that we really are a closely knit community, much closer than was realized and yet there’s still a lot of – a lot of energy and a lot of negativity that – that is like post-traumatic stress disorder. You know, it’s – you think of the worst thing that ever happened you think – you in your life. It flashes [*snaps*] to you immediately. You know exactly was the worst thing in your mind that ever happened to you. And that may be, this – this – this trial just triggered. That throwback to that worst feeling of inadequacy and – and negativity that they ever had. So, you know, we – we have to appreciate that and realize it.

And I’ve talked to people who have said, “Oh, why don’t they just get over it?” And I say, “What’s the worst thing that ever happened to you?” “Oh, that I lost my child,” or, you know – I mean that’s horrific. And I say, “Well, get over it.” Whoa, did they get mad at me? But, I say, you know, you’ve got to understand – and it was somebody that wanted to interview, but they didn’t have the empathy or the sympathy or the – the feelings that were needed to be an interviewer in this organization. So, when you’re doin’ this, I’d say to anybody: be sure that the people who are interviewers have an open mind and/or can keep their feelings under – you know, under the radar – under the cover.

0:16:26

Themes of oral history interviews

Miller Well, that brings up a question of when you’re asking the stories, what sort of themes – you ask for themes? Or how do you go about...

Thompson Well, we’re...

Miller Pitching the story.

² *State of Florida v. George Zimmerman*.

Thompson We started with a theme that was, uh, perseverance. And this was in 2010, and so our first story was about, uh, how Sanford and the community had overcome all sorts of natural, um, disasters. We had floods, and we had, uh, fires, and we had – the weather froze – and, I mean, uh, the weather was very cold and the fruit and vegetables and the trees froze. You know, so it changed the whole economy of things. The, uh, Navy left Sanford. Big, big, big, big problem. and Sanford’s overcome and actually gotten better from all the different changes that have happened. So that was what – it was perseverance, and we used as a sub thing, openin’ a can of worms [*laughs*]. So we – we just – “So what is,” you know, “What were you mad about? What did you not like? What did – what did ya get over on somebody?” You know, we had all kinds of questions that we tried to pull out of people that were deeper than just – “Who are you? Where did – where did you go to school and what do you do? “

0:17:45 **How to adapt oral histories into plays**

Miller Well, you did something like, uh, what you’re, um, talking about, perseverance and...

Thompson Mmhmm.

Miller You know, can of worms. How do you integrate that into the play?

Thompson Well, that is what you have your playwright for. Now we’re, uh, setting up now and working with UCF with this, um – we have, um – May, um – what do ya call ‘em? With, uh, the keyword – keywords. So it might be perseverance. It might be love. It might be hate. it might be alligators or animals, or, you know – so, you’ll have keywords and the, um – um, the – the writers can key in that word, and then up comes the transcription from the play of that – of that – that might fit that story – may might fit that thing.

So, uh, next year’s going to be a comedy. and so we’re, you know – we’re gonna have a theme that’s going to be outta – we don’t know yet – outta, uh – that hadn’t been decided. Uh, that’s how you do it is you decide on your theme and you go to your playwright and say, “I want you to write about this theme and here are your keywords and you can go to all these different” – so maybe when we do an interview – the interview usually lasts an hour and a half, um – in that hour and a half, you might get 10 good stories or 10 stories, you know. It depends on how fast they talk or, you know, what – what you could pull out of ‘em. Some of ‘em in an hour you won’t get one that’s worth anything. But, uh, it might be able to use in backgrounds somewhere. And some of ‘em you could use every single story in, you know – that they tell. They’re all just – oh my gosh. This is great.

And we have several of those families that have done that and one is Uncle Dieter and one is Mr. [Elmer] Baggs. Both of them have just fabulous stories that they tell and we’ve used them in all of our productions. We’ve used stories from

them and we go back, like you said – we go back to them to, you know, harvest more stories from them and ask different questions and – you know. Some of ‘em are just so funny. You know, that you, you forget that you’ve to get in to some of these power depth things too.

0:20:07

Working with professional playwrights and directors

Reisz Have you encountered any challenges working with a playwright that may or may not be from the Sanford area? is there any challenge to that?

Thompson We – yes. We have had that challenge. Um, the one that the professional group that we used, they came and taught us a lot, and they were not from our area. So they had to do a lot of historical research at the libraries and, um, the historic society, so they got a lot of input there. Though it was very good for them, but also they would say things that we would say, uh, “Stop. We can’t use that. We – this – it’s not correct.” It’s, you know – or it’s too – it’s still too politically, um, explosive. That – that we don’t want to bring that to our town at this point. Later we’ll – we’ll delve into that, but right now we can’t do that.

And, uh, and one of ‘em is about – and it – it – it’s about, uh, ah, the [Mayfair] Country Club. And the – the playwright wanted to put that in there and I said, “We cannot put this in there. They are going to court. This is a lawsuit. It has not been [laughs] – you know, we can’t put something that’s an ongoing thing that maybe somebody would be a juror on that trial that saw our view of this. No, no, no, no, no. we can’t do that.” So it’s a perfect – it’s a perfect example of – of havin’ to help, you know, keep things in the right frame that we want to.

Reisz Have you, um, always used, uh, a playwright to produce your plays and a professional director and have you guys done any of that on your own?

Thompson We’re in the process now of doing that and we hired – we’ve hired, um, people who have professional – have had professional experience, but are for – we only use the professionals the first time, ‘cause that was like \$125,000 and so we had to raise money for a long time to – to get that together. And that was the year that we signed the contract with the theater. So, you know, all of this and financial part of it all mixes together.

And you realize, once you start this, you are a theater. You know, you’re not just – unless you’re going to keep it on a low key, not very large, but if you want to go big, you’re going to have to be a theater. And we want to go big. We’ve – want to go to the [John F.] Kennedy Center [for Performing Arts] in – in, Washington. We’re already set to be at the Dr. Phillips Performing Arts Center. We’re working with Central Florida, uh, uh, Community Arts and they’re gonna do a Christmas that’s gonna be the same show, or similar to the same show, that they put on at Christmas at Disney. So it’s the candlelight, uh, service that you pay 80-90 dollars for and you’ll pay 10-20-15, you know, for this show here.

Because we want community to be able to see what we're doing. And, and, uh, that is – that's part of our mission, to bring the community together.

0:23:41

Using volunteers and employees from the community

Reisz Um, so the professional – that's the direction that you guys are going to go in going forward is using, uh, not necessarily, um, director per se, but definitely a professional playwright and things like that? you going to keep that?

Thompson Well, no. we've brought the community on the playwright too. As a matter of fact, um, even I helped write [*laughs*] a little bit of the play that we're doing right now. So I can't call myself – I call myself an editor, not a playwright.

Miller Well, that was one of the questions, that, um, regarding – do you have any employees?

Thompson No. we're – not yet.

Miller You were talking about having some professionals...

Thompson Uh uh.

Miller So, um, you hire people as you need them? Or...

Thompson The way they – yes. and the way that works, um, is that they would get a stipend. Um, you would be for, um, a director, you might pay 750-1000 dollars, something like that. It's not big money. And they have to work for six or eight weeks before the show to get it ready. I mean, that's a lot of work for, you know, that kind of money.

Uh, but a lot of community theater only pays the music director. Everybody else is volunteer. And we have thousands and thousands hours of volunteer hours, because we have no paid staff. We do have some[sic] paid artist, but not any paid staff. And nobody and – none of the actors are paid.

Miller So you draw your expertise from the community also?

Thompson Right. and that is a lucky thing that we have. That we have so much theater and, um, entertainment in Central Florida, and people who want to do theater. And they're tied into day to day jobs that, um, you know, stifle their creative – and, and they do it for free. They do it for the love of theater.

Which I didn't understand. I'm a businessperson. I came out of, you know, owning my own business for many, many years and my husbands a, uh, CPA [Certified Public Account] and ran an insurance company. And, oh my gosh. You know, everything is the bottom line kiddo [*laughs*]. So that's kinda where I fit in. And t's a little difficult for me to learn and having to learn. And most of the other

people on the [Executive] Board are businesspeople. And they – it's – it's – it's somethin' to learn how to do this.

0:24:45 **Role of the Executive Board**

Miller Well, what – you brought up the board. What role does that – the board play?

Thompson Uh, the board makes the decisions on where the money goes, and – and where the fundraisers and, um – we do all the – all the grunt work that has to be done. We do the marketing. We do the, uh, advertising. We do the, uh, um – um, the Celery Ball, which is our main fundraiser.

We reach out to all community to – to get the word out and speak to groups and make connections wherever we can with the politicians, in, uh, um – you know, just have to reach out to every single facet. And it's – it's – it's a miracle. It's wonderful. It is wonderful. And I love working this class that's a very diverse class, with older, younger, men, women. It's great. You know, I going to learn so much from you all [nods].

0:26:43 **Success in achieving goals**

Reisz How, um, how is – how is Creative Sanford and *Celery Soup*, how have – how have you been successful in achieving your goals?

Thompson Well, we've put on three shows. Yes. We've brought in community who have done playwright – playwriting – who have done music, who have done directing, that are from the community, that were paid a small stip – small stipend. And, um, you know, this is – this is the goal. is to bring the community together. We've brought people together who would have never have met.

Um, one lady who's a very prominent, uh, poet, and she was in our show and she helped write a little bit of it. And, um, she was afraid of one the – of one of the people in the show. It was a young black guy and she was an older black lady, but she wasn't raised in any of the – so she had a whole generational plus economic – there wasn't a reason to be afraid of this young person. But she was – she was fearful. And so she really learned. And the – and the young person learned too. How to be more respectful and so that's – that's a goal is – you know, I think people call it bullying and all of that, but it's really – it's learning how to love each other and work with each other, and um, and blend into to, uh, international, you know, family.

Reisz You mentioned earlier that there was a couple of things that, um, you hadn't achieved. You know, you want to do more outreach with other community groups and things like that?

Thompson Right.

Reisz Is there anything else you – that Creative Sanford would like to do, but you haven't been able to do yet?

Thompson Oh, yes. We'd like to, um – we'd like to have a performing arts center. and we have talked to, uh, Congressman [John L.] Mica about that. um, preliminary, stages, of maybe having an arts council – not an arts council. We have the Seminole Cultural Arts Council, but um, to work with them with Creative Sanford to have our theater in a building, to have uh, um, uh, galleries in the theater, and have gift shops, and have, uh, study areas, and training areas, and studios. I mean, we've got a big group of ideas and that would – that would involve all the arts. And that's one of the things that, um, is real – real difficult to get off the ground on no money. So that's where you're going to look for federal grants and that's where you need your politicians to help you. And Seminole Cultural Arts Council and ourselves are working together to, uh, work with Congressman Mica and – and see if we can get one in Seminole County. You know, there's a lot people, there's a lot of money in Seminole County. It's all going south. So we want to bring some of it back to Seminole County and let them realize that, not only are we a bedroom place, but also a great place to – to just enjoy life and make your whole – whole area more livable.

0:30:09

Importance of community involvement in plays

Reisz Um, why is it important – in particular in Sanford, of course – but why is it important that these plays are produced by the community for the community?

Thompson Well, that goes right back to, um, people learning each other, meeting each other, uh, getting together, and becoming friends and, um, meshing as a team. And they go out when – when we have done this, um, the group says, "Hey, I know a place that we need to go." So emails go back and then we just get together, we go out, maybe put on a performance or – not a whole show – but do vignettes, maybe do a little bit of Uncle Dieter maybe do a little bit of, um, Elmer Bags. Just, you know, somethin' funny or, er, poignant, or somethin' like that.

We've done one called *Generations*, where the woman tells the story of how her family came from Africa and, you know, where they landed, and you know, how her history came about, and now she's the last one in her line. And she says – at the end, she says, "Who will remember me? Will you?" And it just – oh, it just gives me cold chills right now. It's just – it just tells people – opens their eyes and minds and hearts to, you know, what's going on in the rest of world and how other people are feeling and, um, we always want to do more of that.

Reisz Uh, you had mentioned earlier that – that the – that Creative Sanford and *Celery Soup* in particular had been really well received by the community?

Thompson Yes.

Reisz Um, how have you integrated community feedback into your projects and the things that you're doing, besides just the interviews?

Thompson Well that is – that is one of the big things that we do. When we have the play and getting it ready, okay? We have a day, that we have – invite all the community to come to the theater and we do a run through of the play. And if they have feedback, “Oh that – that story wasn’t there. That story is over on Eleventh Street.” “Oh, this is wrong,” or “I don’t like this,” or, oh – they don’t laugh or, you know, they think something’s offensive. And we take that all into consideration. We’re very much attuned to what – it’s like what we tell the playwrights, sometimes we say, “Hey. Something we already know politically you can’t do that. They’re already in a – they’re already in a lawsuit.” But it is the same thing with other peoples’ feelings. And, um, we had one lady who got up and said she loved this part and the other lady got up and said that, “This isn’t the way it was where I was.” And it was complete opposite, so it was like, “Okay. Well, we’ll tell this story here and let’s interview you and get your story for the next time.”

So it’s – you know, we’re going to tell our stories as much as we can, but we want to – we want to be fair to everybody, but that is what we do. That’s part of the community – that we learned from the professionals. It’s that you have – when you start your cast, you – you have a day that you talk about, um, being compassionate and – and working with your other cast members and all of that sort of thing. And, um, that kind the way it starts and then, you know, we get this real tight group going and people know you now.

For me, see, I am known as the “ticket lady,” because I was always down there working the tickets and, you know, all this. They didn’t know I was president. they didn’t care who I was. I was the ticket lady. That’s the one they saw every night. But now they’re seeing me in a completely different role, because I’m in the play. And I have just a small – I have three small parts, but, you know, one of ‘em is absolutely just as silly as all get out and so they’re seeing, “Oh, the ticket lady does something besides” [*laughs*], you know, “sell the tickets. She might have some other good things that she can do.” So they’re seeing me in a different light and I think we see everybody in a different light. That – that whatever they perceive themselves to be, we’re seeing them in a different, more human light.

Miller Well you’ve been with the project from the beginning, um...

Thompson Just about.

0:34:48 **Biggest surprises and challenges**

Miller Well, what – what are your biggest surprises about this?

Thompson Oh, all of it. All of it. I had no idea how much work it was gonna be, how much fun it was gonna be, how enlightening it was gonna be. It’s just been – it’s just – it’s been like [*sighs*] renewed youth of somethin’. You know, you’ve thought, *Oh, well, my identity is a restaurant owner. This – I’m the Rib Ranch*, you know. Well then you retire and I got all involved in this and – and, uh, now I feel like, “Well,

hey. This, this is rejuvenated me.” and, you know, put your brain in gear again and you have all these new goals, because I’d already completed all my goals. I was the best restaurant that sold barbeque in Seminole County and, you know, where do you go from there? So this was a new goal and set new things. So age never matters. Grandma Moses became famous in her 80s, so maybe I’ll become famous in my 70s [laughs].

Miller Ah, what are some of the challenges in creating and maintaining a project like *Celery Soup*?

Thompson Financial. There you go. That’s the bottom line. That’s the big problem, is getting’ the money. Yup.

0:36:01 Fundraising and the Celery Ball

Miller Well, um, you mentioned fundraisers.

Thompson Mmhmm.

Miller And you have a Celery Ball.

Thompson Right.

Miller Do you want to describe that a little bit and some of the other fundraisers?

Thompson Okay. What we’ve done – and, of course, this has evolved too. When we first started we had the Celery Ball, we had a king and queen. And the king and queen raised money – the king and queen candidates raised money – and, um, the first year we raised over \$30,000. The second year about \$30,000. The third year about \$25,000. And the fourth year \$10,000. Okay. economy. There you go. The economy’s going down, people didn’t have money to do all this, so that next year it was – we had a lot of silent auctions. We did not have, and we’re not having this year, a king and queen.

So we feel like – okay. We’ve kind of burned that out. it’s got a life of about four years and then you’ve got to go to something else. So we’ve moved the play – we’ve moved it to a different location. It’s gonna be a *The Great Gatsby* themed, so it’s gonna to be ‘20s-‘30s. Gonna be a lotta fun and, uh, um – and we have silent auction and trips and things like that, that we’re gonna be putting out to – to raise money instead of having – it was real easy when you had kings and queens and they’re all out having fundraisers and, you know, they’re doing all the work and you’re raking in the money. But it doesn’t work that way. It doesn’t work that way for the whole thing.

Miller Alright, um....

Reisz [inaudible]

0:37:36

Production costs and ticket sales

Miller Yeah, uh, what are, um, some of your production costs? And in that the price of your tickets and stuff?

Thompson Mmhmm. okay. We price our tickets at \$15—well 20 and 18 at first—and then we moved it down to 15 and 12. And, ah—again, it's to meet the mission of bringing things and the quality—best quality we can—to the community. And these are bad times. I don't know how you guys are seeing it, but, you know, everybody is working one or two, you know—working extra jobs. Still not, you know, cuttin' it with the way things are going with businesses, where they're cutting people's hours back. "Oh, we're only going to give you 26 and we're never gonna give you more than 32, so you can't be a full-time employee, so we won't have to pay you benefits." Da, da, da, da, da.

So we look at all of that and, uh, we decided on our price, and because we're not usin' the professionals. We're back—we give just the small stipend—we do a production, is about 10,000, mokay? Is what it costs us to put on a production. and a lot of it is borrowing from different places in the community. Oh, and now that we're a co-op we can say, "Oh, do you have some lights we can borrow?" Whereas we may have had to spend 10,000 on lights the first year, which we did. We had to rent 'em. That, you know, now we can get lights and—as a matter of fact, we just had two people who gave us lights just in the last week. So, you know, we're getting the lights—we don't still have as much lighting as we need, and that's one of the things that we'll get a grant to help us get lighting and sound equipment and, you know, these kinds of things that we need. But, um, yeah. that's it. Financial.

0:39:33

Preserving the legacy of Creative Sanford and Celery Soup

Reisz Um, much of what *Celery Soup* has been doing is preserving the history of and the stories of Sanford.

Thompson Right.

Reisz How are you preserving the legacy of *Celery Soup* and Creative Sanford itself?

Thompson Well, we have two ways. Uh, Alicia [Clarke] at the, um, Sanford Museum has asked us for copies of everything. So they're going to archive the beginnings and all of our—as time goes by, they'll do it. And so I'm keeping double records of, you know, two pieces of paper and so we'll keep one and give one to her. And of course, we're expecting that a lot of our archiving is going to go up on RICHES, so we'll have that as part of our archival process.

And we, um—you have to have a disaster program, you know, and so we have disaster programs and we have things backed up with—on the flash drives—or we have them backed up on secondary computers. We have, um, fireproof safes that we keep things in. and we keep things off, um—out of the office. I don't—I

can't think of what the word is. but somewhere else that, um, we keep things – the financial things and the historic things – um, backed up. So that's how we have to do it. And – and the things like this, I'm really happy that if anything happened to this little dress, um – this was the dress that was worn by the little two and a half year old little girl, who was in our very first production – Kalayla. and, um, so definitely want pictures of that. And that's – that's an archival thing. If this rotted, we wouldn't have it. So...

0:41:26 **Maintaining community engagement**

Miller Okay. um, how do you keep the community engaged in *Celery Soup*, uh, especially long-term?

Thompson That's a problem. You have to keep moving and especially when we have to look two ways: the economy and wearing yourself out, you know, with asking people over and over again for help. And, uh – so the engagement – we just try to broaden and not to go back to the same wells every time. That if there's 54,000 people in this town, and if 2,000 people are helping us, we need to get to the next 2,000 and the next 2,000, and the next 2,000. And we've reached, um, – as a matter of fact, just last week we were given a check for \$250 from an organization that had never helped us before. So here we are. We're getting into that outer ring and so we'll just, slowly but surely, we're just gonna reach out all through the whole area and get some of these people.

Mercedes[-Benz] helped us and then they kind of backed – backed away with what they were doing and so we're going to different places to make this thing work. And we're on David Maus' [Toyota's] jumbo-tron out there, which we've never been on there before and so, you know, that's a first for us. So we just keep moving out and we've never had any kind of TV advertising or never had any TV that supported us, and so this year, uh – this 2014, we're really gonna put a push on getting sponsors of, um, in kind or whatever we can get from the, uh, major stations. We've had radio. We've had, um, um, public and NCR³ and public broadcasting, but we want to get more into the mainstream too.

0:43:40 **Advice for communities creating similar projects**

Reisz Um, I know that we are getting tight on time, so we have one last question that we'd like to ask you, before we release you.

Thompson Okay. Mokay.

Reisz Uh, but what advice would you give another community thinking about beginning a similar project?

Thompson The advice that I would give them is to contact everybody that has ever done one that you can find and ask them the questions that you're asking. How do you do

³ Correction: National Public Radio (NPR).

it? How much did it cost? We had a group that came in and asked us those questions and we answered them and, uh, and it was very interesting. We had – they came down and visited us and it was a very interesting time.

But, um, whatever the people tell you it's going to cost, figure it's going to cost at least 50 percent or a third to 50 percent more, okay? It's much more expensive than you think it's gonna be. Uh, some people think, "Oh, well everything be given to us." and that's what we were told" Oh, people would just reach out to you and they're gonna give you this and they're gonna give – let me tell ya. in a big market like this, they don't do that. Maybe in very small towns, yes. You can get that kind of immediate help, but in a big, big area like we're in it's not the same process. And that's where we differ with *Swamp Gravy* too, in that, you know, we have a very different financial field back and forth there.

So, yeah. It's, um – it is – it's mainly financial, legal. Be sure if you write contracts, if you go with professionals that, you know, you get a good tight that you're protected and safe. And we went to an entertainment attorney and had her look over the contract and make changes and things to protect us a little bit better. So those are the things that you've got to have.

0:45:29

Closing remarks

Reisz Well thank you very, very much. We greatly appreciate it. Um, we really appreciate it. And then we'll probably come up with some other questions. If you think we missed anything, let us know. We'd be happy to ask about it.

Thompson [laughs] Okay.

Miller And we...

End of Interview