

WP: Hi everyone! Welcome to episode 2 of *Between the Lions*, the six-episode podcast series that features museum officers and shop staff members from the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. I'm Whitney, and I'm very happy to welcome Toni to the show. Thank you so much for joining me today.

TK: It's a pleasure.

WP: I'd like to start by asking, how long have you been working at the BCMA?

TK: I have been working since the summer of 2020, which was COVID summer, so I started during the height of the COVID epidemic.

WP: And what is your position here at the museum?

TK: I am a casual staff [member] working in the museum shop, greeting people who come into the museum, giving out information, and also helping to run the gift shop.

WP: What drew you to working at Bowdoin and the BCMA specifically?

TK: I had a very close friend who was working as part of the museum casual staff. And when I retired from the State of Maine Department of Transportation, I was Chief Counsel there for a number of years, but I retired in 2020, and I wanted something to do to give some structure to my days. And she suggested that I interview for a casual position, because someone had just left, and they were looking for someone. And I did interview and got the job.

WP: Could you describe your career pathway?

TK: I was an English professor at the University of Florida for five or six years, and I decided to go to law school, and I did. I went to law school, and I got a job with a large

corporate firm in Tampa, Florida, which is where I lived, and I worked there and made partner. And we, my family, for a variety of reasons, decided to move to Maine. And so when we came up, we moved to Brunswick, Maine, and I first had an in-house job as a real estate lawyer with a developer. And then there was an opening at the Department of Transportation, and I became their real estate lawyer and ultimately their Chief Counsel, and worked there for about 23 years.

WP: What did you study in school and how did that shape your career pathway?

TK: I was an English major and an English education minor. And after I got my degree, I went to graduate school and ultimately got a doctorate from Florida State University with a specialty in Victorian literature and 18th-century literature. And then I taught both of those at first at the University of West Florida but ultimately at the University of Florida before changing careers. So I think, too, the fact that I was an English major, and I also taught writing, it seemed to me, when I wanted to change careers, that going into law would use those skills that I had developed as part of my English major education. And happily, I did well on the LSAT, and went to law school, and ultimately practiced law.

WP: What role would you say that art has played in your life? I'm curious about what drew you to work at an art museum now.

TK: Well, you know, it's funny, when I was an undergrad at the University of South Florida in Tampa, I was on the College Bowl team from the university. There used to be a show called *The GE College Bowl* where students from various universities would compete against each other and answer questions, and I was on the team. And there was an art question every show, and our team was just determined to get the art question right. And so we got tutored by people in the art department and art history, and I really developed an appreciation for art. And I, to this day, can go into a museum and tell you who painted what, even if I'm not familiar with the painting, because I know certain attributes that we learned in order to recognize paintings that they might throw at us. So

from there, I've always been very interested in art, and I love going to museums. So it just was a wonderful gift that I had this offer of a part-time job in retirement that would have me in an art museum, or at least on the fringes of it, in the gift shop.

WP: That's a really cool story. Thank you for sharing that. What is the most challenging part of your job?

TK: I would say the most challenging part of it is doing some of the things I do behind the scenes, which is accept things into inventory, orders that we put in for things that we sell in the shop, and I'm the one responsible for accepting them into inventory and putting price tags on them and all that. And that's a big responsibility. But all the other parts of the job, greeting people, telling them about the museum, actually selling things in the store, I really enjoy and no pressure.

WP: My next question is what is the most rewarding part of your job?

TK: You know, I think it's getting to meet students and also visitors to the museum from a number of countries, a number of different states in our country. The students that I've met are just delightful, and I've thoroughly enjoyed interacting with them and seeing them come in for their classes and things like that. I couldn't be more impressed by the Bowdoin student body. I mean, I think the students are remarkable people, and it's been a pleasure to kind of work in their midst in the museum. So they would be my chief plus, I think, for the job.

WP: Well, I would say it's been such an amazing opportunity to work at the museum this summer and meeting you has definitely been a highlight for me.

TK: Well, same here, actually.

WP: Oh, thank you! I wanted to ask, what was your first impression of the museum, especially since you mentioned that you started working at the height of COVID?

TK: Yeah, it was a very strange time. My job at first was to sit outside of the museum, or right at the door in the winter months, and ask to see people's vaccination cards and also to require them to wear a mask. And most people were quite willing to do so. You know, occasionally people would walk off in a huff 'cause they didn't want to wear a mask, but they were not welcome in the museum anyway. But yes, it was very strange, a strange time, and we were all masked. Guests kept coming into the museum, and so all of that was pretty normal. And my first impression of the museum itself aside from those weird circumstances, I had never understood how diverse the collection is, and I really appreciated the various exhibits that would come and go, artists that I'd heard of, artists that I hadn't. And it's just been a very enriching experience. And I think the physical plant of the museum, I love the wood, the warmth of just the facility. And we have such experts in terms of how to curate and present the art. I mean, it's just been a real pleasure.

WP: How have you seen the museum change over the course of your time here, if at all?

TK: I think it's changed in that personnel have come and gone. The manager, long-time manager of the shop, who hired me, retired, and we had a new manager come in. You know, the chief preparator just retired, so it's been a constant evolution of the staff and different people to work with. But I think the quality of the museum and the creativity of the exhibits, all that has been pretty constant, even though personnel has changed.

WP: Do you have a favorite exhibit that's been on view at the BCMA or a favorite piece in the museum's collection?

TK: Well, I like the Assyrian reliefs a lot. I just think they're so cool, although I'm uneasy about them, in that, you know, all the question[s] about imperialism, and artifacts from

other countries being sort of ripped away with the notion that they'd be safer elsewhere. Although sometimes that is the case, but all that aside, all that worry aside, I really think the Assyrian reliefs are fabulous. And I sometimes go up and just look at them and stuff. I really liked *At First Light*, which was, I think, the first major summer exhibit while I was here. Well, the second, I'm sorry, the second major summer exhibit while I was here, focusing on the houses of Maine artists, and then with a lot of wonderful paintings that I got to see in-person. So I think that was my favorite.

WP: I also love the Assyrian reliefs. I feel like I'm always in awe a little bit when I go up. But, I mean, you bring up a good point of this issue of provenance, provenance?

TK: Yeah, yeah.

WP: I know I learned about that in my Critical Museum Studies course that I took this past spring, and it's definitely a big issue that museums all over the country and all over the world are really focusing in on.

TK: Right. My younger daughter was a classics major and then a major in ancient history at Brown and then at Michigan, and she feels very strongly about what's happened to artifacts in Greece and the Elgin Marbles and then on from there, so she's made me more hyperaware of the issue. And it's such a paradox, because on the one hand, you want people to have their own artifacts, and on the other, we couldn't get to enjoy these wonderful artifacts if they weren't brought to us in museums. And I'm not going to travel to Athens probably in my life, but I would get to see a lot of the wonderful products of Greek culture when I go to the Met, or when I go to other museums. So it's a quandary, but I certainly, you know, the issue is there.

WP: Yeah, definitely, it's very complex. And there's not a clear right answer at all, so we'll see, I guess, in the next years, and decades even, what direction museums will go in.

TK: It will be interesting to see how they evolve, that's right.

WP: Absolutely. My next question is do you have a favorite piece of shop merchandise?

TK: I really like the garlands that we order from France, and I have them hanging in my house. And I guess [those] would be my favorite. And, you know, they come, they're bright, they're cheerful, they flutter in the wind. They're just very cool, I think. So that would be my favorite.

WP: Is there an interaction you've had with a visitor that is particularly memorable?

TK: You know, I've talked to so many interesting people, and what I've found is that some people, especially single people, both men and women, come to the museum but really want to talk, you know? And so I've had very interesting conversations, a lot of times with just single people traveling solo. And I think who might be lonely or need someone to talk to, but they talk to us, the museum staff. And I've had people tell me all about their life history and really interesting things that they've done. So I would say the people that really want to share with us, for whatever reason, are a highlight.

WP: Well, it's great that you can be a friendly ear to people. I feel like that kind of interpersonal interaction is something that we miss, for sure, because we're in the conference room in the museum offices and really don't get that face time with visitors. So it sounds like it's a unique part of your position and definitely a difference between...

TK: Yeah, absolutely, and one that stood out was a man who owns the oldest ice cream company in Pennsylvania, and I can't remember the name of it right now, although apparently it's a very famous ice cream [company] in the mid-Atlantic states. And he

told me all about inheriting this company, and showed me his products, and we had a very interesting conversation. And he was wearing a pin with his company name, which I can't remember right now, but he sort of stood out. That was pretty cool.

WP: The pin sounds like good advertising as well, to be walking around with that.

TK: Absolutely, and I'm probably not the only person he told the story to.

WP: Oh, sure. Is there anything you would love to see or see more of at the BCMA?

TK: Well, we have such a—or Bowdoin, not we—has such a large collection, I think there's 30,000 items or something, and I think it would be fun to have more of the things that have been stored away brought out, especially like the *Miss Rumphius* art. I think it would be so cool to have them bring that out and have it exhibited again. And the Kate Furbish, some of that art that we own, it would be very cool to see them bring that out, and I don't think they've been out in a while. And then, of course, they own Hoppers, they own Winslow Homers, so, yeah, I mean, I'm looking forward to seeing more of what's been warehoused in the collection.

WP: I remember seeing the *Miss Rumphius* note cards in the shop for the first time, and I kind of fell in love with them. I just think they're beautiful.

TK: Yeah, I agree, I had never heard of her [Barbara Cooney] before I started working in the shop.

WP: Yeah, me neither, me neither. But yeah, it would be amazing to see those out of storage.

TK: Yeah, and people ask. They call and ask if they're on display, and I have to say, no, but we have note cards.

WP: Maybe, maybe someday in the future, we can get those out.

TK: Maybe, yeah.

WP: Great. Well, my final question for you is how do you like spending your free time?

TK: I like to read. I like to watch movies. I like to be with my family. I enjoy traveling to New York to see my older daughter, and seeing plays, and visiting the museums there. And every year we go to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario. So I love watching theater and so those are some of the things I like to do.

WP: Well, thank you again, Toni, for taking the time to speak with me on the show, and thank you all for listening! Feel free to tune into the other episodes of *Between the Lions*, out now.