

Ukulele Music

Keith: Welcome to the LeeCoSchools Edcast #23 with Sarah West, who is the owner of the Sarah West Gallery of Fine Art in Smiths Station. I chatted with Ms. West because she has been doing the important work of bring art education to our elementary students in the Smiths Station area. She is passionate about sparking the flame of creativity in our students and hopes to eventually be able to offer classes across the county, but you have to start somewhere and we're lucky she chose our Smiths Station as her launch pad. We also discuss her work as the official artist for the City of Smiths Station, her affiliation with the Biltmore Estate, and many other topics. You'll find we kind of jump around a little more than normal in this episode which is totally my fault. I blame the cold medicine I took to keep my cough in check for the recording for making me a little loopy. At any rate, after listening to this, if you have any questions, comments, complaints, criticisms, compliments, colloquialisms, conundrums, or concerns, you can find us on the web at www.lee.k12.al.us/EdCast, on Twitter and Instagram @LeeCoSchools, on Facebook at facebook.com/leecoschools, we have our own little icon on the Lee County App which you can find in Google Play or the Apple App Store. Finally, you can email us at edcast@lee.k12.al.us Without further ado....Allons-y!

Funky Transition Music

Keith: just to get started I guess just tell us a little bit about your professional journey are you from the Smiths Station area or

Sarah West: pretty much my family moved to the area when I was around five okay and so from early childhood on Smith station or the Smiths Station area has been home and so yeah it's it's important and it means a great deal to me it's meaningful that I'm I've been able to establish a career here but more importantly find a purpose filled path here

Keith: so tell us what about your professional journey how did you get to open this gorgeous gallery that we're sitting in right now and how did you get to working get the point where you're working with our elementary students

Sarah West: yeah and it's it's been a journey we are currently celebrating our 10th year here in Smith station in 2008 we opened as a exhibiting gallery as well as my own residential studio and quickly we discovered that within our community there was a great need for cultural arts interactions and involvements and

Keith: as someone who grew up in Smiths Station, I agree

Sarah West: yeah there really wasn't anything here of that nature and I can't say that that is what attracted me to the area it was simply home and there was a vacant building here in town and it seemed ideal to establish a studio here that was truly my primary focus when I opened there wasn't necessarily an intention to teach however within just a few months of opening we discovered that with in our community especially there were many individuals who expressed an appreciation for art but did not necessarily recognize their own capability for it and it was because of that that we began developing programs those programs did grow and we quickly evolved into a cultural arts center more so than just a gallery although we've written we've maintained that name over recent years I think that we've come to the realization that we we have become a destination for people who drive from miles around to participate in our classes and programs and as an extension of that we are continually wanting to grow

deeper roots within our community those roots seem to have taken hold and through participation with with area schools certainly we're able to reach out to more and and give back

Keith: at first I was thinking that you went out to the schools and do you do any of that or do the kids come here?

Sarah West: initially if we began our program which is which is now titled our studio programs which we teach here within our studio however we do we do reach out to our local schools at their request we take our program into the local schools and through that program we have tailored it to meet the specific needs of an end-of-day class at the schools so once per week participating area schools have us bring our program to them and we teach students who are enrolled they don't necessarily have to be a part of the extended a program that is offered there but they are enrolled through us and we teach at their school location

Keith: so let's talk a little bit more about the art studio are there particular like alright this semester we're going to focus on pencil drawing do the kids get to choose...how does that work

Sarah West: there is a structure there's very much an academic structure although we are continued fine art education we recognize that there there are important principles that should be established early on with an individual in order to provide them with ways to make advancement accessible to them and so we do require that every student new students who enroll they study fundamental drawing first and from fundamental drawing then they can advance into various other realms of formal Fine Arts study they're pretty much every fine art medium that we provide to our students are things that that they can continue to study on a lifelong level we start them with graphite drawing but they can then advance into charcoal drawing pastels watercolors acrylics and even oils

Keith: I used to teach world history at the college level I would spend a couple of days on the Renaissance just because they gave me an excuse to just look at beautiful art you know the advancement of the techniques from you know the gothic art where everybody's right up here at the front to the Renaissance where you learned the depth perception and you know these things draw your eye to the center and stuff so imagine that there's like some mathematical and geometry involved in there and stuff so what kind of things do these classes learning how to create art enriches their other academic....

Sarah West: I think the benefits to studying the arts are pretty broad really um it does influence every part of our lives I believe that through art we learn to see beyond ourselves and through the experience of studying in studio you've learned many artists over the years I don't know who said it first but you learn to see things differently and the we we've seen many people grow beyond their own preconceived capabilities we've seen them cultivate further skill we've found that it it certainly increases their confidence and the awareness of the world around them so in that regard it connects many different avenues that not necessarily would be typically associated with art as you mentioned the mathematical there's so much science within the study in the development of art and not everyone sees it that way initially I don't think that that there would be there probably wouldn't be as many people attracted to art if they realized initially that there was so much science in it but once you sink your teeth into it I think that that that that in its own way feeds one spirit and it certainly does expand one's intellect and one's capabilities we have received great responses from our local schools faculty the teachers and counselors who have recognized the impact and the influence that a child's participation in an art class

has had on their entire classroom and in that way I don't think that there is any greater praise or reward that we could hope to receive than knowing that it has had a positive impression upon someone's life and hopefully it's helped them raise the bar

Keith: yeah now that's not to say that art isn't you know isn't great as an end in itself yeah but there are other practical applications

Sarah West: absolutely there are experience many people who who come to us and and they they strictly want to explore our art out of curiosity and that's absolutely fine I think that that sometimes that's all it takes and then in that way a person discovers that there are many worlds beyond just you know painting a pretty picture

Keith: mm-hmm so currently you're working with West Smiths Station and Wacoochee Elementary schools so if other schools are wanting to get in on this

Sarah West: absolutely

Keith: which I would encourage them to do how would the schools or if any of parents who are at any of our other elementary schools that aren't involved and they want to get their students involved how can they

Sarah West: as we have a we've informed everyone within our community we send newsletters and we also notify the schools of what is available to them we have a scholarship program that is part of our cultural arts outreach it is an all-expense-paid scholarship that is provided to any of our participating area schools all anyone has to do in relation to our schools is contact us and say we want to be a part of this and we will put them on the list the more the merrier our scholarship for cultural arts enrichment is a scholarship that is awarded to each participating school per school quarter so they have the opportunity to award or elect multiple students per school year to receive this all-expense-paid scholarship for studio classes here that is actually the Avenue by which schools began to reach back to us asking us if if we could facilitate the need for an extracurricular art program at the elementary school level we accepted the answer was yes we didn't exactly know how we would accommodate that request but we knew that we would find a way to do so and so we responded at telling them absolutely we would be there and we in in return told them that we wanted to donate a portion of proceeds back to those schools so participating area schools host our program per school season so every season we take our studio classes and we introduce them to students who have chosen to enroll it is a weekly class offered for eight consecutive school weeks and each season new students can enroll current students can continue and it is all-inclusive so they pay an enrollment fee and we donate a portion of proceeds back and everything that they need is furnished for them to explore art there are also exhibition opportunities that we extend to students involved in our program those exhibition opportunities not only celebrate their art achievements within their school but it also provides them with the opportunity to periodically take those exhibitions on the road we are the artistic advisors for the city of Smith station as the official artists of the city I also curate two galleries at Smith station City Hall which feature rotating exhibitions of local art work we want to certainly maintain a focus on our younger generations through those exhibits so one gallery is devoted exclusively to student artists and so our students who are involved with us at our local schools are involved in that program as well students who are not currently attending one of the participating schools can still become involved they can enroll in classes here we have studio classes that we offer several days per week in the afternoons after school and on

into the evening hours it is not exclusive to just our younger students it is something that is available to adults as well all of those classes are grouped together by age and by calling us they can receive a full list of available class times those classes are available year-round they start with fundamental drawing and then they can progress from there the sky's the limit we're very fortunate that a great number of our students have continued with us some of them have been with us for over seven years yeah we're excited to celebrate many who are graduating this year at our local high school

Keith: so you have summer programs too...?

Sarah West: we do we do although

Keith: parents can get the kids out of the house for a little bit

Sarah West: yeah yeah we have our studio concentrations which continue as I said year-round so those are classes that students can maintain involvement in and oftentimes that doesn't conflict as much with a summer vacation schedule we do have special programs that we introduce each summer in some cases those are summer camps for the younger ones and we also have portrait programs and drawing events coming up that they may want to engage in as well

Keith: so as listeners of the podcast know and anybody else who knows me know that I filter the world through my pop culture knowledge and so obviously anything that I know about art classes boil down to the image of class being in the studio and they're like in a circle around with a bowl of fruit or something and they're all sitting there drawing and stuff yeah but I imagine that that's probably not how your classes are structured

Sarah West: um sometimes sometimes I think that that picture is there because it's founded on academic principle and so that that image is certainly reflected in our studio however aside from fundamental drawing which is the core foundation of our program the explanation for that is we want to ensure that every student regardless of how long they are able to study with us they leave each week feeling more capable and more confident in their skill and in their abilities than they were when they arrived that is our goal from week to week however if a student is able to continue there's their furtherance beyond the initial classes in drawing composition they can advance into as I mentioned any level of study any level of study relates to not just the fundamentals of drawing as you referred to still lifes or figure drawing with the model but we also want students to be able to travel beyond the studio and achieve and find satisfaction or gratification in their work as well so we address the study of art from many different perspectives they draw from pictures as well as drawing from real life so that in any scenario they are well equipped to progress

Keith: I want to circle back to something you said a minute ago about being the official artist for Smiths Station how did that come to be what all was involved with that what are you doing mayoral portraits or how does that

Sarah West: um actually yes our current mayor approached me as he wanted to honor our previous mayor mayor LaFaye Dellinger who was the station's first mayor as founding mayor he felt it important to commemorate her achievements but primarily focused on her legacy and pass on her legacy to the younger generations and we know that one of the most important things to do is to record that through our art art is a record of civilization and I'm thankful that he recognizes that view and he requested that I paint the official portrait of Mayor LaFaye Dellinger which I did it was unveiled last summer at a special

event honoring the mayor and since then we have also established as I mentioned the art galleries which we oversee we curate those galleries continually change throughout the year in addition to that as the official artists to the city there are other responsibilities that relate to any artwork that they that they need we are I say we as in the Sarah West gallery fine art and our affiliated artists are also involved in the founding of the historic commission for the city of Smith station and that also relates to the upcoming opening of the Jones store history museum and so relating to that there are specific artworks that needed to be created and developed for future use some of that may relate to documentation and just recently the city coin was revealed I was commissioned to do it create a pen etching of the historic Jones store and that is featured as our more notable historic landmark on the flip side of the official coin which the city uses as a challenge coin to recognize citizens within our community

Keith: very cool. Mayor Copeland, maybe I could get one of those at some point...so you don't do any of the like 3D like sculpting or

Sarah West: not at present

Keith: no carving? you don't have some block of marble in here that you chisel away at

Sarah West: no no at present I don't think that our facility could accommodate coal connections sculpting or hot glass or pottery there are elements of that that will be integrated into our programs in future as we expand we will be building a larger facility and for that purpose we will have various shops within the facility that do provide those other realms of formal art training instead um we are industrial design artists to some extent as well meaning we've worked in in other forms of media such as cut glass stained glass we've done a bit of restoration so we wear a lot of hats but I would say the primary focus of our Center right now is to provide programs related to visual art composition most of which features a concentration on two-dimensional and then our cultural arts outreach initiative which brings various artists of different fields to our area to introduce them to the community we offer many free events throughout the year as well as programs that a person can become involved in through enrollment or registration and then of course the school programs as an extension of it

Keith: I was reading some on you on your website and so let's talk a little bit about about you about some of your artistic journey

Sarah West: mm-hmm as far as my background I my background is in real realism I primarily work in graphite drawing an oil painting however we've also made mention of pen illustration in the form of etchings the Flemish master certainly had inspired and informed all of that there are many American artists as well whom have also influenced and continued to inform my work as a American illustrator I'm a member of the Society of illustrators in New York and through that organization and also through a great deal of research and exposure to the American masters I've developed a great appreciation and admiration for those who forged a path for documenting the American landscape long before us current artists and I feel a great responsibility to carry on that tradition and to continue to present relevant narrative related to current society social issues I feature a lot of that in my work or address those topics and in open open-ended narrative really it's an ongoing conversation that I want to continue to have and engage other appreciators

Keith: so let me ask you this I see some really beautiful portraits around here so can anybody commission a portrait if they wish and can they pay a little extra to look a little better in their portrait?

one of my favorite stories from history is one of Henry VIII's wives before he even met her because she was from Germany or something one of these women and so they send a portrait of her over and he looked at her portrait and was like oh my gosh she's gorgeous yeah send her over and she showed up and he's like hmmm somebody paid that artist a little extra so can we get a little airbrush kinda

Sarah West: to answer your question regarding commissions I do accept a limited number of commissions I am currently working on a large-scale series which is relevant to our current times and Michelle who is also one of our chief instructors and co-founder she accepts a limited number of commissions as well but we we paint it as we see it and we're fortunate that certainly others find our interpretations resonant and I'm thankful for that I think that ultimately in any work of art you have to find truth

Keith: I think this is a great you know growing up we didn't have anything like this in Smiths station so I think it's great that you're here now this question I stole from Dan Rather and it worked out kind of kind of ok on the last one so someone has to give this one what question have I not asked you that you think you was hoping that would

Sarah West: oh my goodness that's difficult I'm just along for the journey

Keith: like I told you when I got here I can barely draw stick figures

Sarah West: you can you can you just you have to a picture can be broken down and built back up it's just you you have to have the right components and and some have to be shown the way yeah I think so yeah

Keith: well thank you so much for coming on to talk with us and I think that what you do with our students is important and thank you for doing that and I hope that other parents will listen to this and get their get their kids involved and so so far those people have come to see you

Sarah West: people have driven from across many states to visit however I would say Montgomery is I believe the greatest distance a student has traveled to take classes weekly Wow yeah yeah that's a nice distance and out-of-state people drive from out-of-state to take our classes as well

Keith: you have people from Columbus coming over

Sarah West: and farther than that

Keith: yeah we have because I know you're mostly involved with the Smith station service area but you know we have three others that you guys were here

Sarah West: absolutely absolutely in my in my life I've had to to travel elsewhere and and bring back with me the talismans of experience and integrate that into into my journey here in order to make it what it is

Keith: would you be able to travel to our other service areas if any of them wanted to get in on this

Sarah West: we consider everything and we take everything into consideration and any opportunity that opens to us we consider it deeply as we do consider it an honor and we recognize that there is a greater need for cultural arts enrichment opportunities of this nature and so the answer is never no we want to consider it and if it is possible we will make it make it happen

Keith: ok I was curious about that Smiths Station shouldn't be the only one with an embarrassment of riches I think

Sarah West: no no it's just um it's it's the land in between and it is home and at the same time I do not believe in being confined to you necessarily a zip code I never have been I believe in in traveling and going the distance and in every facet of my life and so absolutely not there are no borders

Keith: do your students works get displayed anywhere or do they just get to take it home

Sarah West: everything that our students create is theirs and theirs alone from the moment they sign it they leave with it I am proud to say that we have many award-winning artists which span years among our students some who are currently and many who are currently enrolled and some who have since gone on maybe they're living you know outside of the states now but many of our students have had the opportunity to exhibit their work elsewhere and many have gone on to to be awarded for those accomplishments and recognized on not just a local level or within their school but also on a state and state regional and national level

Keith: have many gone on to college

Sarah West: many have gone on to college some are pursuing careers in related fields others continue to to keep art as as a secondary Avenue in their lives

Keith: like Winston Churchill painting in his spare time or George Bush now painting his feet in the bath tub or whatever

Sarah West: George Bush and I believe a former President Jimmy Carter I think has a has an art book out now - you find that among various leaders as well as scientists and inventors there's also a component of art enrichment in their lives

Keith: you were talking earlier the Biltmore estate, tell me more about your involvement with them

Sarah West: I'm in exclusive - biltmore licensed artist which means that my work is marketed through the estate the Biltmore is really the birthplace of so much in terms of American innovation and history at the turn of the last century and in that regard it isn't necessarily about it being a place of opulence or necessarily the the family history related to it although that is very important to our American the fabric of our American lives however it is about stewardship and sustainability and those are values that directly relate to what we do here that's embedded within our roots it is it is not just a career but it is a life commitment and you see that reflected in research when you go back and you examine the life of people like Frederick Law Olmsted and Carl shank and many others who were associated with the founding of the National Forestry Commission and then you have the architects as well and then innovating pioneers that gathered there on Summit to brainstorm and many of them even Eleanor Roosevelt visited the Asheville area and she was very impressed with the level of stewardship and commitment that not only the Vanderbilt family but many other pioneers in that field and also in the region the steps that they were taking to further sustain the people of the region that is that's deeply moving for us and it has always been a steadfast form of inspiration and it continues to inform my work and so that relationship with Biltmore is an important one for those reasons and more

Keith: last thing I think is anybody who comes by to to visit and if they just fall in love with with something of any of this available for purchase

Sarah West: yes yes yes yeah I I I paint I draw I create and I teach because I feel it is my purpose to do so but these things only matter if they are shared and the greater skill that we can share those on the better the more lives that they may they may influence or inform in a positive way and so even even the art it is available for acquisition if someone is so inclined we do want to see all of these various avenues that we are involved in continue to grow and flourish

Keith: okay well miss West I really appreciate you having me here at the studio

Sarah West: thank you for coming

Keith: I have had a great time and as we tell all of our folks we have on the podcast to continue to be awesome and continue to making this important impact in our students' lives I think that art is too often seen as disposable education art education to see too much as disposable and not as important as the other things and they are exactly wrong

Sarah West: that's right the art is what lasts and we are we are extremely appreciative to our community within Lee County Schools and the faculty and principals and teachers who have seen the importance of art and who are striving to make it accessible

Keith: I really appreciate you taking the time

Ukulele Music