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Interview with Pat Crow

Kelly McPharlin

Pat Crow

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Interviewer: Kelly McPharlin

Interviewee: Pat Crow

Place: Knox County Visitors and Convention Bureau, Mount Vernon.

Duration: 00:25:44, 25 minutes, 44 seconds

Co-workers present: none

Kelly McPharlin: Okay, so my name is Kelly McPharlin, today's date is February 17 and I'm sitting here with Pat Crow, and we're going to talk about the Dan Emmett Festival. So could you please state your name and occupation?

Pat Crow: I'm Pat Crow, and I'm the director of the Dan Emmett Music and Arts Festival.

KM: Great, and how long have you lived in Knox County?

PC: I was born here, and I've lived here all of my life except for twelve years.

KM: So can you tell me a little bit about why you wanted to get involved with the Dan Emmett festival?

PC: (laughs) Why I wanted to get involved or how it happened?

KM: Both.

PC: Those are two different things, two points of view. I never really intended to get involved in the festival other than, my paid job is the director of the Convention and Visitors Bureau, and of course we're always supportive of community events like festivals. The festival in 1997, uh, was about to fold up and not happen the next year, so we stepped forward and offered as, um, part of the Convention and Visitors Bureau, we stepped forward and thought that that was a bad idea to not do it again, whatever the reasons were, and offered to take over the festival. Take over the festival for us meant that the Convention and Visitors Bureau would not assume it, but would help get it back on its feet. So we created another company called the Dan Emmett Music and Arts Festival, Inc. So from that then we started working on the festival, the festival is separate from the Convention and Visitors Bureau, it's a separate board, and a separate entity. So we stepped forward, somewhat on behalf of the visitors bureau, but more on behalf of the community to do it. We're unpaid volunteers, we've never been paid a salary or any form of remuneration for the festival work, it's strictly a volunteer thing for us as well as everyone who works on the festival. But that was 1998, that was our first year, so approaching 2012, this will be our 15th year doing the event.

KM: So why did you want to get involved?

PC: Well I don't, I think that there are many reasons. Some of them are professional, and some of them are personal. I think having a desire, with all the other things on our

agenda, I don't think we had a compelling need to make our schedule any worse or do any more work, because at the time we took over the festival, we were actually managing three not for profit organizations, anyway. But I think that we saw a need that was congruent with the other activities we were taking part in. At the time we were transitioning from the downtown management team to a, uh, team that was developing, redeveloping the Woodward Opera House project. We also were managing a small arts group, and also the Convention and Visitors Bureau, and we saw the music and arts festival as being a compatible and even, congruent from a mission perspective to the things we were trying to accomplish there. Particularly the Woodward project, because we felt we ultimately would be dealing with arts groups all over the community to have programming and occupants in our Woodward opera house building, so we thought that dealing with all the music and arts groups in the community in a festival setting would be a positive thing. If nothing else, just to make connection. At the time, we thought the Woodward project would move along a little faster than it did, it has been a very slow and painstaking process. So I think the want would be more of a, more by intelligent design, is that a good way to put it... I think beyond the, we wanted to add a festival kind of feeling, we see a compatible activity here that would, would be symbiotic in a sense, that it would be good for all the organizations if we did that. If we keep the festival and make the connections with all the arts groups it would help the Woodward project as that unfolded, as well as from a tourism stance. I believe we changed the posture of the festival as we took it over, I think we have looked at it as more of a tourist event than a local festival, and I believe we've been very successful at making that happen. So again, "want" is probably not the right word for me, I think we decided to do it because it was the right thing to do for all of the organizations we represented. And you know what? There were no other downtown festivals in Mount Vernon, so we thought it was a good thing to keep that.

KM: So you mentioned there are personal reasons for that, is there something ideologically you wanted to do?

PC: Well, sure. We're in the community development business, and we like to see things work, and we like to work with groups of people, that's been our mission here. Building organizations in a team setting is something we like to do. And with the Dan Emmett Festival we currently have 25 operating chairmen or committees that function to make it work. It's a very large event, we have about 20 or 25,000 people that attend each year. We put over 700 people on the stage at some time during the festival, it's a four-day event, it's three-dimensional at least. And so working in that environment in a volunteer setting is a very rewarding thing, and you make a lot of friends. We tend to encourage and we think develop confidence among volunteers, we try to provide a soft leadership style, present a soft leadership style so that people lead themselves. If we have a new chairman or someone perhaps brings a new idea to us, we're pretty, what would be the right word... We believe that people that have ideas need to be willing to step forward and help with them if they really are truly interested in helping the community. So a typical interview with a new prospect, we would go through the event and see if there was something compatible. Once you arrive at all the niceties about that, the last thing I tell the chairmen before we start, before we get to the first day so to speak, we tell them,

“This is your event, if you’re not gonna do it, we’re not gonna do it.” And that is a fundamental tenet, or a fundamental principle in the operation of our festival. If you were coming in the door here and you wanted to do a mountain bike competition, okay, I would tell you exactly what I just said. You know, if you want to do this, you need to find a chair and put a committee together, we will work with you on financing and sponsorships and stuff, but at the end of the day it’s your event. Our role is supportive in nature, and it builds a very strong pyramid, an organizational pyramid, when you operate in that environment. If I had to say the secret in making it work, that’s it. It’s getting a good team of people together that are willing to work in our environment. Another unwritten tenet we have, an unwritten principle, is that we don’t bring troublemakers into our events. And I know it brings a smile to your face, but I tell you, people have to get along, play nice in the same sandbox, and if they’re gonna do that, we don’t want them to be part of our team, they can go start their own event. It’s a real simple principle, it’s uncomplicated. And we have to do this in our spare time. We don’t get paid to do it, so it has to work, it has to be efficient. At the end of the day, though, you have to put on a quality event for your community. And we use what we consider family values as the standard for our event, that anybody could come and in general not be offended by anything at the festival, and we’ve stuck by these principles pretty carefully. We get a push every while by somebody that wants something different. But if it’s not in the envelope, again, the comment is we’d really like to see you do your own event, then go do it and if we can help advise you, then we’ll be glad to help you with the organizational stuff, but we’re not doing that during the Dan Emmett festival. So those are some basic guiding principles we use.

KM: Did you have a set of original goals you wanted to come out of the festival?

PC: Sure. First and foremost, put on a quality event, a family event that anybody could come to, I just said that. Second, that it would attract not only the community, but a larger audience than the community, hence the tourism connection. We felt that we would by and large provide free entertainment for the community, and our goal, our sponsorship goal and donor goal was set in such a way that we would bring in at least a night or two of what would really be considered headliner entertainment, free entertainment to the community, and I think we’ve accomplished that every year since we’ve done the event. I think on the other hand we want people to be comfortable when they’re here, there would be an educational element as much as possible in an outdoor festival, that we would encourage the arts, the visual arts or the fine arts, and that would be, again, on that self-help thing. Music and arts are different. Music, you pay people to get on the stage, arts, you get people to come and they actually get money by being here, by selling their wares on the lawn. I think we tried to make it a youth-based activity, I think that was another goal we had, and I think we succeeded in doing that. But 70, I don’t have the number memorized, but something like 70 or 75 percent of the people who step on the stage are under 18 years old. So we have a real, we have a tiered developmental system, we’ve involved, we have what we call a Youth Showcase where we showcase the youth entertainment and that’s particularly high school students or even younger who are just learning. They may get up and sing just one song, or do just one thing. And as those kids develop, they become better. We then, if they’re successful at their development work,

we move them on to a 30 minute slot onstage. We also have the Knox Idol competition which is aimed at youth, not adults, young adults. And all those things lead to, eventually we see bands formed out of these kids, we've been doing it long enough to see a whole generation move up through. We've had some that have gone off to college and have been very successful at music and arts careers, so that's I think all of these things combined are what we saw initially as an opportunity. Some unintended results is that a very gifted group of people we've brought together to accomplish this. And a very, a very cohesive group has evolved out of it, very, we're all friends. And it has become a very rewarding, fun, and enjoyable process to put the festival together, for us.

KM: So, um, why did you want to encourage the festival as a source of tourism instead of just a local festival?

PC: Okay, make sure you understand that it's an add-on. The community has to be served first. Well, that's an economic development issue, you know, one of my rules sitting in this chair is economic development and tourism is certainly economic development. We feel that the economic impact of the festival is hundreds of thousands of dollars each year, that the money it brings to the community as a result of the travel that precipitates from people coming to our community. I think that's one thing, I also think there's a branding thing of Mount Vernon that results from it, that was intentional. That people come here, they experience it, they see the beautiful downtown, they think, "Maybe I'll come back, and do something else here." I think it, it is a, um, familiarization process where people come, they learn about Kenyon or MVNU while they're here because they're in the vicinity, they learn about our community, so all those things are good. It is the, I think it, from an event standpoint, I think it's the flagship event of the year for downtown Mount Vernon. We have First Fridays, we have Christmas walks, we do a lot of things, but more people attend the Dan Emmett festival in those four days than probably all the rest of the events combined in downtown Mount Vernon, particularly from out of town. So, we think that's all good, and we don't see any significant bad side to that.

KM: How would you describe the overall mood or atmosphere of the festive?

PC: It's festive. I don't think I could describe it any other way. We have fun, we're here to enjoy ourselves, and probably eat bad food, I mean, not bad as in tastes bad, but bad for us, probably, and too much cholesterol and fat, and we enjoy the music, and we look at the art forms that are presented, we probably spend too much money while we're here, and it's just a good time.

KM: Do you have any plans to move the festival, or is the public square pretty much the perfect location?

PC: I am so convinced that having it downtown is so important, that if there was a move in the community to move it out of downtown, I would no longer be the director.

KM: Why do you think it's so important to have it downtown?

PC: Because it's a downtown festival, and this is the place to have it. It gives it a unique brand, it is the proper setting, it is historic. Dan Emmett performed his last performance in downtown Mount Vernon; the downtowns used to represent the, the commerce and the business, the business end of a community, and having it anywhere else would be, would make it a fair or something different. And for it to be a music and arts festival in this setting with the icon we've named it after, celebrating the legacy of Dan Emmett, that is appropriately and properly done in the downtown setting.

KM: How do you think the public square is used other than the festival?

PC: Well, it's certainly the centerpiece of town, people drive around it, it's the roundabout in town. It anchors the community, it is a memorable place for people who drive through town, they remember the monument, the square. You could drive by a hundred buildings, but you drive by the square, and you remember the square. You always do. And the towns I've driven through all over the United States, I remember the square. I was in Australia a few years ago, and you know what I remember? I remember the square of the town I was in. We were visiting New Zealand, the same thing, we were going through town, I remember the town, I remember the downtown area. I mean, do I remember the Walmart? No. Do I remember the shopping centers? No, I don't remember those, they're all the same. What defines a community like Mount Vernon is its public square and its downtown. It is what it really is, it represents that. So no, it is about downtown, it is about the square and that's the memorable part. Typically the major events of any community, historically, have happened in the downtown; things that have happened in the square are memorable. We go back to things like the wars—when they had World War II, the honor roll of those who died was posted on the square. When Clement Vallandigham gave his famous anti-war speech during the Civil War, it happened on the square in Mount Vernon. Those are the kind of things that happen on public squares, so it's a place of public discourse, it's a place of celebration, it's a place of memory. We put our fountains, we put our monuments, we put all those things on our squares because that's the center of what we think as our community.

KM: So what do you think the Mount Vernon public square says about the Mount Vernon community?

PC: Well, I think it says a lot of positive things. It's well-maintained, it's probably the most well-maintained place in downtown. It's hard to see in February, but in June, July, and August the city does an amazing job of maintaining it, they take care of it over time, I think that represents the town well. I think that there are defining moments in a community, some of which I've already described, those are manifest on our public square. We have historic markers, we have the monument, we have the fountain, all of those are parts of our history. We have a war memorial also on the square—all of those things are, in a social sense, define moments or parts of our community and I think the public square in Mount Vernon does that as well or better than any other community that I've seen.

KM: Do you think there are other opportunities to increase the activity in the square, or have other events there?

PC: Sure. They do First Fridays up there, there's always a way to do more. When is more too much? I don't know the answer to that, um, but we have a very active downtown community, and there's a lot of events. Sure, whenever we think of doing another event, there's some cool things coming up here, anniversaries in the next few years regarding the Civil War, Johnny Appleseed, and some other things, our mind always turns to the square to begin, celebrate, or terminate those kinds of activities. So events held around the square are better. Can we do more? Sure, but we do a lot now. You know, when is more too much? I don't know. I don't think I have a good answer for that. Sure we could do more, but a great deal happens right now. There are communities that never do anything around their public square, except drive around it. It's a compliment to this community about how much does take place there.

KM: So how else is the square used other than farmers market, First Fridays, and the Dan Emmett festival?

PC: Well, as I said, it's a place of public discourse. Whenever there's a demonstration of any sort or some sort of a civil presentation, the square's usually where it happens. Oh sure, during the center bill issue here, there was a bill that raised all the ruckus last year about what was perceived as an anti-Union bill, when demonstrations came to Mount Vernon, they pulled the motor coach up and it was presented on the square, and that was certainly a moment. When we did the bicentennial presentations, during the bicentennial year both for the state of Ohio, for the county's celebration, as well as Mount Vernon's celebration a couple years later, those activities and those moments of celebration were presented on the square. They weren't presented out on the street somewhere or out on Coshocton Avenue or Walmart or anywhere, it was done on the square. So it is a place of disclosure, demonstration, discourse, awards, festivities; all those things are done best on the square.

KM: Do you think the square is used in the daily life of many citizens?

PC: Sure. People go up, and all the time I see them sitting on the park bench watching the pigeons fly over, or watching the water flow through the fountain, or I sometimes see a young couple in love sitting on the park bench with their arms around each other. I see people walking their dogs. It is a part of everyday life for people, and it is the central part of Mount Vernon.

KM: Do you have a favorite event or memory of the square?

PC: That's a really good question. Since I've been in this job 19 years, I could probably talk all afternoon. Do I have a favorite moment? I think my favorite moments are when we six or seven or eight thousand people on the square for an event, and they're happy, and having fun, and enjoying themselves. I think that then we've done our part to make

the happen, and we're always happy at those moments. I think those are my most memorable moments.

KM: Is that, do that many people only come for the Dan Emmett Festival?

PC: Pretty much, yeah.

KM: Yeah.

PC: When we have the headliners and the national groups, that's pretty common. But some local groups like Phil Dirt and the Dozers bring almost that many people through.

KM: Do you have any hopes for the future of the Dan Emmett Festival or the public square?

PC: Well, sure. The Dan Emmett Festival, like any event, will have to change and evolve with society. Just like today's favorite group, in 10 or 15 years, will have to be a different favorite group, because society changes, people age, the people who liked, 15 years ago you could have done a Glen Miller concert, but today you're done. You know, groups like Peter Noon and Herman's Hermits, because that's the generation of people that are now approaching being seniors. In 10 or 15 years that will be different, and our shows have evolved. The shows you saw 15 years ago are different today, people make different things, styles change, attitudes change. We had our first occurrence last year of someone who wanted to exercise free speech at the festival and carry a rather large placard up and down the street in the middle of the event. I see more of that kind of thing evolving at the festival, where we have to provide free speech areas because that seems to be, again, an opportunity for public discourse. We accommodate without necessarily compromising the event. And I see that changing, I see music forms changing, I see art forms changing, I see whatever is popular in the young adult world, like the cheer competition seems to work now, in 10 years that probably won't be the case. Do I see the presentation of local music to change at the festival? Perhaps, and the style of music or whatever, yes, the substance, no. I still see us being 95 per cent local music, as much as possible, and that the festival will reflect the current status of the groups that are performing in this community, and that's what I think makes it such a rich event. You won't find another Dan Emmett Festival anywhere in the world, because you will not have the people anywhere else like the ones here that are doing the music. So from that perspective, no change.

KM: Do you have anything else that I haven't talked to you about?

PC: I could talk for a long time, but that's probably enough unless you have any particular questions about the square.

KM: I think you answered all of them with me only asking a few. Thank you so much.

PC: Thank you.