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## Redbird Buzz Episode 29: Greg Cameron, August 1, 2023

John Twork Interviewer

*Illinois State University*, [jdtwork@IllinoisState.edu](mailto:jdtwork@IllinoisState.edu)

Greg Cameron Interviewee

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# Redbird Buzz

## Episode 29: Greg Cameron

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*August 1, 2023*

**John Twork 00:10**

Welcome to Redbird Buzz, I'm John Twork from University Marketing and Communications. Our guest today is Greg Cameron, a 1980 graduate of Illinois State University who has served in administrative and philanthropic roles for nearly four decades with prominent Chicago art and community organizations, including the Department of Cultural Affairs, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the Art Institute of Chicago and PBS affiliate WTTW. In 2013 he joined Chicago's Joffrey Ballet where he currently serves as the Joffrey's president and chief executive officer. Greg is featured in this summer's *State* alumni magazine and he joins us today to talk about his role with the Joffrey Ballet, one of the premier dance companies in the world.

**John Twork 01:03**

And it's my pleasure to welcome Greg Cameron to Redbird Buzz. What's the word, Redbird? Greg, tell us about the Joffrey Ballet and your role with this organization.

**Greg Cameron 01:14**

Great. Well, thank you, John. It's great to be here and hello, fellow Redbirds. I have had the good fortune of being the president and CEO of the Joffrey Ballet for the past ten years. For those of you that don't know the Joffrey Ballet, we are based here in Chicago for the past 27 years but founded by Robert Joffrey in 1956 in New York City. We are a dance organization, we have a company of 47 artists that perform our Chicago season at the Lyric Opera. We tour locally, nationally, and internationally as well. We have an Academy of Dance at the corner of State and Randolph, where we have over 700 students taking dance classes and we are out in about 50 to 60 Chicago public schools, so connecting with community in sharing the joy of movement and dance with youth across the city. So that's a little bit about the Joffrey Ballet.

**John Twork 02:19**

And let's talk a little bit about you, Greg. You graduated from Illinois State in 1980 with a bachelor's in German, and you were also an art history minor. So how did you end up on that academic track and what was your experience like at Illinois State?

**Greg Cameron 02:34**

Sure, I think many of us started our academic careers thinking we want to do one thing, and I was pivoting long before the word became a buzzword epidemic, but I did set off to be a special education teacher and went to Illinois State University because my counselor at Proviso West High School, Miss [Theresa] Lovasich, said that the place to go if you wanted to be a special education teacher was

Illinois State University. And I had some great faculty there and enjoyed thinking about becoming a teacher, but my sophomore year I ventured off to Salzburg, Austria on a program that Illinois State had in partnership with Northern Illinois University, and I will say that it changed the trajectory of my career. I'd always loved the German language, but while in Austria I discovered the richness of art history. Actually, on a weekend trip to Vienna, Austria, I saw my first ever ballet performance, *Rudolf Nureyev* at the Vienna State Opera House. I was in a standing room only section, 17 curtain calls, the audience wouldn't leave. I'm sure that that got into my blood. But I came back to ISU and continued to study special education, art history, and German. And then shortly before it was time to do student teaching, decided to really take a pivot and leave ISU as an undergraduate with a degree in German and art history. And that then opened doors for me to pursue a subsequent degree in public administration at the University of Illinois here in Chicago, which then led me to my almost 40-year career in arts administration. Had a great time, I mean, ISU was a wonderful learning place, the academic setting, the students, the theatre department was a favorite place for me. I guess I probably always wanted to be a performer, but didn't have the courage to be on the stage so I found a good place off the stage but in support of artists and the important stories that they tell.

**John Twork 05:00**

Though you didn't know that at the time, it all came together, all of these dots were connected. And when I spoke with you earlier this spring we talked about how good of a dot connector you are, Greg, your passion and your ability to connect the dots, both literally and figuratively. Can you talk about what makes you such a good dot connector and how that skill has proven beneficial throughout your four decades in arts administration?

**Greg Cameron 05:28**

Sure, well, I do think it's funny to think about, you know, connect the dots - and there are probably some people listening to this podcast that go, what is connecting the dots, so Google it, but people that are of a certain age had connect the dot books, you know, pen and paper or colored pencils. And I was - I realized at a young age that I was not going to be an artist, but I had this passion for art and as I look back I realized that connecting the dots was something that I could do well, and I have been able to flourish and make it a little bit of a signature for me. But I love people, I love relationships, I'm committed to relationships' intense duration, hence an entire career in the arts in Chicago, supporting artists, connecting artists with opportunities for them to exhibit their work, to perform their work, a recent example being a project that two of our company artists are going to be creating with the Adler Planetarium and bringing the Joffrey into the mix and really thinking about how together we can do so much more. Company artists here at the Joffrey, they will be back in this Monday to rehearse for our season. 47 artists in a studio with a choreographer, and what they really do is connect with each other and use their connections to tell a story. And I guess what I would say I do is connect artists with opportunities, funders with ways to sort of activate on their belief in the importance of the arts, students to pursue and continue to learn over the years. I've had many interns work with me. It's fun to watch interns surpass you in landing leadership roles that are really making an impact. So it's probably a skill that I learned from parents that cared about relationships and grandparents that were integrally involved in their communities, small communities, a farm community of Coleta, Illinois and Sterling, Illinois, so I'm sure there's somebody out there listening that knows where those Illinois towns are. All

good Redbirds know Chicago, but we also know the vast array of communities across this great state of Illinois.

**John Twork 08:12**

Greg, your philanthropic, business-minded roots run deep, all the way back to your childhood in western suburban Westchester. Can you tell us about the museum and the theater that you and your brothers created, and also about your success selling mints for the YMCA and how all of those experiences led to the man you are today?

**Greg Cameron 08:34**

Sure, it's, you know, you have these experiences as kids and you don't always understand how they're going to impact your future. But as a young kid on our block, Kensington Avenue in Westchester, Illinois, we had a pretty tight community and we created a carnival in the backyard of our house and had live theater performance in our garage. And I was never one of the actors, but I was the person selling and marketing the production, the carnival, selling the tickets, collecting the proceeds, closing the - we didn't even have an electric garage door, so it was opening and closing the garage door, making the announcements. And so it was an early beginning of thinking about how can you build a business model around performance. I also had grandparents, my grandparents, grandma and grandpa Cameron, who lived in Sterling, Illinois, traveled a great deal across the globe and they would bring home treasures from their trips. When you're a little kid they seemed like priceless objects. You know, as an adult, you can realize that they were souvenir tchotchkes, but that doesn't matter. They were important and meaningful to me because of who gave them to me and they opened my mind to new worlds. So I established in our basement a little museum of Eiffel Towers and pyramids and taxidermied [piranhas?] and put labels on them and charged neighborhood kids a modest admission fee. You know, I wanted to be able to have a little bit of extra spending money. You know, Jolly Rancher sticks were five cents so I needed to make some money. But I think I also did it out of a passion, it was fun, it was fun work.

**Greg Cameron 08:42**

And then as a member of the LaGrange YMCA, there was a contest to see who could sell the most mints for the YMCA. And this, of course, was, in the Y's vision, it was philanthropy, much like the Girl Scout cookies. You know, Girl Scouts sell cookies, they learn a lot from selling cookies, but the Girl Scouts benefit immensely and are able to advance their programming and serve their constituents, so this is what the Y was doing. I was probably more, a little invested in winning the contest because the person that sold the most mints got a bike and I was sort of excited about getting the bike. The long and short of it is I sold the most mints, and that meant I sold them, my parents did not take them to their offices, I went door-to-door and in my own humble way told the story of the Y and what the Y did for me and my brother's swimming, karate, crafts. And I got the bike and then realized that I already had a bike, so I sold the bike to my best friend's mother and she gave it to my best friend for a gift. But I think looking back what I realize was I was engaged and excited about doing something and telling a story. I also fondly remember going door-to-door with my mother collecting for the Lung Association, and couldn't believe that you could knock on your neighbor's door and say, hey, would you consider making a contribution to support the research that the Lung Association is doing? And people said yes, and that was pretty exciting to me. Probably my first experience of being a philanthropist was the offering

envelope at the Bellwood Presbyterian Church and being excited about putting in a few coins and adding it to the offering plate. So non-profit organizations depend on community and depend on people to make contributions and I've been lucky to work at some amazing cultural organizations that don't do any of what they do without support from individuals, from foundations, corporations, governmental entities. A long answer, I'm sorry, John.

**John Twork 13:18**

It's all such important work. And so you go from the, shall we call it the Cameron Brothers Theater, in the Westchester family garage, to now you're on State Street in Chicago, right next to the Chicago Theatre in Joffrey Tower. You became the executive director there in 2013 for the Joffrey Ballet. Why did you decide after already a long career in the art scene in Chicago to join the Joffrey?

**Greg Cameron 13:52**

You know, it's a little bit more of other people connecting dots. And of course over 40 years working in the art sector here in Chicago you get to know a lot of people, and within one week's time I received three phone calls from three Joffrey board members asking me if I would consider or be interested in talking to them about the executive director position at the Joffrey. And I was ready for a change, I was thinking that it was time to not be the second in command but to really be that person that needs to lead an organization, of course in this case in partnership with Ashley Wheater, who is our Mary B. Galvin Artistic Director. So they reached out to me and we talked and ultimately an offer was made to me and it was quite exciting and easy for me to say, here is the opportunity that really wraps a bow around all of the things that I care about, artists and the stories that artists tell, arts education, and community connections. And I really have to say that it was at Illinois State University where all of those three things really came together for me. I was studying to be a teacher, I was a die-hard fan of the theatre department at ISU and attended everything that I could. Al Goldfarb, who was, I think, in his first year of teaching in the theatre department, took a class to New York for a week and I signed up for that immediately and saw *Sweeney Todd* the first time around in 19 - I think 1977, I might have the year a little off. Richard Gere and Pat Carroll in one person show called *Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein*, and Pat Carroll just recently passed away. So it was a, like, a-hah! moment that I can give back to the community that I've called home, that I can ensure that the next generation of artists have a safe and engaging place to learn, and that the artists that we call the Joffrey Company have a home to really refine and practice, rehearse their craft, and then perform and bring joy to audiences.

**John Twork 16:33**

You're wrapping up your first ten years at the Joffrey - and I shouldn't say wrapping up, you're moving through your first ten years and continuing to go strong. Over those last ten years, though, how has the Joffrey evolved and grown and what are some of the things you're most proud of with the Joffrey?

**Greg Cameron 16:52**

Sure, well, yeah, when I got to the Joffrey ten years ago I was excited to be here, but quickly realized that the business side of the Joffrey was not [of a piece?] with the artistic trajectory that we were on. And so in partnership with Ashley, and Zach [Zachary D. Lazar Jr.] was our board chair, we set out to really put an end to some of the financial challenges that existed at the Joffrey and it was really through creating a culture and trust and respect with the team, and the team being the administrative team, the

artistic team, the board, our incredible women's board, that we in one short year sort of put the financial challenges behind us and then started really revving up for the what's been an incredibly successful past ten years for the Joffrey. You know, shortly after retiring some debt we were able to engage in commission Christopher Wheeldon to create a new *Nutcracker* for the Joffrey Ballet. Christopher and Ashley Wheeler wanted to use Chicago's 1893 Columbian Exposition as the backdrop for this *Nutcracker*, so a slightly different *Nutcracker* than a wealthy little Victorian girl that has everything in act one and then in act two gets even more. It's set, you know, it opens in the winter of 1892 in a shack on the site of the construction, down in the Midway here in Chicago, a single mom and her two children, and the magic starts to happen, and of course, in act two, instead of going to a land of sweets the kids get to travel to the pavilions at the World's Fair. We worked with the Chicago Public Schools and created a curriculum guide to accompany the *Nutcracker*. We subsequently have done video pieces, both in English and Spanish, to give students and teachers access to the *Nutcracker* that maybe can't physically get to Chicago. We'd love to sort of get it to be a part of the curriculum of every school across the state of Illinois, at least for starters, let's, you know, let's get it into Illinois teachers hands. But so a new *Nutcracker*, you know, huge lift for us. You know, it was about a four and a half million-dollar project. We launched a fund to create the Joffrey's first ever endowment, we had zero endowment and we now have about \$14 million and our endowment still needs to grow but it's better than where it was. The successful negotiation of a contract with our company artists. Our artists are part of the American Guild of Musical Artists and I'm pleased to say that our first negotiation with them was magical. And just last April, a year ago April, we negotiated a subsequent five-year contract with them, so we're honoring our commitment to them.

**Greg Cameron 20:32**

And probably the most exciting thing happened just a couple of weeks ago. On June 25, we hosted sort of a return to Joffrey fundraising events, we took time off from that during the pandemic, we learned a lot during the pandemic, but we had a wonderful fundraising celebration on Friday, June 23, and then on Sunday, June 12, for the first in Joffrey's history, we did a free performance in Chicago's Millennium Park, the Pritzker Pavilion, and it was a program that put a spotlight on the company, on our students in the academy, and the students that we work with across Chicago Public Schools and our community engagement program. And on a Sunday afternoon, with weather that kept looking sort of iffy, we had over 7500 people attend a beautiful performance. At the end of the performance there was a double rainbow, seemed appropriate. Robert Joffrey and Gerald Arpino, who were the co-founders of the company, I am quite certain were looking down saying, team, you did a good job, you've honored what we set out to do in 1956, which was to create a quintessentially American ballet company. Robert Joffrey was the son of immigrants and he wanted to create something that was American, and his vision in 1956 is the same sort of vision that we hold to. Our company really reflects a diverse community. We have dancers from about 14 different countries in our company, our students come from all across the globe. So that Sunday the 25th felt very, very, very joyful, and the added bonus and extra to that was that my parents, my brothers, other family members, some of the Kensington Street gang, you know, that I've known since I was in second grade, were there. My one friend, Dean Patsavas, who didn't go to ISU, he went to Southern Illinois University, he was like, Greg, you didn't tell me I was going to be crying. But, and it was a beautiful demonstration of who we are and what we are, and, you know, and the fact that there's a lot more to come going forward.

**John Twork 23:25**

For listeners who may not have ever attended the ballet, can you describe what that experience is like and why they should head up and watch the Joffrey Ballet in Chicago?

**Greg Cameron 23:36**

Oh, gosh. Well, if you love music, and when you find that your body moves when you hear music, you know, you're sort of a dancer. Now, it doesn't mean you're a ballet dancer, but translate that into, you know, young people that study from the age of six or seven to really perfect this art form of ballet, and then they join a company, and they are working with choreographers, both living and, of course, works created by choreographers that are no longer living. But you've got music, you've got movement, you have costume, you have light, in some cases you have the spectacle that theater allows you to create, the magic of the stage, things that happen, you know, like, how did they do that? But I think most importantly, it's an art form that really brings joy. It's quite amazing to be able to tell a story without any spoken words. I mean, you've just listened to me on this podcast - obviously, I am not a dancer. Our dancers could tell, you know, tell this story with movement and music. But yeah, please join us. We open our season at the Lyric Opera on Thursday, October 12 with a world, well, a Chicago Joffrey premiere of Liam Scarlett's *Frankenstein*. So it's a story that many of us know, but you'll be able to see it told through movement, something to not miss. Then we jump from that into December with the *Nutcracker*. And if you've never been to a *Nutcracker*, head to Chicago, our tickets went on sale earlier this week and I'm pleased to say that audiences are scooping them up. Ticket sales are brisk, which makes us happy, but we've got plenty of room and we love to welcome any Redbirds in Chicago or beyond. Come up to Chicago, you know, there's so much to do here, from the Museum of Contemporary Art to the Goodman Theatre to Steppenwolf to the Art Institute, to the symphony, the opera, the National Museum of Mexican Art. I'm telling you things that you know, but Chicago, most people don't come to Chicago for the weather. They come to Chicago for the incredible rich cultural offerings, the magnificent architecture. And there are Redbirds that have touched, you know, pretty much all of those sectors, of course the business sector too.

**John Twork 26:36**

Yeah, yeah, it's a magical city to visit and even more magical at the ballet. What's next, Greg, for the Joffrey and also for you personally and professionally looking ahead?

**Greg Cameron 26:50**

Sure, well, you know, for the Joffrey, we are in the early stages of talking about creating a documentary on a program that we call, it's Winning Works, it's a program that's been in existence for 13 years that really provides opportunities for diverse ALAANA choreographers to get their foothold in the world of dance. So we provide a stipend, they come to Chicago, they work with our studio company members, they create a piece in two weeks time, it's been rehearsed and rehearsed. We've performed for the past several years at the Museum of Contemporary Art and their Edlis Neeson Black Box Theater. So we're continuing that program, but 14 years of work, of, you know, almost 50 choreographers, we're turning over the material to a documentary filmmaker to really tell the story of how choreographers create work. It's really less about the Joffrey but more about our commitment to the choreographic side of what we do. Also excited that in September of 2024 an exhibition on the history of the Joffrey will be opening in New York City on the Lincoln Center campus. The New York Public Library has an amazing collection

and they have an exhibition space. So that exhibition will be opening in New York City. It's important that it opens there, given the fact that Robert Joffrey founded the company in New York in '56. We've been here 27 years, but, you know, the first 40 years of the Joffrey's history was in New York. That exhibition will ultimately come to a venue in Chicago, and then we're hopeful to be able to take it to Los Angeles as well.

**Greg Cameron 28:54**

Speaking of Los Angeles, next year the Joffrey will be touring to LA, we will be taking Yuri Possokhov's *Anna Karenina* to the LA Music Center. Yuri is a living choreographer, the score is by a young composer, Ilya Demutsky, beautiful piece that we co-commissioned with the Australian Ballet that we've performed here, we've performed it at the Kennedy Center, and are excited to sort of export some of the good work that we do here in Chicago and Illinois to other cities. And I'm, you know, I don't believe in jinxing anything, but we're also hoping to be able to tour to Japan. Rahm Emanuel, who of course many of us know as a former mayor of the city of Chicago, is now the ambassador to Japan, and Mayor Emanuel, now Ambassador Emanuel, is a big fan of the Joffrey Ballet, so we're working to try to make that happen. As for me, yeah, I've got a lot of work to do. You know, I'm not going anywhere soon, but I am starting to think about, you know, how do I move on to make room for the next ISU alum to come in and take over this position? Probably in the next three to four years, you know, I will say, hey, it's time to make a change and not retire, but, you know, find something to do that's maybe a tad less full-time, give me more opportunity to go and see dance other than the Joffrey. But for now I am 150% committed to the work that we have here. It's an incredible team of colleagues that I get to work with, a board that is so highly functional and extraordinary. Anne Kaplan, our board chair, makes everything that we do fun. Actually, one of our board members, Jim Kirk, is an ISU alum. Jim is the publisher of Crain's Chicago Business. So it's fun to be able to occasionally have side stories with Jim about ISU, The Vidette, which was the publication, it was like my go-to newspaper for four years at Illinois State University.

**John Twork 31:41**

Yeah, absolutely, good, great memories and it seems like it laid a foundation for you that has held steadfast for 40 years. You've done amazing work, Greg, and we really encourage those of folks who are listening to the podcast to see the ballet for themselves. Check out the Joffrey's website for that 2023-24 schedule for the season that's coming up and go see the ballet up at the Lyric Opera House. Greg, thank you so much for your time today and best of luck with all of those endeavors. May there be many more double rainbows in the future of the Joffrey.

**Greg Cameron 32:20**

Great. Well, John, thank you so much and thanks to the ISU team. I know it truly takes a village to make everything work and I applaud you and your work and I can close my eyes and picture the campus and when I do that it brings a bright smile to my face.

**John Twork 32:49**

That was Redbird alum and president and CEO of the Joffrey Ballet, Greg Cameron. You can read more about Greg in this summer's State alumni magazine and you can check out the Joffrey's 2023-24



schedule at [joffrey.org](http://joffrey.org) Thanks for listening to Redbird Buzz and be sure to tune in next time for more stories from beyond the quad.