

Folk Tales Podcast
Episode 1: Next Generation Artisans
in the Traditional Building Trades
Audio Transcript

[00:00] **Intro (spoken by several consecutive voices over upbeat music):** Every summer, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival brings voices together, honoring the traditions we carry forward. This podcast is the un-hosted open mic for the Festival's tradition bearers, creatives, and storytellers. Culture isn't preserved in glass cases—it's lived, breathed, and passed forward. Here's the story.

[00:37] **Marjorie Hunt:** There's so many young people who want to work with their hands, who are interested in learning the building arts, and highly skilled, experienced craftspeople who are dedicated to passing on the knowledge and skills to the next generation.

[00:52] **Tyrone Vic:** If historic preservation didn't exist, the Washington Monument wouldn't be there right now. The White House wouldn't be there anymore. The Smithsonian buildings might start crumbling. Historic preservationists are here to make sure things are preserved. It's important for young people. Our job as the youth is to keep that tradition kind of going.

[01:25] **Arlene Reiniger:** I am Arlene Reiniger, program coordinator for *Next Generation Artisans in the Traditional Building Trades*.

[01:32] **Hunt:** My name is Marjorie Hunt, and I'm the curator of the *Next Generation Artisans in the Traditional Building Trades* program.

[01:39] **Reiniger:** Marjorie and I were trying to present different avenues that young people can take in the traditional building trades because there's been a skills gap in those crafts. We thought it would be an opportune time to highlight master craftspeople and their young learners.

[01:59] **Hunt:** I was just thrilled that the program seemed to resonate with visitors and that there was a lot of wonderful interaction between the craftspeople and festival visitors. Craftspeople build our structures, our buildings, our stone walls, our memorials and monuments. We wanted to both shine a spotlight on the important role that craftspeople play but also the great skill and knowledge they have.

[02:35] **Vic:** My name is Tyrone Vic. I'm a part of the Traditional Trades Advancement Program, and I'm here to show off arriving demonstrations with the National Park Service.

Four years ago, I was a freshman in high school. I did internships throughout the school years. I learned all my carpentry skill on site or in classroom. So, these people know me. I'm familiar. That's how I got here.

2023, I didn't know I was in love with the Park Service yet. One day, I'm walking out the school, my assistant principal tells me, "Yo, I got this internship with the National Park Service." I'm like, "Why am I doing anything with the Park Service?"

I go, my first day I meet Matt, and then I just started working, and at first it was hot. I'm tired. I gotta wake up. I gotta be out here. But once I started putting on the work clothes, once the materials started making sense, once I began to understand how to use the tools properly, it was like a complete shift. In the last two weeks, I wanted a job. I used to ask Matt, "Yo, when you gonna hire me?"

I look at me now, hired. I'm proud of myself. I'm proud of my friends. I'm proud of the people that were able to bring me up to get me here. It honestly relights a fire in my eyes to see kids coming and enjoying the stuff that I love to do. I could be inspiring the next me. I could be inspiring a kid that's gonna turn out similar to how I turned out or even greater.

[03:45] **Reiniger:** There's years and years of knowledge, and sometimes it comes down through the family, sometimes it comes down through schools. I'm thinking of Tyrone and Omarion and the way they spoke about their mentor, Matthew Jacobs with the National Park Service, and the admiration that they had for him and the fact that he and this program taught them something that they never thought that they could do.

[04:11] **Vic:** When I first started working for Matt, we were putting up insulation. I just met Matt the day prior. He brought us in, full uniform. He's telling us that we're gonna install insulation on a roof. It wasn't fluff or something. It was this long metallic-looking sheet. He gave us a ladder. He left the room, and he let us figure it out for ourselves.

The roof is fifteen feet up. I'm in this room. I'm like, "How am I gonna get this up here? How am I gonna make it stick?" We put it up there with screws. And then they all rip out. So, I'm like, "This is impossible." Matt comes back, he grabs a two-foot piece of wood, he grabs the insulation, he wraps it around, he climbs up the ladder, he puts it up to the wall, and he drills through the wood. And it holds.

This guy knows what he's doing. This guy knows what he's doing. And from then on, I never talked back. I just let him guide me through everything, and he's been a great help.

[04:56] **Matthew Jacobs:** Hi, I'm Matt Jacobs. I'm the director of preservation education and youth engagement for the National Park Service, Get the National Parks in New York Harbor.

After my time in the military, I joined the National Park Service as a preservation specialist and led preservation crews all over the northeastern United States, working on an array of historic buildings—homes of John Adams, John Quincy Adams, both Roosevelts, and a variety of other important figures from our nation's history.

I've always loved history, and I've loved working with my hands, so this job is the perfect combination of two of my passions. Add to that my interest in working with young people and training a new generation of craftspeople. I have the best job.

I got involved in the trades at a pretty early age. I learned the trade directly from my dad, who was a master craftsman. My dad was a log builder. He built log homes all over the country. I grew up in rural Pennsylvania and did historic preservation before I even knew what that term meant. Learned at an early age to work with my hands and found a passion for it. I know as a young person, uh, it helped get me through high school and gave me purpose and direction in life.

Now, I'm trying to pass that on to the next generation, teaching younger people who have a passion and interest in the trades, especially those who have an interest in working for the public sector, preserving our nation's natural cultural resources.

Working under a master craftsman, you learn by doing, you learn by working right next to someone who knows the trades very well. And then five, ten years down the road, you are in the position of becoming the knowledge bearer, the one who knows those practices and passes them on to the next generation.

[06:37] **Vic:** A mentor is there to push you through the hardest parts, and that's what Matt does for us.

[06:41] **Jacobs:** The Traditional Trades Advancement Program is one in a long line of youth-focused programs that the National Park Service has offered. We're trying to meet the students where they're at and meet the young people where they're at, and there are a whole array of interests and array of skills and array of attention levels.

We try to tailor projects to the individual's needs and abilities, but what we do initially is offer them an array of opportunities 'cause almost all of these skills are not trades that they have worked in before, so we engage them to a whole array.

Our mission is to educate this and future generations. There aren't a lot of precedents for what we're doing, bringing young people in who have very little to no experience and getting them engaged as practitioners and building their skills and giving them the skills and

the knowledge and the ethos to carry that forward. That is the way the trades have been taught for centuries.

[07:28] **Vic:** My dream job is to work for the National Park Service and to be a preservationist. I'd love the idea of making people remember that people were here, that things happen here. I would love, love, love to keep doing what I'm doing. I would do this for fifty years if I could, 'til I'm a sixty-year-old man. I would love to be a preservationist for the rest of my life.

If you want to learn stuff, say yes. Say yes. If you do it and you love it, keep doing it. I learned something I love and I kept doing it, and I get to be here showing off what I love to do. I don't feel like I'm at work. I feel like I'm showing people my passion, and I'm so happy to be a part of it.

[08:01] **Jacobs:** One of my favorite parts about working with young people is when we finish a project and they stand there looking at the work we did, and they talk about when they're gonna bring their kids back and tell their kids that they were responsible for the preservation of John Adams's house or John F. Kennedy's house or the White House.

To be able to be part of history and part of the preservation of history helps place them in time. We're in a moment where young people are disconnected from the world around them, but we're giving them an opportunity to connect with our history and the founding of this country and all of the incredible events that have happened here in a really tangible way.

[09:04] **Hunt:** The *Building Trades* program brought together just some incredible young people who are so passionate about learning the crafts and their teachers, their mentors, who equally just so dedicated to passing on what they know to this next generation to see it carry forward.

I had heard about John Canning and his incredible artistry. He's really one of the great masters of decorative painting and architectural finishing in the United States. He's been responsible for restoring and preserving so many of our beautiful buildings here in the United States. He passed his skills and knowledge onto his daughter, Jackie Riccio, and then to his son-in-law, David Riccio, and then to his granddaughters, Zoe Riccio and Isabella Riccio. So, it was really thrilling to have the entire family here with us for the Festival this summer.

[09:55] **John Canning:** I found it a real pleasure working with Zoe and my other, uh, children, grandchildren. She appears to be very introvert, but she's not in reality. It's a pleasure

working with her, knowing that what directions you're giving her, she really is listening, and she's really following through with them.

[10:14] **Zoe Canning:** I am a production artist. A lot of people from our sites will send us tracings or historic photos of ornament and design that was originally there maybe hundreds of years ago. I go through and digitally remaster these designs, and I run an industrial-sized laser cutter. I cut them all out and precisely recreate an original pattern.

[10:39] **John Canning** [in demonstration]: I'm not supposed you would use one, but I would've used one with [indiscernible] brush.

[10:43] **Zoe Canning:** It's definitely interesting working with the family business, the dynamics of having your boss who is also a grandfather, but it's great because we just have our own sense of community. We're able to lean on each other. Bonding over jobs has been amazing, just all of us pulling together and working so hard to get a project finished and then stepping back when it's done, and, as a family, collectively looking in awe and seeing all the hard work and dedication that's going into it as a family. Knowing that we did it is one of the best feelings.

[11:16] **John Canning:** Almost fifty years ago, my wife and I founded a family company, the key word being here, family; my wife, being the administrator and taking care of the office. It was started out of my garage, the American way: small business, starting off small. Now, we work in about forty states.

My oldest daughter, Dorothy, she's a chief financial officer; Jackie, my middle daughter, and three grandchildren working for the company. So, we got three generations. I've always been involved in teaching apprentices. It was just natural that I would have my daughters and granddaughters.

Having served a five-year apprenticeship in Glasgow, Scotland, the whole process of a tradesman's apprenticeship is the handing down of experience, techniques, from one generation to the next generation. Apprenticeship, as I know it in the United States, back in the 1970s, was mostly unions that had the responsibility of training apprentices.

There were wonderful programs in the city of Glasgow at that time, where my apprenticeship had a program sponsored by the two parties, the masters federation and the government, whereby an apprentice was released one day a week from working to go back to college, and their wages would be uninterrupted. You would get paid for that one day that you were at college. That was on the condition that an apprentice attend three nights school a week. So that was one of the benefits of an all-round apprenticeship.

Based on my own experience, I try to put that into any programs that I'm involved in. We had an in-house apprenticeship program. We had it registered by the state of Connecticut. It, it was usually a three-year apprenticeship program. My apprentices were so good that, after one year, I just regarded them as journeymen and paid them journeyman's wages.

[13:18] **Zoe Canning:** Essentially being handed down these traditions, um, from my family has been so valuable. Being able to have my grandfather as a master craftsman teach me about keeping our historic traditions and learning things the way they've been done for hundreds of years. Being a teenager working my summers in our studio, learning what we do—it has been such a valuable asset to have his knowledge and his education. I can't get that anywhere else.

[13:45] **John Canning:** Whether it's conservation of fine art, decorative art, stone or wood, or any of the trades, it's important, before you do anything, to understand the original methods and materials of execution. That's primary. That requires research and study. Usually, we're pretty accurate, as accurate as we can be assisted by science and technology.

In-house, we have ornamental plastering, plastering, wood restoration, stone restoration—just about all of the disciplines and architectural preservation. Working in this industry, one becomes an amateur historian. It just—when you're doing the research on a building, you automatically are studying the history of the building. We're discovering things that's not widely known.

As an example, when we restored the San Francisco Opera House, we found out that it was the very first venue, 1945, of the United Nations. Fifty nations met in the opera house, and they thrashed out a charter. Then, officially the next year, 1946, they adopted the charter, and so the first meeting is considered to be in London, but the actual first meeting was in the San Francisco Opera House. When you're doing the research so that you can thoroughly understand the building and the decoration and techniques, you just can't help but get seeped in history.

It is hard to find skilled help. I'm encouraged, though, by the younger generation. I'm encouraged by the fact they want to work with their hands.

We're always going to need plumbers, carpenters, stone masons, painters, decorator artists to maintain these historic buildings. I'm hoping with all of these efforts, apprenticeships, and training, there'll be an abundance in the future.

[15:47] **Zoe Canning:** Youth and the future of culture is so important, involving young people from my generation and even younger generations to keep on these traditions and these

values and keep educating the younger people and keep getting them more involved. If we don't keep young people engaged and involved in what we do, things become lost.

[16:25] **Hunt:** To hear the young people speak about their crafts, about why making matters to them, the fact that it is something that they feel is larger than themselves, that they're contributing their excitement at learning and their appreciation for their mentors, the highly skilled craftspeople that are teaching them—that was really exciting.

The American College of the Building Arts is amazing. They got their start after Charleston was hit with the major hurricane, Hurricane Hugo, and when they went to rebuild, there weren't any artisans to restore the buildings that have been damaged and some enlightened individuals set about to create a school for the building arts, now the American College of the Building Arts.

At the festival, it was just wonderful to be able to have the young stone carving student there, Tatum Connor, with her craft professor Joseph Kincannon.

[17:16] **Tatum Connor:** I actually was attending a different university, and I was two years into my computational media degree, which is essentially computer science, and I was stuck behind a computer screen all day. I realized that was not the life that I wanted for myself.

I was interested in furniture making, so I was looking into different apprentice, apprenticeships, and I heard about the American College of the Building Arts from my old high school professor. So, I was looking at the architectural carpentry program. I went to the open house of the school, but when I walked through the stone shop, I was amazed at a whole new world that was opened up to me. I was like, "Okay, why not give this a shot instead?"

What's amazing about ACBA is that the college, across all the programs, all four years, there's only about 160 students. In my stone carving classes, currently, there's four of us, plus Joseph's in the room. He is able to give each individual instruction that we need, and that comes with creating a relationship with the professor that is harder to get at a larger university. I had a hard time finding my professors at the other university to get into office hours and to get that extra help that I might need after the class is over. ACBA offers a really unique experience in that the professors are so passionate about what they do. All of the professors there are eager to teach any and everybody. They're so willing to share their knowledge and develop a deeper, more meaningful relationship.

[19:00] **Hunt:** The students at the American College of the Building Arts leave after four years, and they have jobs in the traditional building trades. Young people can go to this college and learn hands-on building trades like stone carving and blacksmithing, timber

framing, architectural carpentry, and also get a liberal arts education and then go out into the world and be able to practice these crafts.

There's a demand. There's a need for craftspeople, both to preserve our historic buildings and to create new structures of beauty and excellence. Also, what's unique about the college is that it combines under one roof the building trades and architecture. It's so important for them to be able to learn about and appreciate and respect each other so the architects understand what goes into creating or preserving a building and the young people learning the crafts get a sense of what design is all about and the work of the architect.

[19:56] **Connor:** Recently, there has been a pushback and a slightly more negative view towards the trades, which is such a shame because our world, our built environment, is nothing out those trades men and women.

I don't really know anybody else who's doing these trades like I am. Most of the young men and women that I know through the school or through connections that I've gotten through the school, it certainly has opened a whole new path.

[20:22] **Reiniger:** I think people are missing the chance to work with their hands and to bring their own creativity to the built environment. We saw this with a lot of the participants who came. They were excited to talk about the fact that they had a hand in designing or building or having a piece of a building or a structure or something that's out there.

[20:51] **Connor:** The projects that I've done at school have been designed by our professor, the head of the department, Joseph.

Joseph has been my professor all four years. I remember, day one, I walked into the shop, and we all met, and Joseph said, "Okay, we're going out to the alleyway, and we're splitting the stone," and I had no expectations for this class because it was really something I knew nothing about. Right outside the college, we split four rocks for each of the four students, and then we brought them inside, lifted them manually, and then put them on some metal dowels to push them across the floor, much like the Egyptians, Romans, and Greeks might have done to move larger stones. We had to shape the stone, and then we went into more ornate carving. It was all done by hammer and chisel. We didn't use any grinders. We didn't use any pneumatic tools.

[22:03] **Hunt:** This generation of young people, many of them are yearning to work with their hands to make something lasting. I think they value the chance to look back and either say "I made that" or "I preserve that." Like, "I lent my skill and knowledge to helping preserve this historic building or to create a new building." That's beautiful.

Many of the young people who are learning the crafts were talking with the public about the importance of the human touch and the humanity of a handmade, I think they value that, and I'm so excited that these young people are going out into the world with not only the knowledge and skill that they've been learning but this incredible desire to create. We're all gonna be the better for it.

[22:49] **Reiniger:** I think we should always include youth in our festivals and in the planning process. They bring a voice and ideas that we need at the table. We're always trying to make the young people in this area aware that this Festival is happening, and it's for them too. It's important that they see themselves in the Festival.

[23:10] **Hunt:** This young generation coming up, they care deeply, and they're very serious about contributing to culture and society, and they've got just such a unique and heartfelt vision for what our future should be like. I just have a great deal of hope for the future. Working with the young people at the Festival, the interns that I've mentored—we're in good hands.

[23:52] **Shauri Thacker:** *Folk Tales: Youth and the Future of Culture* is a production of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Kirby Ewald produced this episode.

Mentorship isn't just a learning model for artisans. Next episode, tune in for how our youth musicians are learning and passing on their skills.