

Folk Tales Podcast

Episode 9: It Takes a Village

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.

[00:27] **Tyler Nelson:** The National Mall—when we get it, it's just grass, trees, and gravel.

[00:33] **Sarah Roffman:** We're raising a temporary city, right? We're raising it from the ground up, and we're installing the office trailers, the tents, the plumbing, the electrical, the stages, the audio equipment, the security overnight, the waste streams, right? Our sustainability program, composting everything.

Everything that comes to our site is something that we have brought there.

[00:54] **Tyler Nelson:** Designing the Festival site starts with a blank slate.

I am Tyler Nelson, the technical director for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

The Festival's a complex project. There's many moving parts, there's a lot of details, and it all starts in the design phase, uh, so looking at this blank slate that is the National Mall and figuring out what infrastructure we need, uh, what textualized spaces, you know, vernacular architecture, tent interiors, concessions, and starting from there. And it's a conversation and a collaboration with the curatorial team to figure out what the needs are.

[01:30] **Roffman:** My name is Sarah Roffman. I'm the production manager for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Overall, I work to keep all of our timelines and schedules built out and corresponding to the work that all of our different departments have to do. And so, keeping everybody on the same page, right? Moving a program from its curatorial research inception, development stages, all the way into technical, operational, production land so that the curators, of course, are spending months ahead of time—sometimes years—doing their research, and then we reach this pivotal moment where it has to, like, move into reality, right?

[02:06] **Nelson:** But once we have a pretty good sense for what is gonna be built and what we're gonna present on the Mall, we begin to look at each of those individual spaces and structures and stages and furniture pieces and then design those in our shop in Atlanta, Maryland, where we've got a 17,000-square foot carpentry, welding, and warehouse space. And I have a team of talented carpenters, designers, painters that build many of those elements from scratch.

[02:34] **Roffman:** Regardless of how long the Festival lasts, it takes about three weeks minimum to set it up. We'd like to have a little bit more time on the Mall, but, kind of, it depends on the permit and the partnership that we have with NPS and other activities that are happening on the Mall.

So three to four weeks, I would say, in advance to build everything out properly. Assume one to two weeks of Festival and then two to three weeks on the backend to make sure everything is cleared. We're kind of like the middle ground in a lot of ways, right? We're not at the very beginning for the research of the curatorial process or the design and build of the custom structures and the foundation, but then we bridge that gap, right? Getting—helping to get the site to the point of welcoming the participants.

Every year, on the very last day of our permit, so at the end of the three-week loadout, we all go outside together. It's usually on a Friday, and we call it "mooping," M-O-O-P, and mooping is, um, "matter out of place," and it is a much more fun way to describe "everyone picks up trash together," so anything left behind on the site, right?

True purpose of it is our commitment to our stewardship of the land. Symbolically, it's important that our whole Festival staff together goes out on the very last day of our permit for the year, and we all make sure that the site is pristine, and we're returning it in good condition to the National Park Service.

This is the Festival at its best, right? Bringing people together from different walks of life, different political opinions, different family backgrounds, different communities, and finding not just, like, common ground in their conversation but finding how we can help each other. We're constructing a platform for a lot of magical things to happen.

We're invested in bringing people together who are doing this cultural work across the country. I think that the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and our jobs here at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is to honor, showcase, bring together the people that are doing important arts. It's incredibly rewarding to see it come together piece by piece.

This is incredible, that something not, not just big but something very intricate is built in such a short amount of time. And then the temporal nature of festivals, I think, is something that brings the magic and makes them feel magical 'cause it all goes away.

[04:48] **Kate Haas:** To me, we don't have any national crisis of trash on the National Mall. I'm happy with that. We have collected over 37,000 pounds of compost, which is higher than last year. I'm definitely proud of how we came out the other side.

I'm Kate Haas. I'm the sustainability coordinator for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. During the pandemic, I was a production intern. It's different than my role now. [Laugh.]

So, sustainability has always been at the forefront of what I wanna do with my career. As the sustainability coordinator, my main goal is to think about sustainability in all aspects of the Festival and see how we can increase sustainability throughout our time on the Mall.

Primarily, this is through waste diversion. Waste diversion is basically trying to take as much waste that we produce and keeping it from entering the landfill, and we do this through resource recovery, which means that, with the waste that we produce, there are resources within it that actually can be reused or repurposed instead of being trashed in the landfills.

When planning a festival like the Folklife Festival, which is on the National Mall—the National Mall is a national park, so we work with the National Park Service—and so understanding, first and foremost, the parameters of that contract is really important to our program in addition to understanding the policies of the Festival itself.

Number one with that is that all of our concessionaires' products, their service wear, needs to be 100 percent compostable.

Our resource recovery stations are where the guests of the Festival can throw away their waste. These are stations that are staffed by volunteers. They have recycling, compost, and landfill waste receptacles, and our volunteers help the public sort their waste to ensure that our waste streams are clean and not polluted with other contaminants. We use a lot of photos in our signage to kind of guide guests so that, if you have any difficulty reading the sign, you have the pictures there to help you.

Our volunteer program is so critical to the work that we do. Our volunteers are trained to meet people where they're at and put a focus on public education, if that is what the guest is looking for as well. Our volunteers are trained to assist the guest with as little interaction as the guest wants, so if a member of the public just wants to hand them their waste and walk away from the station, that's fine. Our volunteers will sort it for them and take care of it. But if someone is looking to engage, looking for guidance, and looking for assistance

when it comes to disposing of their waste, that's where our volunteers are trained to engage, educate, and really connect with our members of the public.

We also try to work closely with our curatorial team, the programs team, to understand what waste needs the participants will have. If we have people who use dye water, paint, spray, paint, anything like that, we really try to think about what waste will be generated, how is it best disposed of sustainably, and how we can provide the infrastructure to the participants to bridge that gap.

At the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, sustainability is a core value, and we see this in cultural sustainability, and we also see it in the priority we place on environmental sustainability, and cultural sustainability and environmental sustainability go hand in hand. Sustaining the communities and their culture, you need to also have a sustainable world.

Including this aspect in the Festival—it's really crucial and aligned with our values at the Center, and I think it speaks to the sustainability of the event for years to come.

[08:50] **Diane Nutting:** Nothing is 100 percent accessible all the time. You can't really do that.

[08:54] **Tori Baker:** The hope is that you see that access is possible and, like, that level of access is possible. You, you expect more when you go somewhere else.

[09:06] **Nutting:** My name is Diane Nutting. I'm the visitor accessibility manager for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. A lot of what I do is work across all departments. It's one of the reasons I love my job. So, I work with all the departments to kind of think about accessibility, sort of from the beginning, thinking about it in terms of our design, our implementation, and also a little bit about representation too.

Our work starts several months before the Festival. One of the things that I do pretty early on is look at the site map, and I think about just the physical spatial layout, working with our programming team and also our tech team. Also, I sit down with the programmers, and one of the first things I do is I ask them to tell me what, what the intended visitor experience is in each tent and in each space they're in.

[09:54] **Baker:** I'm Tori Baker. I'm the accessibility assistant for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. I assist Diane and take over some of the administrative tasks.

Accessibility covers all of the disabilities, and sometimes we'll cover things that you might not consider as disabilities.

[10:09] **Nutting:** I use the phrase intentional invitation, and that's a phrase that I've used since I've started working at the Festival here.

What I mean by that phrase is really thinking about, I don't want someone to have to go through extra work to figure out whether or not we've considered that they might come to the Festival.

[10:27] **Baker:** You're thinking of people who can't hear; you're thinking of people who can't see; you're thinking of people who are moving differently; you're thinking of people who experience sensory input in, in different ways. Even within one disability, if you've met one disabled person, you've met one disabled person. That's one experience out of many. So, access is, is considering all of it.

[10:47] **Nutting:** We have tried to improve and increase our accessibility every year, so every year we're trying to make sure that we are challenging ourselves to take it one step further. So, we have a sensory guide for the Festival now.

And that's another thing is, like, having families be able to just be together, disabled and non-disabled siblings experience and experience together.

With Morning on the Mall, we have about an hour and a half before the Festival opens to the public. This is a program that provides opportunities for individuals and their families, individuals who might have sensory sensitivities or might want to engage in the space in a different way that's a little less noisy or chaotic or bright.

[11:26] **Baker:** The Smithsonian Folklife Festival is situated in a really unique position in that we bring a bunch of participants from across the country and across the world, and they experience the Festival, and they go out into their own communities. I want people to be able to come and experience the Festival without having to think about access. If we've done our job well enough, you kind of just get to experience the Festival.

[11:48] **Nutting:** We should live in a world where everyone is allowed to be their authentic selves at all the time. We always wanna make sure that the community knows about us and they know that the Festival is here and that we welcome them to come to the Festivals.

[12:09] **Jocelyn Callister:** I am Jocelyn Callister, the volunteer coordinator for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

Coordinating volunteers is a unique experience because you have people who are offering their free time, their talents, their energies, and sometimes all they want is to show up and

be told what to do. Sometimes, they have extreme ownership over this thing because they've been invited to give their time for free, and it's a fabulous balance of making sure that they are rewarded for that investment.

They get to engage in the way that they want to engage, and the Folklife Festival allows for such a variety of spaces to do that work. You wanna help to teach people about sustainability? You want to sit and take notes about the audio documentation of the presentations that are happening? There is something for everyone.

Coordinating volunteers for this event was really exciting to pull in people of all ages and interests and excite them about the work that we are doing and then temper their expectations to working in the hot sun and for four hours standing on your feet and spreading the word about the Festival.

So, we had over 600 people apply to be a volunteer for the Festival. Of those 600 people, we had over 350 who actually, uh, showed up on site. Most people worked an average of a day and a half. Some people came for one four-hour shift. Some people came all six days at the Festival.

Volunteers are so critical to the work of the Festival. We have full-time staff who build both the content and the physical structures of the Festival, and then we have some contract folks who come in and help to actually put all of the pieces together. But we could not hire enough people, even with all the money that we could get together, to actually have enough feet on the ground to make the Festival a success.

We had so many ways that volunteers could participate. So, uh, we had kind of the Festival-wide helpers, which is like the info booth; the accessibility team, making sure that people got around and got the services that they needed; our sustainability team, helping teach about sustainability and actually helping to sort our trash. And then we also had the program areas that really focused on skateboarding, music, building trades, learning together, family activities.

This year, we had volunteers who were helping to teach people how to chisel even though they had only learned how to chisel 20 minutes previous from the master stoneworker. That kind of involvement is invaluable to making the Festival actually happen. It was also really special to see our young volunteers come back day after day, not just because they could earn their volunteer hours for their school program, but they wanted to work in all the different areas so that they could see: What else is happening; what are the youth of the rest of the country doing? And teaching them that they might be able to grow in as well.

So, our volunteers come back year after year. We have some volunteers who have done over thirty Festivals, although 57 percent of our volunteers this year were brand new. These first-time volunteers are the future of the Festival volunteers. Our longtime volunteers are the ones who are helping to shepherd those people along to continue this legacy that volunteers come to help run the Festival as a whole. That is really something special that the work here makes an impact in people's lives that they're willing to give of their time, um, to come back here after year.

[15:49] **Arlene Reiniger:** The Festival presents itself as tremendous learning platform all unto itself. They may not realize it in the moment, but our interns contribute a lot to our work. It's invaluable.

I'm Arlene Reiniger, program coordinator for *Next Generation Artisans in the Traditional Building Trades* and intern coordinator. I've been working with the internship program since—I can't remember exactly when—end of the 1980s or 1990s. I, I have seen a lot of interns come through the Center.

Our interns contribute to the production of the Festival and the behind-the-scenes work that goes into it. And then, once it's up and running, they learn a great deal from our participants who come to present their traditions, their expressive culture.

It may not feel like, in the moment, like they're getting a lot out of it, but I think just being exposed to all of this is huge. They're doing everything from helping us research photos for signs, if they come early enough; they're putting together what we call cheat sheets, which is information about each and every participant who is here to help our presenters with the information that they need. Yes, they're moving tables and chairs and adjusting sign frames and all of that, but it's all to help our participants be able to shine, to be able to present their skills and knowledge in the best way possible.

We do end up having a lot of interns who come back, either as an intern or as a seasonal worker. They come back on contract or hire for a next Festival.

I think we should always include youth in our Festivals and in the planning process. They bring a voice and ideas that we need. I think it's important that they see themselves in the Festival, either behind the scenes or on stage.

[17:54] **Shauri Thacker:** *Folk Tales: Youth and the Future of Culture* is a production of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Shauri Thacker and Nakanlaya "Por" Tupsamphan produced this episode.

Thanks for listening to our storytellers. *Youth and the Future of Culture* may be over, but we'll be back soon with a new season and new folk tales. You won't wanna miss the Smithsonian Festival of Festivals.