

Hello. I am your host, Neil Ward, and I'm grateful that you are taking time out of your day to learn more about design educators' paths to tenure. I truly appreciate it.

On this episode of Tell It To Neil, we're chatting with Assistant Professor of Graphic and Interactive Design, RJ Thompson, from Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio. Let's listen in.

**Neil:** Hi RJ, how are you doing today?

**RJ:** Hey, Neil, how's it going, man?

**Neil:** Pretty good, pretty good. So, you are the inaugural colleague on Tell It To Neil: that must feel good!

**RJ:** It is a great feeling. It's a dream come true. I remember when I sort of came up with the name I was like, pressuring you: I have to be the first and I actually got my way and it feels great!

**Neil:** Absolutely! So, let's get started.

**RJ:** All right.

**Neil:** So, for myself, I know my path into the Design field was kind of windy and non-linear, kinda like the creative process. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about how you found your way into the design field?

**RJ:** Sure, so...pardon me, I'm coming down with something. I've actually been doing Graphic Design in various manifestations for about twenty-two years, so to give you some context, I'm thirty-three, so I started doing Graphic Design when I was eleven, and I came to it in two different sort of directions. One was I'm a huge Marvel Comics fan. I was as a child and still am and I had received a Captain America action figure for my tenth birthday and this was right around the time that I got my first computer and with that computer we also got a printer and this Captain America action figure is sacrilege. It came without a shield. You can't have a Captain America toy without a shield, right? So I used this Crayola design program just some like really cheap thing and I made a shield and it looked nothing like Captain America's shield but I made it and it was cool to me and I printed it out and pasted it onto some cardboard and then all of a sudden my action figure had a shield. And then it just kind of blew up from there, so, simultaneous to that, my best friend at the time, his uncle was an independent sort of racecar driver, so

he ran a shop where he would work on his car but he would also work on other cars and they had a vinyl machine and I actually got exposed to vinyl at age eleven and getting to design various stickers and put them on the car and it was awesome to see that designed application process so young. So since I would say from age eleven, I just started in design, and then moved into Photoshop and then I moved into coding, making my own websites and doing that in Dreamweaver UltraDev, which at the time was a macro-media product and having to reverse engineer HTML because, you know, I often say educators make the worst students, so of course I had to learn it backwards, and then I migrated into video work and then I migrated from there into 3D modeling and the animation, so by the time I was eighteen I had done 3D modeling, video work, Photoshop, Illustrator, print work and doing the details and it was that's sort of where it all began and I walked into a Tech school knowing so much more than my peers and I just kind of breezed through that and went into...I transferred to a four year University, got my Bachelor's then and entered the field.

**Neil:** So you sound like you were really prepared for the field!

**RJ:** I would say yes, I was, yeah.

**Neil:** So, once you did get into the field, where did you work? What positions did you hold?

(04:33)

**RJ:** So, my first job I was probably nineteen and I was a freelance Graphic Designer for Blair. Blair is a corporation that sells clothing products to senior citizens and it was as exciting as you could probably imagine it was. And I was just doing Photoshop work, doing product images for the website and the cool thing about it was is that I was getting paid like twenty five bucks an hour because where I grew up, which is where Blair was located, they didn't have any talent; there was no talent, everyone moved away, so they were really hard up for Graphic Designers to come in and do the work. And then I would work that job in holidays and summers between semesters and then right around the time I was ready to graduate from CalU, I actually got a job as a magazine designer, print designer for the Pennsylvania Educational Publishing Association which was a non-profit organization operated by my Professor and I worked with him over the summer and into the first part of the fall and then I got laid off. And I was out of work for about a month to a month and a half, and this is 2007 and then I got picked up at Heinz North America and I was a Graphic Designer on-site for Heinz for a little over two years. In the latter part of that time at

Heinz I started my own LLC, formalized my own design practice so I was working on client work when we had down-time at Heinz and also I started my Master of Fine Arts degree at Savannah College of Art & Design while I was still at Heinz so I was really busy, very active at that time. After Heinz, I actually left Heinz to be a Visiting Professor at La Roche College and that was about 2009 and then I've been teaching ever since.

**Neil:** So, that kind of leads me into the next question. As you were working at Heinz, what was the "a-ha" moment where you thought, you know what? I want to get into design education?

**RJ:** So, yeah, this is great and this is actually one of my favorite stories. So, when...I was in this Tech School, it was in downtown Pittsburgh. It has since closed and two of the teachers I had were just so very, very gracious with their time and more specifically patient with me; I was the kind of student that I would bother you during your office hours and I would bother you about things that had nothing to do with class or even school: I just wanted to learn as much about design as I could. So, several years had passed since I got that Associate Degree and it was, I would say, the summer of 2009, early summer 2009 and one of those teachers that I was latched onto, he had seen me on the street because Heinz was located almost directly across the street from the School. He was like: hey, what do you do? And I said, well I'm just gonna go get a poor man's meal over at Au Bon Pain and that to me is like bread and macaroni and cheese and he was like, no, don't do that. Why don't you come check out our portfolio review? We could really use you and your insight now that you're working. I'm like, OK. So, I went over and this was my first sort of portfolio review exposure as a practicing professional and I ended up staying there for two hours and I only have...I'd only have like forty-five minutes for lunch and I didn't tell my Art Director where I was going; I just disappeared for two hours and I had contemplated what kind of lie I could tell to get out of it, like, oh, I was in the bathroom or I was having some gastro problems or something but I just straight up said, there's a portfolio review across the street and I spent the entire time talking to those kids and telling them everything that I could within a short amount of time and my Art Director, who was a good friend, he had to play that...I'm your boss and I'm upset with you card, and called me into his office and I'm just...I just, I couldn't take it seriously; I'm just like...because at the end of it he's just like...you should've told me; I would have went over with you, we'd have stayed out for the entire afternoon. But instead, finger-wagging. But I realized that I didn't care what he had to say about my absence; I just flat-out did not care. And that's when I realized like, hey, you know, I might have something here. I had a completely different value-shift and shortly after that I applied to the MFA in Graphic Design Program: actually, strike that.

(10:01)

An opportunity came up where I, at this time I had been looking at graduate programs, so I was interested in an MFA but I was kind of concerned about the teaching market and so I was looking at graduate degrees in non-profit management, arts administration and things like that. And then SCAD had a promotional tour going around and they actually had their Faculty going to all these different cities and I drove out to one of their events and I had my portfolio reviewed by one of the Faculty. Ironically a person whom I did not even have in my graduate program but a person that was very well respected, regardless. And she's like, you have to apply; your experiences are great, you're on the AIGA Pittsburgh Board, you're in the community, you're doing all these things but your work is awesome. So, I applied and I ended up getting a twenty thousand dollar scholarship to do the entire program online, so while I was at Heinz and at La Roche as a Visiting Professor, I was still doing my MFA education and it worked out really, really well but that's sort of the genesis of how I migrated into education. So, all of these things sort of happened simultaneously.

**Neil:** So, as you were going through your MFA program at SCAD, can you talk a little bit about your work during Graduate School and maybe a little bit about your thesis project, if you had one.

**RJ:** Yes, I absolutely did, and that's a story unto itself, so I started off really strong in my MFA program with a class called Design Methodology which turned my world upside-down. This was a...so we weren't really taught, or at least I wasn't, design thinking and design methodology, like, the creative problem-solving process; it was mostly through associate, in my Bachelor's, it was mostly practical, which is great, but it's like I didn't get a really strong education in how to be a creative problem-solver, so Design Methodology opened me up to this entirely different new world of how to solve problems and I learned a significant amount from that class and the...one of the projects that we had to do was we actually had to define Graphic Design and I basically had defined it as through chaos comes clarity and you know, it was represented by these red, 3D paper red cubes that I taped up on the wall and they just looked...they were all concentrated and stacked on one another. No joke: I taped them onto the wall and then clarity was obviously represented by green and then they would thin out and take order on the wall so it was this...I had never manifested Graphic Design in that way before so at the end of the course, we had to make a design methodology book that encapsulated the entire ten weeks of experience and I ended up getting an award from the AIGA for that book and that's when I realized that, OK, every single project I

do in Graduate School, and this is pressure I put on myself, needs to be the absolute best that I can make it, award level type of work, so I submitted tons of projects to competitions and things like that and some of them got in, some didn't and that's fine. But I took it ultra-seriously, and it also helped that I had a lot of availability, the time in my schedule to produce good work and so around 2011 I enter my thesis stage and I actually take six months to do my entire thesis and I wanted to approach the thesis not as a project that needed done for graduation but as a project that would be a stepping stone into a teaching job.

(14:14)

So, the average MFA SCAD Graphic Design thesis is about thirty pages total, so that includes a written component, so hypothetically like a twenty page paper and then like the equivalent of a ten page design piece. Leave it to me; I wrote a two hundred and fifty page document with a thirty-five page visual component and my thesis advisor, who was the teacher that I had for that Design Methodology course, I think, had a lot of respect for my intent and ambition but she's just like, there's no way in Hell I'm reading all of this. I'll read it once. And then eventually, I took a break from it, I got another thesis advisor and it was her time being a first-time thesis advisor so she's like, I'm only ready this once. At a certain point my wife Erin, who was my girlfriend at the time, she had to read it twice just to edit the punctuation. But she's a grammar nerd so she loved it and now I have this huge document that's my thesis and I put myself through that process because I wanted to understand what a full-blown research project was and everything that went into it; all the late nights and the stress and I haven't done a project like that since, ironically, at least in terms of research because I'm more efficient and my topic, by the way, I really buried the lead there; my topic was about template systems. Design Templates that lead to creating influence that irreparably damages people. So you could look at it from World War Two Home Front propaganda, inspiring soldiers to go off to war and be maimed or killed or whatever, and comparing that with contemporary cosmetic advertising which introduces by dysmorphia, plastic surgeries and just all kinds of neuroses and issues there and these two completely separate things actually cause problems with humans and it was a lot of fun to write and read about, so that's why it was so in-depth.

**Neil:** And such a light topic!

**RJ:** Such a light topic, yeah! And I have a pretty nice stable of adjectives that I use, so my papers were very adjective-heavy and that led to the length. So...yeah, I didn't do any favors there but I'm proud of it. I never got it published; I didn't really pursue it beyond that point because my interests had changed.

**Neil:** You did all of this research for your thesis project and then now you're out into academia, so can we assume that this transferred into your classroom, into projects or did you go a completely different route?

**RJ:** So, I ended up at my first University, College rather, La Roche, I just incorporated it as a lecture and when I started at YSU in 2012, Youngstown State University, I incorporated it into my History and Theory of Graphic Design course, so I introduce it right around the time that we introduce propaganda and talk about...so we lead in with Art Deco and we get through...we enter the late thirties and forties and then I start talking about propaganda and then it just kind of goes on from there, so I do a whole lecture on that and I don't assign a project around it but I still include it as a lecture, so I still get value out of it and my students are impressed with it. One of the things that I had done in that thesis was in both the dozen World War Two Home Front propaganda designs and a dozen contemporary cosmetic ads, I counted all of the letters, all of the words that were used and all of the colors, so, mathematically I could compare and contrast and by the time I'm done with that lecture they're just like, you're the biggest nerd ever and you did all of that work for us to tell you the obvious. And I'm just like: yeah, I know it's obvious but I have to substantiate that through data and research and they're just like: whatever, nerd! But yeah, it's mostly just a lecture at this point.

**Neil:** That's still a great compliment from students!

**RJ:** It is; I'll take it. Absolutely!

**Neil:** So, you are teaching now.

**RJ:** Yes.

Neil: At Youngstown State University.

**RJ:** Yes.

**Neil:** But how did you get there? So you were working at Heinz, you were going through an MFA program and then you graduated and then you were trying to get into academia, so what was...what was that path like?

(19:59)

**RJ:** Sure. Sorry. So, I was at Heinz and I was on site in downtown Pittsburgh at their Headquarters and I was doing my MFA program and I'd say in early...I don't want to say...I can't even pinpoint the time. It happened at some point but they transferred me down to part-time and then they moved me out to another site where I did nothing all day long and it was great because I got all my school-work done and I got paid to do it and that's awesome. But there came a point where...I know what it was, OK. So, that summer of 2009 I was doing my program, I was on part-time and then La Roche, I applied to La Roche as an Adjunct and they hired me to teach an Interactive Design course in the summer at night, so I was doing that and then they hired me as a Visiting Professor for two years at La Roche. The second year of me being a Visiting Professor, I also taught two...three Adjunct classes at Carnegie Mellon University and at the end of I'd say 2011, I got a job teaching at Edinboro University, Pennsylvania. I was there a year and towards the end of that, a tenure track job opened up at Youngstown State which was closer to my home in Pittsburgh, despite being in Ohio and I applied for that job and it was a temporary position but the sort of, you know, I did a temperature check at Edinboro and their union, it looked like they were going to strike and they didn't know if there was going to be a tenure track job opening up so I just took a risk and the guy that I worked with at La Roche, the Department Chair there, he had actually gotten a job at Youngstown State so he was the connective tissue between those two jobs and I've been at YSU ever since. So yeah, that's sort of how it all panned out.

**Neil:** It's a track that I think a lot of us educators have followed; I know myself, I was at a couple of institutions before I landed at Drake University. So, as somebody who is graduating from an MFA program and wants to get into academia, there's a lot of choices; lots of choices. Community Colleges, R1 Universities, Teaching Universities, contract jobs, tenure track jobs. Can you shed any insight or talk about your experience at each of those institutions?

**RJ:** Sure. So...and for those of you listening, if you hear my daughter in the background, she's having a hard day, so, sorry! She had to see the Doctor today. So, at La Roche I really cut my teeth on teaching and politics. La Roche is a small, private, Catholic school in the north hills of Pittsburgh and they produce

really good Graphic Designers. Or at least they did when I was there, ha-ha! But when I was there, I really got to learn how to be a teacher and be an effective mentor but I also learned how to stay away from politics and how to not get involved and how to navigate those waters. La Roche being so small, folks are fighting over a lot of territory and it just, you know, I was a Visiting Professor so I didn't have a ton of investment at that point. I didn't have a ton of investment in the politics because I knew at the end of two years, I'd be gone, so why even bother? Nevertheless, I was given ample opportunity to re-define the curriculum and I created a sort of a working class studio where the students did real work for real clients and we had a lot of success with that. And I was able to re-vamp their Interactive Design program. I've only ever been an Interactive Design Professor. While I can and do teach print classes, at each institution I've taught it, that's been my specialization, so that's all I've been primarily hired for. At Carnegie Mellon, talk about an experience. So, Carnegie Mellon was hard for me because it is obviously a world-renowned institution that produces amazing work, amazing students and it's taught by amazing educators. But the culture there wasn't really palatable for me. I'd just got picked up and dropped into the deepest part of the ocean and expected to swim back to shore and quite frankly, I just wasn't prepared; I was just way too young. My God, I was maybe twenty-five when I was teaching there.

(25:37)

**Neil:** That's pretty young!

**RJ:** Yeah. I was teaching...twenty-five or twenty-six, I was teaching web design and I enjoyed the students, they did great work but one thing I learned is that they are entirely self-sufficient; I feel like I could have just walked in, gave them the assignment and left; don't even bother lecturing, they just automatically know or something, it's just kind of unreal, But I got dropped into the deep end and I did swim back to shore but it took me a long time and it hurt. So I was just way too young to teach there. That doesn't mean I'm not grateful: I mean, I was blown away by it. Edinboro: Edinboro was a two hour drive one way from my home where I was living in the north side of Pittsburgh. Two hour drive one way. So I was in the car four hours a day for four days a week, for an entire academic year. And I was just exhausted all the time. I had to teach a New Media...sorry...yeah, a New Media course which was basically web design and that was fine, it was a similar model to what I'd been teaching previously but I had to teach Intro to Graphic Design and I had to teach it without a computer lab.

**Neil:** Wow! How did that work?



**RJ:** Well, see, I grew up in the Edinboro area, so I naturally had a good rapport with the students, I knew where they were from, I've experienced the culture, I know everything that they do cultural-wise from up there and I gotta tell you, it was refreshing to not use the computer to create Graphic Design because it really tested the hand skills of the students and me for that matter. But at a certain point like we needed to use the computer and these students didn't have laptops either. So it was....but the computer lab that they had there had maybe ten computers and I taught a class of twenty-one, twenty-two people, so I had to heavily revise my curriculum to accommodate all of these folds and despite those challenges, they did awesome work; I was really pleased with it and I enjoyed my experience there but it became very clear to me that not only did I not want to essentially move back home; my now wife then girlfriend Erin was not going to move with me, so I needed to find something closer and then on top of it not being tenure track, I just didn't know what the future was going to hold, so...and you know the thing at that time too was I was running my own design business; I had two employees and I was teaching all the time so they basically ran my shop and I just dealt with clients and I didn't design anything. I remember one time we were producing a Prod2 like seventy-five page product catalogs for a sunglass company here in Pittsburgh and they did it all by themselves; I barely did...I barely had a hand in anything. I just creative directed the whole thing but we had to pull two or three days' worth of all-nighters to get it done on time and it was just...it was brutal. I'm surprised I wasn't in the hospital with dehydration or something like that. But yeah, so really busy time of my life but I'm glad that I eventually moved on to YSU and then I also merged my company with two others to form a new agency and, you know, made things a little bit easier for me.

**Neil:** Well, that's good. But as you've indicated, you do like to be busy.

**RJ:** I can't stand being bored. I'm at the point now where if I have energy, I have to be doing something productive with it. The only time I sort of don't do that is when I just have to listen to my body and crash on the couch and watch Netflix or something. There are times when I do nothing, but I could be sitting on the couch, bingeing a show, but in my brain I'm working on something.

(30:00)

**Neil:** Gotcha! Well, for our listeners who may be in a tenure track position or not, and they're not quite happy where they are or if they see a posting for a different job that might fit their skills a little bit better, what advice would you have for them?

**RJ:** Well, I would approach this particular topic a few different ways. First off, just by default rather, our first jobs, we have to go where tenure track is offered. We just...you have to go there. You have to get it and you've gotta make the drive and it's brutal. You never think that you'd be driving as much as you do as a teacher but you do. So, if you find that first job, go where the work is and you've got basically a five year buffer between the job you have and then either tenure and promotion or the next job. So, if you find that the culture you're a part of just isn't working out for you, or maybe you don't like where you live, whatever the issue, I would absolutely say, don't be afraid to apply and don't be afraid to be honest with your intent for applying. That doesn't mean you stop doing a good job with where you're at, no matter how hard it may be for whatever reason: you've just gotta power through it but for someone like me, my sort of career has not been defined by the amount of money that I make but by the type of work that I can do and how satisfying it is to me as an artist, designer, academic, etcetera, so you have to ask yourself is the kind of, is your life supporting the kind of work that you're capable of creating and if you're at a place where that is not the case then you need to move on and to a greater extent, I would argue, don't be afraid to look in the private sector: go back to professional practice if that means that you're able to create work that satisfies your soul. Because academia can be hard, it can be really, really hard. And so draining, just like working anywhere else; it has its pitfalls, to say the least. But it also has really great benefit. So, if you're right on the cusp of, you know, you're in the pre-tenure fourth year, I would say, keep applying and if something lands: great. If not, that's fine too; you're still going to have to go through the tenure and promotion. I would actually argue in favor of going through tenure and promotion because you might get both and then if you apply to a new job and you become a finalist and you enter into negotiations because they want to hire you, you can transfer in with rank and tenure already applied depending on the situation. It seems like those two things are really rare these days to get at a new position. But it provides you a bargaining chip. So, I would argue in favor of some temporary permanence in a sense. But then the other thing that, you know, I would bring up and I just realized this. Last month and again today, so last month there's a gentleman that was at the UCDA Conference who teaches...he was teaching at South Dakota State University and some of you likely know him, but I won't mention him by name, and then he was tenure, full Professor and then he wasn't. He got a new job at Kean teaching in China. But from my understanding, I could be incorrect, he started at the very bottom of the tenure ladder again and you know, I don't know how old he is but I'm assuming he has kids and, you know, he

might be an empty-nester but that's a hard thing to give up, that full Professor's salary and the rank and everything and yeah, he's in China doing some new and exciting things but to go from the top back to the bottom, it just demonstrates a very...I would say, a risky choice but you have to respect it because it was...I feel as I interpret it, it was a risk made not by finances but by personal satisfaction and then just today, I reached out to a colleague who was a NASAD reviewer for YSU and had been at this one institution for well over a decade; he was a full Professor and a Department Chair and I just happened to look at his LinkedIn profile and in May, he started as a full Professor and Department Chair at a completely different University in another State and I couldn't believe it, I'm like, Holy crap, this guy, he had this huge presence at this place and now, I don't know where he's gone and he's somewhere else and I just...I love the fact that they did that despite the risks that it posed.

(35:30)

So, for those of you that may not be totally settled in your position or wanting to even be settled, there are many, many great opportunities out there that can be completely transformative to you as a person, as a designer, artist, educator, and you're not necessarily held down to the highly coveted tenure and promotion and I gotta tell you, one thing that I realized after seeing that is that, wow, I all of a sudden don't care about these two things that I've been told to care about forever: go for tenure, go for tenure, get the promotion, get the promotion and I'm just like: these things don't even really matter to me any more. It's kind of surprising because it's about, for me, it's not about the salary and the rank, it's about the work and the reward I get from that work and the positive reinforcement from my peers in the education community, in the design industry and the personal satisfaction I get and being able to put more emphasis in that sort of channel, as opposed to appealing to those that rank above me; it's been liberating. So, I did go through...I did go through tenure; I got tenure; I did not receive promotion, which is as I understand it a very rare thing to have happened. I don't quite know what to attribute that to. I'm sure that I have some shortcomings somewhere but if any of you are familiar with the tenure and promotion process, sometimes the shortcomings are in the eye of the beholder, so for whatever reason, I didn't get promotion that's OK: I'll apply again and again until I get it and that's fine. In the meantime, I'm not letting it deter me from the innovative work that I'm doing in all these different atmospheres, these different environments and you know, one thing I can say is, if you don't feel your work is valued internally where you're teaching, it likely and absolutely has value to people outside of that institution in the design community, education community and elsewhere, so don't feel like if you're not getting good traction from your Faculty peers on your work, that doesn't mean it's not valued by others and I think

that's a really important thing to recognize because not getting tenure or promotion is so crushing if it happens to you and how you approach it makes all the difference.

**Neil:** Absolutely. And you're so humble when you're talking about it too!

**RJ:** Well, I don't really even know how to talk about it because like, not getting promotion was a surprise to me, especially after having five years' worth of people telling me how I'm doing a great job and how my reviews have always reflected extremely positive and I don't want to get into the weeds on how it happened or why it happened; the fact is, it happened and it's up to me to react to it in a manner that is professional but also productive for me. And that's just how I approach it.

**Neil:** So tell us a little bit about that tenure and promotion process? So, what did you have to go through at your institution?

(39:30)

**RJ:** Sure. So, at Youngstown State you have to submit your dossier, your basically, package. I refer to it as a package because it feels like it weights ten pounds. It's a huge four-inch binder that you have to fill with evidence of teaching, scholarship and service across the entire time that you're tenure track educator. And at YSU, you submit it and to HR, the Senior Faculty review it and then eventually you do a presentation, your tenure presentation and then you find out shortly after that if you got tenure. Simply put, you do the presentation, they have a meeting afterwards; they either vote on it there, they schedule another meeting to do a vote. Either way, you find out in about two weeks. And then that occurs at the very beginning of the Fall semester and then promotion, the promotion presentation with the Department occurs in, towards the end of that Fall semester like in late November and then you don't find out really, I think in some cases you find out before the end of the semester if the Department decided to promote you. Then you go to the College Committee which is comprised of a committee of educators from the different departments in the College; in this case Theatre, Communications, Art and Music and you do a presentation for them and they decide on whether to promote you and then it goes to the Dean who decides to promote you and there's no presentation, there's just a review and then the Dean makes the recommendations to the Provost who ultimately decides on whether you're promoted or not. And that's the process and that takes about an entire academic year.

**Neil:** Well, and just as a side-note for our listeners, this is one tenure and promotion process at one university and each university will have their own unique process of tenure and promotion. One thing that I'm curious about, as you were talking about the tenure and promotion package and then the folder or binder of evidence. What type of items did that consist of? Was that programs from where you were presenting or was that peer feedback? What were some examples that you put in there?

**RJ:** So, my binder was broken down into Teaching, Scholarship and Service. Three basic areas. So, in Teaching, I showed my syllabi, the absolute best work product that my students produced in all of my classes, any associated awards or recognitions that my students achieved through the projects that I gave them or any grants that I had received based off of that work, which there were some, and just really showing up the student work. In Scholarship, I shared everything from articles I've written, to conference presentations, to the grants that I've received to all of the awards and recognitions that I've received throughout the years and all of the things that you would think would be appropriate for the Scholarship and then Service, I would show a list of all of the Department, College, University and Community sort of committees I've been on throughout the years, proof of some of the works that I've done through them, identifying areas where I've volunteered or I've contributed to the community of Youngstown in a way that was perhaps academic but also not. So it's really a very comprehensive overview of what you do in the University, in the Department, in the College and in the Community across Teaching, Scholarship and Service. So, it's a real behemoth to try to tackle and parse into the appropriate areas because with me, I have this sort of philosophy, it's called Adaptive Synergy. So, if I...if I create one thing, how can I use that one thing to hit as many different initiatives as possible? So, if I create...if I create a lesson plan for my class, where else can I use that lesson plan? Well, maybe I could give it to one of my High School educator peers and they can teach it in their class. Or maybe I come out and teach it in their class and maybe I also give that lesson plan to you, Neil, where you modify it and you teach it in your class and then you give it back to me and then we decide hey, you know, we really have something here: why don't we write a book about it? So then, OK, well then we write a book about it. Who do we send this book to? Who can publish it? So like if there's one ounce of effort, how can you get ten ounces out of it basically, that's the best way I can sort of make sense of it. So, when you say I'm busy all the time, that's absolutely true but like, one thing I'm trying to apply twenty different outcomes to and I think that can be very confusing because it becomes very nebulous and it's like a web. It's not even a web; it's like a rolled-up ball of string with different colors of string, it's just like you make it into a ball and there it is. It's very hard to make sense of despite the fact that it works.

(45:46)

So, trying to articulate that in a tenure and promotion binder it was difficult and I think that's where one of my shortcomings was, because it's like, oh I get one grant, like a thousand dollar grant that was based off of work that my students did in the classroom that I'm having them re-do again for this grant but I'm also having High School-ers do it in the community and the grant is going to pay for all of the work to be printed and then we're going to distribute it at all these different sites, so I feel like I have this problem where I've got this sort of additive, grand thinking and then it's only...it only goes out and when I try to pull it back in, I have a hard time writing about it because it only really makes sense to me and I think that's where one of my shortcomings was in my process. But that's sort of Adaptive Synergy, yeah.

**Neil:** That seems like an excellent...an excellent way to describe your Teaching, Scholarship and Service, especially for tenure, that's something I think a University would just be all over.

**RJ:** Yeah, and you know, unfortunately I sort of coined that phrase after...I did it last month as a matter of fact: that's when I realized, like, oh: this has a phrase and a concept I can apply to it. So maybe I'll talk about it some day in a conference or something but it's been a successful sort of philosophy for me.

**Neil:** Well, going on that, when you speak about this to your colleagues, whether they're in design or they're not in design, do they get what you're trying to do or does it kind of fall on deaf ears?

**RJ:** I would say at least at my...at home base with my Design Faculty, they're just like...there's just a built-in trust, so if I say, I have an idea they're just like, just stop, do it. We trust you. Tell us when you need us and we'll be there, so they've kind of been conditioned at this point but when, you know, I'm talking with you or some of our peers and like, and this is not a criticism by any means, I have to explain it and eventually you'll get to a point where just like, oh RJ needs me for something, I'll just do it so leave me alone! But I would say with the people I'm close to, they sort of understand how my brain works and that's...that goes a long way but others there's a bit of a teaching process where I have to say, here's the idea and here's how we can apply it to all of these different constituencies and that mostly manifests itself as a brain-storming session. Some people get it, some people don't. It especially helps with having people that have a background in entrepreneurship or design, even like practice; they haven't always been just a teacher, they've been like, oh, I've worked as a thing at this place. Like, OK. So you understand what corporations are like outside, you know what working is like outside of academia: that helps a lot

because Adaptive Synergies in the corporate world; I mean, that's all they do every day. I mean, that, if you think about it, it's just like a...a marketing and advertising strategy, so it's like: we've developed one commercial. How do we apply that to billboards, web ads, YouTube commercials? It's just that sort of what I do, I just apply it to people and organizations. So, in some cases, I'd say for the most part it's understood. There's a bit of a learning curve almost always because again, you can't read my mind so I have to articulate it. But I think it all comes together in the end.

(50:00)

**Neil:** Yeah, well, speaking of the end...

**RJ:** No!

**Neil:** I'm going to put air quotes around that.

**RJ:** No, we're not done. Never and let's just keep going. I didn't come up with the name for this podcast for nothing. We have to talk for two more hours. Actually, my throat's like dying inside so that's fine.

**Neil:** It's OK, just a few more questions.

**RJ:** Absolutely.

**Neil:** Would you, do you have any insights or advice for those that are working their way towards promotion and tenure?

**RJ:** You know, there are some Junior Faculty following me in this process and I feel that I can give them advice and most of it would be good but each of us, one's in Education, one's in Digital Media, so they're still unique snowflakes unto themselves, even me, so they can't totally follow what I've done. And I'm not even saying what I've done is a model to follow necessarily. But I would say for our peers in Design, you know, you're only limited by your ambition and you know, sometimes a high frequency of activity is not always the best thing. It works for me because I never stop working. But for some people, they like to have one project that they can really hone in on and deeply focus on and understand and definitely don't be afraid to dedicate that time to your projects. So, time management is really, really important; devote

the right amount of time to what you need to do to get it done at a high level. I don't always do that and it catches up with me because I then have to take time away from other things to make sure that it's, you know, what I need done is done at my level of expectation.

I would also whole-heartedly recommend that you let people in. Because of my busy-ness, well first up, I don't really have a taste for politics and I also really don't care for water-cooler talk and just passably socializing in the hallway. I want to spend time with my peers, but it's like I would rather do it in a concentrated way that doesn't have pressure. So, I would encourage you guys to like, say, hey, fellow peer: let's go out for a coffee or let's go out for lunch and let's learn about each other as humans and not just as professionals. Don't even talk about art and design; don't even talk about it. Talk about other things and that's one thing that I kind of miss is that I don't have the relationships, I feel I don't have relationships with my Faculty peers where I can say: hey, how's, you know, how's your son's cold? Or I don't know people on that deeply...not even deep but in a personal level that when I talk to them about it, it comes off as sincere, right? That doesn't mean I don't care but I'm just so busy all the time doing these other things that I don't make room for friendships and I've always sort of been taught that you don't have to like the people that you work with; that's not to say that I don't like them. I like everyone that I work with just fine, but I think it speaks to you don't have to interact with people as a necessity to get your job done and I'm just, when I'm on the job, I'm job-focused. When I'm off the clock, I'm off the clock focused so like hey, if I want to be friends with one of these Faculty peers, let's go out for a beer after five pm, or let's go out for lunch where the pretences are dropped and you know, you can actually have a conversation with a human being and not just a Faculty peer. So I don't really have a specific flavor for politics. Talking about politics in the hallway while on the job: it just leads to problems. So, I would say, take the time to invest in your peers as people and understand what their interests are, what they care about and you know, you don't have to be friends with them necessarily but in so doing, you're also showing them a dimension of yourself that says, I'm not just this one thing and I do it all the time. I'm, you know, I'm just as dimensional as you are; I've got a family and I have hobbies that are not art and design based, so I think that collegiality is missing in a lot of departments because I've had so many people tell me that, I go to work, I do my job and I leave and I don't tell people how my family's doing; I just do my job and go and I'm a very private person and I think that's great, but if you're pre-tenure, you've got to open up a bit and be flexible.

(55:50)



**Neil:** Great. Well, that was quite an informative hour that we just chatted about.

**RJ:** Yeah, so...I could really get in-depth on that but be friendly, be cordial, you know, show an interest in your peers in their research and what they're doing and just try to be a cool person. And, you know, if you do that and your CV content is solid and your experiences are good, then you've done everything that you could leading into that process and if you make it: great. If you don't, then you don't and you have to pick yourself up and pivot.

**Neil:** Good advice. Well, that concludes our podcast, our first podcast. Thank you RJ for being our first guest and for everyone else out there, keep listening and we'll see how promotion and tenure works at other Universities.

**RJ:** Sounds good. Thank you for your time Neil; this was great and I'm going to tune into the podcasts that follow.