Hello, and welcome. 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 Associate Professor of Graphic Design, Archana Shekara, from Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. Let's listen in.

**Neil**: Hi Archana, thank you for being on Tell It To Neil.

**Archana**: Hi Neil, how are you doing? Thanks for inviting me.

**Neil**: Of course, I'm doing well and let's get right into it. How did you get into Graphic Design?

**Archana**: Graphic Design. So I have a BFA in Painting from State University of New York in New Paltz. As I was taking my BFA classes I had to take tons of Art History classes, so whilst studying to twentieth century art, I came across Theo van Doesburg and I was totally fascinated by his typographic experimentation. I liked the math behind it. Kind of sounds like as though I'm a nerd, but I really enjoyed, I really enjoyed studying Theo van Doesburg's designs, so and then I wanted to try them, although I was afraid of sitting in front of a machine, to draw it, because it was a different medium so I was used to drawing with charcoal and pastels and paint and so for me, letterforms have volume and I cannot see it flat, so that's what brought me into Graphic Design.

**Neil**: Talk a little bit more about that idea of letterforms have dimension to them.

**Archana**: Yeah, so while taking Painting, we had to take Sculpture class and then, so you look at like three-dimensional work and then so, because you paint and everything is 2D but then you're imagining the three dimensional aspect on a 2D surface, right, when you're drawing, you're painting. So then when I look at letterforms, I kinda imagine that they have volume and then the negative space becomes more powerful than the positive space. I find the negative space more exciting than actually the positive space because that's what I believe gives a power to design, the negative space.

**Neil**: And that is definitely nerding out on typography! I love it! So then you got into Design kind of later in life, so it wasn't a childhood want to do it, which is really fascinating.

**Archana**: No, not really, I mean I did not know anything about Graphic Design; as a child I was fascinated by painting so I used to paint all the time. I was a huge collector; I would collect stamps and I was a big reader of comic books back home in India. There's this comic book series it's called Amar Chitra Katha so I would read them all and then I would be fascinated and I would try to draw them and like all of the characters but really I didn't know anything about Graphic Design. So, after like this fascination with Theo van Doesburg and wanted to do and understand what design was all about, I registered for a Graphic Design class and I remember the first day of class, my Professor asked me to draw this one animal icon and she said, oh, use your markers or your, like, you know, your technical pen or something and I went up to her and saying, I've never drawn with markers before so I have no idea how to be so tight in the sketchbook. I'm used to drawing with charcoal and she said, OK, why don't you draw with that? So then I, and I used compressed charcoal to draw these, make these marks but then, and then after that, the second day of class I came back and refined them using tracing paper and then she looked at it and then she said, you're a designer. And then I was like no, I'm a painter, I like drawing, you know, and she said: no, you're a designer. And I kind of took it to heart and now when I look back and I've been a designer since then! So this is like twenty-four years ago.

**Neil**: I love that story. And the interesting part of it is that you were surrounded by amazing graphic design with stamps and comic books!

**Archana**: Yes! Absolutely! Absolutely, and I had no idea that a designer had designed them, right? I mean it's just like you just take it for granted. You don't understand the science behind design, you don't understand the professional value of design because you never, because I was never aware of it, never thought about it, so I thought some painter does this, someone puts this together, so I did not understand the value or the professional idea of Graphic Design; I had no idea when I was in India. And even now, my parents who live in India, they don't understand what I'm doing, so when I tell them, but they know that I'm a Professor of Graphic Design, so they are very happy and they're like, oh, she's a Professor at the University, but I don't think they understand what Graphic Design is all about, which takes, even like many people even now don't understand what Graphic Design's all about, right? They're like, oh, so you get paid for that? You go to school for four years for that or get a Masters Degree in Design? Whereas I can just open up Microsoft Word and design something in ten minutes and you have to go to school, right? I mean, people ask you these questions, so…

*(05:48)*

**Neil**: Yes, they do! They do. So then, did you switch Majors when you were in undergrad or did you end up going to graduate school in Graphic Design?

**Archana**: No. What happened was I have a BFA in Painting and Drawing and then moved here to Normal, Illinois and lived in town, took a first class at ISU actually and Julie Johnson was the Professor who kind of guided me to go towards Design and she was the one who looked…who looked at my designs and she said, you are a Designer. And then she was a great mentor to me and so then I took a few Graphic Design classes and then applied for an internship in town, which I was, there was an Ad Agency in town at that time. Again, I'm talking about twenty-four years ago, called CSNE Advertising so I applied and then got a summer internship and they liked my work and then they said, do you want to come back and work for us full time? So I had done about, maybe three classes of Graphic Design, along with Typography, curriculum was very different back then so then, and Julie said, why don't you do it, because I think you will learn a lot working in the profession, because you already have ideas, you already have a degree. So then I…so all of the design work, all of the professional work I've done and the knowledge that I've gained is through client-based work. So then after working in the industry for about twelve years or so, I mean I worked for several institutions and also clients and Graphic Design Studios and things like that and then I decided I want to go to graduate school and kind of understand cultural identity because I noticed that…that me being an Asian an Indian American, I have seen, like, lots of stereotyping being happening and also marginalization. As a person of color I started to look at stuff differently and I was sick and tired of downloading images from Getty or all these stock images just to, for companies who wanted to show diversity in their campaign materials, I was really tired of doing that. And I'm like, is this right? Is this how we live life? I mean, this is, we need to really talk about this, so I decided I need to go to graduate school to really understand what cultural identity means and who am I as a Designer? So I wanted to really give a lot of thought to this and then decided to go to graduate school and get, and really understand kind of deeply about design. And I was really fortunate to meet Professor Jennifer Gunji, who was the Chair of the Design Program at University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign because her thesis work and her research work is in Graphic Design and the Tea Ceremony, so when I started talking about identity and cultural identity specifically, she immediately understood what I was talking about because not many people understand or…now people are talking about it but twelve years ago, it was completely new and so then she understood it and I was really fortunate to work with her under her guidance and then develop all these theses material and so my thesis was on Graphic Design in India and how we see design through our six sense so the sixth sense being the mind. So it was more like very philosophical and then spiritual and then, and then also like experiential where you experience design through all of your senses. That was a long…

**Neil**: I would love to see that show!

**Archana**: That was a long answer, wasn't it?

**Neil**: No, that was the perfect answer actually! And that showed, can you talk a little bit about that thesis? I mean, well, did you have a show or was it more…

*(10:07)*

**Archana**: Yes, absolutely. No, I had a show. The show was called Tanumana, so I took…I wanted to really, because since I'm from India, lived in the country for nineteen years and then lived in the United States. I've been living in the United States since 1991, so almost…almost close to three decades but now as a graduate student, again, it was almost twelve years ago so again, I really wanted to look at Indian Graphic Design and see what, how design could be understood as like if you go and start designing for a different country, it's so easy to stereotype, go to Google, go to Wikipedia or go to whatever websites and then try to understand and be like, OK, if I'm doing design for India so maybe I understand that people wear vibrant clothing, lots of…lots of bold colors and people are loud maybe and then they perhaps think of our Festival of Lights, or Holi, the Festival of Colors and all these things that people are, like you know, people just kinda see it and believe it and really there is no deeper meaning and understanding. And then of course henna is so popular so people look at these designs and try to do something intricate or look at mandala design and be like, OK, I need to recreate a mandala or something. So again, really doesn't mean anything, right? I mean it just comes out to be so superficial and artificial and not authentic or honest or true. So I was very deeply interested in coming out it would be like, OK, if I have to study a culture, what do I need to do? So I visited India, not as…not as a person who lived there but as a person looking at India or my own home town through a different cultural lens, right, and then try to understand the…how do we, like when I looked at Indian design, there are…it's very deep and India has such a rich history and then you look at all the nine navarasas, we call it, like the nine rasas, so each rasa has a color and then it has like if it's, and emotions, rasas are emotions, so every emotion has a color and a depiction. I also do classical Indian dance so I could enact that emotion through dance but then how do we understand that through design, right? So I kind of researched on that as well and then, but it seemed so complicated for a person who does not understand Indian culture or history, then that seems very complicated and deep and hard, so then I was like, how do I make this…I'm not saying easy, but at least for people to understand who are not as familiar, so it does not overwhelm the audience, right? Or a researcher who is doing the study of design for a project. So then I came about and like, OK, how do I simplify the whole thing? So I looked at Indian food and then I also looked at Indian clothing; then I looked at space and art, right? So my show was called Tanumana. Tanu means body, Mana means mind, so Tanumana was a show where I kind of took two walls that were twelve by twelve feet and I painted both the walls gold because gold is a revered metal in India, so it had gold paint, and one of the walls depicted Indian food, so the Indian…the way I organized was in the beginning the space was very organized and it kind of depicted the Vastu Shastra or the temple architecture, like how we build homes, right? There is a science to it, so it kind of depended on that and then some of the foods in the middle were Sattvic food so that's the food where it evokes spirituality in a person, what to eat and what not to eat, so there is Sattvic food, Tamasic food and Rajasic food so like the whole entire wall was covered with images of food so maybe I had about three hundred or four hundred images or something on the wall, following the grid system and they were places that had broke the grid system as well and then, and I also wanted people to be able to touch some of the spices so then it was, so it's an interactive show and then on one of the wall, because we Indians eat with our hands, so there was a video that was playing, like, how we mix food with our hands and how the food energizes our body through our fingertips right, because we sense, because the food is very sensual, right, because when we mix it, something happens to our body. We salivate as we see food, right? And then there was also another video…no, there was a poster that depicted about all these explanations about how Sattvic food, Rajasic food and some of the food, like when you look at Indian food, when you go to an Indian restaurant, right, because the food perhaps may not be presented in a very…in a very exotic, special kind of manner, but when you taste it, it feels very comforting, right? It feels very good and wholesome. The spices and then the rice and all these dishes kind of make you feel good from the inside, right? So the poster kind of…

*(15:47)*

**Neil**: Yes they do!

**Archana**: …the poster depicted that. So that was one wall. The second wall was about body wear so it did not have a formal grid system but it was very organic because, and I think it's to understand a culture if you look at food, if you look at its plating, you look at the ingredients so it's very…it's like the first way to understand a culture, you go to a restaurant to experience that food, then that's an introduction to a culture, right, through food. And food is something that brings people together, right, when you break bread with everyone it just brings everybody together; you're happy, you feel good, you can make a conversation and things like that. So then the second wall was about body wear so it was filled with like designs from like saris and the hair, what we put for our hair, all of the ornamentation, jewelry and things like that, so the whole wall was that. And then it also had a video of like, because when you walk in the streets of India, it's a little crowded, you can see people honking, I mean you can hear people honking, people are walking by so fast and then…and then there are hawkers, vendors calling out to you to come buy their stuff, right? And everything's so colorful, you raise your head about and there's things everywhere on top and it's just like…it's so busy and I wanted to kind of recreate that so that's why there were sounds and then the sounds of like, of Indian women talking and be like, OK, how can I, how can I be Westernized, what do I look at? So it was all about culture and again, the show was mostly based on like, me living in America and then looking at India as a culture, right? So that's what I…so otherwise if I'm an Indian based in India, then the show was going to be very differently presented but the show was for a Western audience, right? So, who was not as familiar with Indian culture. Again, the most of the Indian culture that you get is perhaps maybe if you have friends or otherwise through Indian food, right, so it was body wear and then so…and then also, and then the whole space was kinda depicted through all of the Rangoli designs that we see; Rangolis are painted on the floor at an entrance to a temple or a home, so it's like so when you walk in, you see it's very welcoming and to ward off all of the evil and then you want to welcome people in, so, because we believe like the guest is God, right? So when a guest comes to your house, so it's like as though the God is coming to your house, so you have that kind of an affection and respect to your guest or to your teachers or whatever that is, so I wanted to kinda capture all these emotions into the design and the walls were kind of placed in only, like…they had only…they were only four feet apart so you feel like as though you're walking in this narrow alley and then you're seeing all these things so it was pretty interactive. Boy, again, a long answer!

**Neil**: Yes, and very immersive too, just as you're describing it, I find myself walking through it!

**Archana**: Good! Good!

**Neil**: So, I guess I've got two follow-up questions to that and one kinda has to wait for the other but…yeah, so after you graduated, maybe it was before, but when was the "A-ha" moment that you thought, you know what? Design Education might be for me?

**Archana**: So, it was like…again, I've been very fortunate to have amazing teachers who have inspired and nurtured me to grow as a person and in Vedic culture or, I mean, most people are familiar with the word Hindu, right? So in…in Hindu culture…

**Neil**: What was that word?

**Archana**: Vedic. It's V-E-D-I-C. So that's actually the true, the true name for our culture. Hindu was the word that was given by Persians when they came to India and Hindu…Hinduism, or the Hindu…the range of mounts, the Hindukush Mountains, so, and all of a sudden it was like, OK the people who live on the other side of the Hindukush Mountains, they're all Hindus, so it's kind of very geographic, that's how it's named as, so the Hindu actually does not have any meaning to it, so the right word is Vedic, right? So in our Vedic culture, teaching is the highest form of giving and I always wanted to be an educator since I was a kid and so, and I thought that this was the best way to share what I'd learned in life through design with my students, so that's why I wanted to be an educator.

*(20:48)*

**Neil**: Interesting. So you knew that part for a very long time, it was just the Graphic Design component came later!

**Archana**: Yes, exactly! Exactly! I didn't know what I wanted to teach, but I wanted to teach!

**Neil**: Well, and you have such a rich body of knowledge, especially with your…with your thesis show and everything that you've talked about are all the basic principles of Graphic Design! Color and space and human interaction, human needs, culture, cultural identity, like all of that is wrapped into this idea of Graphic Design.

**Archana**: Yes, absolutely.

**Neil**: So my next question is, how did that…how did that body of knowledge, the cultural identity, how did that…how did that translate into your teaching and into your scholarship?

**Archana**: So…like…I mean…

**Neil**: *(laughs)*

**Archana**: Now I have to think, right? I have to think because…since I've been…I've been working on it for the past twelve years, so even my thesis work, like, I was like I said, I was very fortunate to work with Professor Jennifer Gunji and then I was also a Teaching Assistant at Japan House, at UIUC. Professor Kimiko Gunji was the Director of Japan House at that time and I took a class with her in, a class of Japanese Flower Arrangement called Ikebana and then I realized I was there was nothing about three-dimensional Graphic Design, because you have to look at line, shape, color, form and how many leaves; should I cut a leaf, did I do this…so it's like you have to look at lots of things, right, and goes in threes in terms of composition and then…then I also was her TA for Chado, that's Japanese Tea Ceremony. So I worked with her for a whole year and I observed her teaching; how she comes across, how she teaches Japanese culture to students who are completely oblivious of…of any Asian culture, right, again Asian culture is so stereotyped; you go to Target, you see these bamboo plants and then you think, let me be a little eclectic and…or even like, you know, I don't know, like, and then you buy these bamboo plants, bring them home and be like, OK, I am like, you know, I'm cultured or whatever, or otherwise you're like, OK, I'm gonna eat this Korean food today and I'm gonna go here, I'm gonna do this. Again, not really thinking about…about what this food means to that culture, right? So, really not having a deeper understanding that then again, very superficial in terms of knowledge, so, and I saw, I observed how she taught and how she came across as an educator and how students were completely energized and…because she was planting a seed. She was planting a seed to students to understand not only about Japanese art and aesthetics, but to understand who we are as people, right? And I thought that was really, really important because it's…I feel like Graphic Design, like for me, design is a philosophy of life in which Designers have to empathize with and respect with the diverse communities of people we serve, so I've come to understand the power of design and its impact it has on a larger community, right, so I feel like again, working as a Designer for that many years, I really want, I really understood at that moment taking classes with her that design is not about creating pretty pictures, right, satisfying the client or one's ego, and it's more than that, so how can we really change the world through design? So I always used to question myself about this and then be like, OK, I need to be the change, right? So…

*(25:22)*

**Neil**: Yes!

**Archana**: So I really found myself breathing, eating and thinking about design but then and also like, you know, and I love to cook, so…so when I…and I love to travel and experience new things and I'm constantly thinking about process and color, arrangement, space, texture and how it affects all of my six senses but sometimes I also find it as a limitation because I want to experience life as it comes, just to observe it, no judgment, because you're…as a Designer, you're always judging, right? And I don't want…

**Neil**: Yes, yes we are!

**Archana**: And I don't want to judge, I just want to kind of observe everything, which is really, really difficult. So, but then…so, doing all these things and then being a keen observer, so then I brought that into my teaching. I got a chance to teach or be a lecturer as a…as an MFA student and then taught this one class on Identity, on Cultural Identity with…to Freshman students and that really went well; there was a small exhibition after that, so then I was, again I was learning how to teach it, right, it was very tough because, like twelve years ago, there was no book written about it, there's no examples about anything, so all of the projects that I'm creating at ISU and then I started experimenting here at Illinois State and I was so glad the Director at that time was very encouraging and then he said, do whatever you want and then…but make it work, right? So then I started teaching special topics in design with the focus on cultural identity and then started experimenting with all these projects that…kinda never done before in Design and then started attending conferences and then presenting…

**Neil**: Can you talk about some of those projects?

**Archana**: Yeah. Absolutely. So…like the first project was about…like again: food! So it's like, so of course food makes us happy, food, we look at food and then it brings memories, right? And then food talks about culture, it talks about heritage, we talk about so many things through food, so I asked students to look at their ancestral country of origin and then…and then talk to their parents and then come back with these answers, I have a list of questions that they have to kind of follow and do research, so it's not just through the internet, right? Not just hop on the computer and then just go duh-duh-duh-duh-duh, and then it's done, so it's not that. So I want a conversation that they need to have with their grandparents or with their parents and then talk about a culture, find a country because, I mean, I tell them: hey guys, you are…some students are like, oh, I'm half this, I'm this and this so they have like two or three ancestral country of original then so I'm like, oh gosh, you guys are so…like, so lucky and here I'm like, if anybody asks me, where are you from, and I have to say India, so I just have so boring, only like one country to choose from, right? Even though it's exciting, I love India, but then…but then you have a choice, so let's look at one country, really understand its roots and heritage and culture and language and all these things and then come up with the food that people look at that food as perhaps a national identity, I don't know, or perhaps that's the food that you ate when you grew up but you never knew that your grandma was making this food and there's all this history behind it. So, let's talk about that. So then students do an information design kind of project on that and then, so I after that then we talk about stereotyping and marginalization, so like, how is this cultural group marginalized, so how do we look at this and how do we analyze it, how do we deconstruct this? So I bring a lot of speakers and we talk about privilege power; we talk about race and racism, so I want students to understand how marginalized, how groups…now then I also talk about how marginalized groups exist and how they co-live in the United States; all of the problems that they undergo, so students are really exposed to the social constructs that we really don't talk about it in design classroom, right? And otherwise most people perhaps might be, might feel uncomfortable because these questions are very tough to answer. So we talk about these things and then I try my best to create a safe space for students so then they won't feel like they're being judged, right, so there's a lot of honesty that happens and sometimes there's a lot of hugs that happen, so sometimes students, without realizing, they sometimes there are tears, that happens because students as they acknowledge their implicit biases or micro-aggressions that they have undergone…

*(30:10)*

*…*So, students share, so there is a lot of like…like camaraderie and things like that but then…but then again, we learn, so again we do a package that's a three-dimensional kind of package. The students have done Typography, students have sewn things, students have…so it's kinda like almost like, it's like a one-time thing. It's not…it's not…you can't reproduce it as a typical Graphic Design stuff so this is more like something where you would see it in an exhibition so it's like one…one thing that students create, so that's a project and also like…we do in terms of Typography I ask students to look at, their, again, culture and things like that. And then I want them to design type based on their heritage; maybe an object from their culture and then so then we talk about that object, its relevance in their culture and then how we see it as a Western audience and then try to analyze that and things. So I'm teaching topics again this semester, so I'm…I just recently went to China because we have a Three-Plus Fund Program with this one university called Shanghai Normal University, Tiahua College of Art and Design, so students do three years of Design classes there and then the final year they come here and get a degree at ISU, so I got a chance to teach Advanced Typography during the summer and then as I was teaching Type and then the last project was about their identity, I asked students to look at their own identity and then learn something which, I mean, the project went really great, the students were like, I did not know all these about my own country so I'm so grateful we did this project. So now I'm taking the same project and I'm asking our students to do that project, so without stereotyping and marginalization because there is this huge understanding, or misunderstanding about China, so I'm going to present this paper at this…we have at ISU we have international seminar series, so the Director of International Studies and Programs asked me to present about this…about my research with the Chinese students and also with our own students so I'm excited, again, to really try to experiment and explore about cultural identities, kinda looking at it from the inside, from like a micro-level and macro-level and trying to understand and make, help students to understand that, so in the end it's all about not creating pretty pictures to please someone but trying to understand what it is, what it takes, what is the power of design and then in the end, as a human being, how can…how can design help you to be a better human being so you can empathize, understand your audience, right, and understand your client in the end because most of the students go and do professional work, perhaps work at an Ad Agency or studios or whatever that they're doing so they understand their audiences better so they can better connect, so it's all about bridging gaps, so I'm trying my best to do that through Graphic Design. Again: long answer!

**Neil**: Which is a-ma-zing! And I have to ask, have you ever considered packaging your Special Topics course into a travelling workshop?

**Archana**: I haven't done that. I haven't really done that. I've just gone and presented papers at design conferences, but then I have haven't…I want to do a book, so I'm thinking of taking a sabbatical sometime and do a book but then I would love to do a workshop. I haven't done that. I haven't really written any abstracts or any proposals for a workshop. Maybe if someone gives me an opportunity, who knows, I can do it, right?

**Neil**: Well, for all those listening out there: get in touch! And have Archana come to your university and put on a Cultural Identity workshop. That'd be amazing!

**Archana**: Yeah, I would love that, I would love that. I never thought about it, Neil.

**Neil**: You should! Oh my gosh, people love workshops and…

**Archana**: That's true.

**Neil**: And Faculty like it when workshops happen in their courses too!

**Archana**: That's true.

**Neil**: They take up some scheduled time! *(laughs)*

**Archana**: That's true.

**Neil**: But very, very relevant to today's society.

**Archana**: Oh, of course, isn't it, yeah, of course.

**Neil**: Oh my gosh! So…you were the trend-setter twelve years ago!

*(35:00)*

**Archana**: *(laughs)* I don't know about that!That sounds very humbling! But…I have also kind of experimented teaching…non-designers, right, so I got a chance to teach…I'm the Honors Co-coordinator for our School. So I got a chance to teach non-design students, these are Presidential scholars from all parts of campus, so there were about seventeen students of Psychology, Math, English, Theatre, like you know, from diverse programs and then they had taken Art only in elementary school so really like hardly have any art background so I collaborated our Design students, I teach this one course called Design Streak Studio where it is…it's a pre-professional Design course where it introduces students to work with clients directly. So then I kinda collaborated with our Design Streak students along with these Honors students and then we did a project looking at, really looking at like social, like art and social justice, so the course was called Innovation and Enquiry and Social Justice, so I invited lots of speakers again and then, so we really looked at trying to deconstruct things about racism, privilege and all these really tough questions and then we did a project called This Is America and…and then students, it was a collaborative project, right, so then our design students designed these posters and then these students generated content and so we, right now we have the show at ISU at this one gallery called Rachel Cooper Gallery and which is in the Women and Gender Studies and Social Work Department and then I know, I've heard that lots of Faculty members bring their students to have, like, discussions about the exhibit and then use that in their classroom, so it's like, it's about a hundred and four posters that cover from floor to ceiling and it's…and it's like, it's the entire room is covered with these posters, and I think it's very impactful, so it's really asking to build, asking for a better America, right, or demanding, not even asking: demanding for a better America and…and it's like, so it became a student Faculty community kind of project where the community members can participate as well and give their thoughts and those thoughts will be turned into posters and that could be displayed on the wall as well, so it's really kind of using design as a tool to do something far beyond…far beyond, like, beauty. Again, this is beautiful too, right, because then you become a beautiful person, hopefully, so far beyond…

**Neil**: Yes!

**Archana**: Far beyond, just like the superficial aspect of design where it's just like, OK, I'm a great designer, I'm gonna do all this client work, make millions of dollars. So that's not the true value of design, I feel.

**Neil**: I couldn't agree more! So, let's talk a little bit about Tenure and Promotion.

**Archana**: OK.

**Neil**: So, you went up for Promotion at Illinois State University, correct?

**Archana**: Mm-hm, yes.

**Neil**: About how long ago was that?

**Archana**: I got my Tenure and Promotion in 2015, so it's been about four years now.

**Neil**: Congratulations!

**Archana**: Thank you! I worked very hard for it! Yes.

**Neil**: Well, so, at ISU, is Tenure and Promotion, are they…are they one thing or are they separate items that you have to apply and earn?

**Archana**: They're…it's one thing fortunately. So…

**Neil**: Good!

**Archana**: Yah, fortunate, really fortunately. So, you just kind of, you put everything together, so like every year, we have to maintain our dossier of like all of the work that you have done in terms of teaching, research and service and then you submit that, right, so there is a word-count or word-limit but then you submit that and then…and then the SFSC, that's the School Faculty Status Committee, they review that, so the members of the SFSC get voted to be on that so it's a privilege serving on the SFSC, so I was lucky to be on the SFSC before my Tenure process so I kinda saw how the documentation is put together and then also I…and also like, some of the Faculty members are really kind. They share their Tenure documentation with you, so you go through it and be like, hah! Maybe I should do this or maybe I can include that and this and things like that. So the best thing is to document everything and then, so when time came, I had all of the five years of stuff that I had saved, so and then that summer, when it was due, I just sat down for three months and wrote the whole thing…

*(40:33)*

…Again, for Tenure document, there's no word count, right, so perhaps you can write a book, who knows? So it was just, so I just wrote it all. So, because it had been a very, very long time since Graphic Design sequence, like anyone from Graphic Design sequence had gone up for Tenure, there was all this new Faculty, we had a new Director, new Dean, so there is always this little bit of apprehension, right? So like, OK, so how do I approach this, so then I tried and I just wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote. So then I got lots of supporting letters from people in the community, from clients, from former students, from past…Professors and then, and also from people that I met at conferences, like other Graphic Design Professors that I had presented along and that they had heard about my work through my research paper, so like really getting lots of letters of support, so I did that. So I kind of, so it was…it was an arduous process but then, but in the end it seemed very rewarding!

**Neil**: I hope so!

**Archana**: It was very rewarding but I was like, OK, here I submitted: I'm done, right? And then I was like, OK, because at least now, we can submit these documents, all of the documents online. In the sense like you can put it on as a, save it as a pdf and then go drop off your flash drive or otherwise you can hit submit online so you can do all that. Back then, four years ago, everything was done as a binder, so I had one three-inch binder of all of the documentation, right, in the sense like, all of my writing and narrative and all that stuff and a five inch binder for all of the supporting materials, right? So I could not carry the five inch binder and the three inch binder at the same time. I could not, because it was so heavy! So my poor kid carried one of the binders and came along with me to drop it off because it was that heavy! *(laughs)*

**Neil**: *(laughs)* Oh no!

**Archana**: So I had done a great job of saving stuff. Almost looked like I was a hoarder or something! Yeah, so, when I heard the good news I was like: YES! and I was so done and tired, but I haven't taken a sabbatical yet, so our program has undergone a lot of changes and then we have hired new Faculty members, our program has grown from when I first started, ISU there were only about forty-five design students; now we have a hundred and twenty. We wrote new curriculum and then I just came to know the new curriculum starts from this Fall; I just came to know it just with our basic GD1 class, we have fifty-nine students, so that's incredible.

**Neil**: Wow! Congratulations on those numbers!

**Archana**: Thank you! Thank you, and we are really happy. I mean, it's a great time to be at ISU, it's a great time to be teaching Design and I'm fortunate that we have a Director who recognizes that. There's also a Dean who promotes it, so Design…so Design is getting a lot of attention and the Provost and the President understand that as well because of course, it's about enrolment as well, so we are really happy, so…yeah.

**Neil**: Always, and with the trend of universities and departments laying off Faculty and cutting programs, it's really refreshing to hear that there is…there is growth!

**Archana**: Yes! While we are working equally hard though. Yeah, but we just hired a couple of new Faculty so we are really excited to have them. Yeah.

**Neil**: Congratulations!

**Archana**: Thank you.

**Neil**: So, would you…do you have any advice for those that are going up for Tenure and Promotion?

*(44:48)*

**Archana**: I think my advice would be really document, document, document. Document everything and then…and then start writing early; understand who you are as a Designer, what do you want to say and what is the difference that you have made within your field; what kind of a researcher are you? How is it contributing to change the world of design? Through design education or research or service or whatever that you're doing, really understand who you are and be honest about who you are as a Design Educator and then I think that's what the narrative should be The narrative should be more about who you are as an Educator. Who you are as a Researcher. What have you done? What's your contribution? And then also in terms of Service, how are you…how are you doing service to your profession? And then, and also service to your community. I think Design has such, again, Design can create so much change to the community and then I think when you do stuff for the community it's like the grass roots level that needs change, right? So and I think it's so important to see who you are and really self-reflect and I think that's what the narrative should be, all about self-reflection, and show the people whoever are reading your Tenure papers that you have grown from a Junior Faculty to like from, so then they can be like, OK, this person has really grown in the past five years and then, so you earn that Promotion, you earn that Tenure so then you earn and you become from Assistant to an Associate Professor; you need to earn that title, I think, or that recognition.

**Neil**: So, for all the listeners out there, don't let that be intimidating to you! *(laughs)*

**Archana**: I'm sorry if I intimidated anyone! *(laughs)*

**Neil**: No, no, no, and if you have…if you have a supportive Department, they will help guide you through every step of this.

**Archana**: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, like I said, I had like, have amazing peers who were very kind of very, very supportive; they shared their Tenure documentation with me and then so I looked at someone from Art Education, someone from Painting, someone from Photography and someone also from Graphic Design, even though Graphic Design, it had been ages since anyone went up for Tenure, right, so then, but I still had my colleagues, like Tenure documentation, look through it and then kinda understood how to put it together, how to write a narrative. And like I said, I was fortunate to be on the SFSC before Tenure and I saw how when people came up for Promotion, how they wrote and how the narrative was very formal because, and I would always suggest that even though your peers are your friends, right, I mean like all of the Faculty members you know them well, you have been teaching with them for five years, but don't take that for granted because I think out of own self-respect, you really need to invest in your Tenure documentation and then write a narrative that…that's honest and tells who you are, and not take it for granted that, oh, these guys are my friends, I know them, so then my friends are reading, yes, of course it's going to be a friendly team of members who read your documentation but then I think we need to have a level of professionalism, so I feel like, so take it very seriously and then apply, so I have served on the SFSC in the past ten years I've been on the SFSC for six years; I know there was a time I went to everyone and I said, please don't vote for me! I need a break! So…but then…

**Neil**: Yes!

**Archana**: Yeah, so, hopefully, hopefully like I was on the SFSC this year too, so that's what I am looking for; I'm just looking for honest, someone to be honest and authentic and really want to see them grow as Faculty members. And try to communicate and again, and document everything.

**Neil**: Well thank you for that advice, and we're almost at the…or we are at the end of our interview.

**Archana**: Great!

**Neil**: Yeah, are there any upcoming projects you might want to talk about real quick or…

**Archana**: I mean, my project is like I'm presenting that paper about This Is America to this, at this one conference called…I think it's called DEL - Digitally Engaged Learning. I think it's in Texas State in September so that's something exciting and then a personal project, because since I teach Design Streak, again, I'm also a client-based Designer who do…who kinda like I make work for people from various communities because again, trying to understand that and I do that in my Design Streak class so I have all these client projects that were working on, like branding for this one company that does soya candles; again it's a Pro Bono project and things like that…

*(50:15)*

…But my own personal project I'm currently working on, the United States Postal Service, they just put out a stamp two years ago for Diwali, or Deepavali, that's the right way to pronounce it, it's a Sanskrit word called a row of lights, that's the Festival of Lights and this year it comes in October. Because sometimes it comes in October, sometimes it comes in November because we follow the lunar calendar and it changes, so this time it's on, it's in October so, last year I came up with this idea of like, how do I share, like my own culture through this card and then so I kinda came up with the Sanskrit Shloka, or a verse. This was a phrase actually and it's called "vasudhaiva kutumbakam" and then the phrase is from this one Upanishad called Maha Upanishad and vasudhaiva kutumbakan means one world, one family. And I thought it was very important message to share, so I sent, I designed that card using Kanodar typography. Kanodar is a language that I speak at home so that's my native language so then I, and Kanodar is very, the script is Brahmi script, which is one of the oldest scripts in ancient India, so it's based on Brahmi script but Kanodar has its own script and the script is very rounded, so I tried my best to create something very geometric because I was looking at Indian sweet designs and then…and then so it was almost like opening a sweet box but then a sweet box of like, you know, to bring people together. So that was the idea last year. So this year, I'm coming up with something new; I'm looking at a Shanti mantra, that's based on peace. Shanti means peace, so in the end it ends with peace, peace, peace, so I'm looking at a Shanti mantra in Sanskrit and I'm trying to dissect that mantra, understand it and then looking at the concept of the mantra that's appropriate to share for Diwali, a mantra that talks about darkness and how do we take away darkness from our lives and look at light because it's the Festival of Light, right? So you remove the ignorance and darkness and come towards light, that means light means knowledge, so that's what the Shanti mantra is about, so I'm looking at that Shanti mantra and I'm trying to design a card, again based on English, but English and Kanodar, because we speak Kanglish, right? So we speak English and Kanodar at the same time, so your brain switches back and forth because if you're not a native speaker of English, so that's the card that I'm designing. So, watch out for that card, Neil, I'm gonna send one to you too in October!

**Neil**: Please do, I will be waiting to see that, because it sounds amazing!

**Archana**: Thank you! Thank you. Well, thank you so much for doing this, it was a pleasure talking to you. I feel like I uncovered so many things about myself, talking to you!

**Neil**: Absolutely, well thank you for spending time with me today.

**Archana**: Thanks, Neil.

This concludes Season Two, Episode Five of Tell It To Neil. If any of the facts or information included in this Episode are incorrect, please feel free to get in touch through our email, hello@tellittoneil.com

If you would like to get in touch with Archana, please contact her through her email at ashekar@ilstu.edu

*(end of recording 53:48)*

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