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 David Grey, the Founding Chair of the Graphic Design Department at Santa Fe University of Art and Design, where he taught for almost a decade. His most recent role was Chair of Visual Communications at Endicott College in Beverly, Massachusetts. David is currently living in Pecos, New Mexico, designing, creating studio art, writing his teachings and offering workshops on Contemplative Design. Let's listen in.

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

**David**: It's my pleasure; it's nice to be here.

**Neil**: So let's get started. How did you get into Graphic Design?

**David**: I think there's a couple of ways you could look at that. Professionally I started working at a marketing firm right out of college: I'd studied Psychology and Photography, I was interested in perception and cognition and I was just a little Administrative Assistant making coffees and mailing packages and one day, they asked me to, quote, unquote, Design and eight and a half by eleven brochure, a one sheet for something they were doing, and they put me in front of a computer, this was the mid nineties, program called…oh God…Pagemaker I think it was…

**Neil**: Oh yeah!

**David**: Yeah, if I'm getting that correct! And I sat for the day with the words, choosing typefaces, choosing sizes, making columns. I'd never been trained but just doing this was super-exciting, it kind of brought together so many things I loved which was visual communication, using the computer to make something, recognizing the beauty of composition and legibility and all these design principles that I just kind of intuitively enjoyed. And after doing that for a few months, I decided that was really something I wanted to pursue so I left there and worked a handful of entry-level Design positions at a Copy Cop in Boston, Mass, which is like a Kinkos, sitting in the back, making logos,

**Neil**: Oh yeah!

**David**: business cards…and then I worked at a slightly higher end printing facility that did like large vinyl banners for companies and so I got to do…yeah, banners or announcements and postcards; a step up from just the logo and business card world. And I did that for maybe a year or so and then the internet and websites exploded and if you understood how to make some things, people were welcoming you into their web design firms, so I hopped in and worked for about two years designing medical and financial websites in Boston before I realized I was never trained and it was time to actually go become educated! Get a little bit of history, a little bit of theory for what it is I was actually doing.

**Neil**: Interesting. So…other guests on the podcast, they talk about how when they were seven years old and they were just naturally drawn to Design and they knew they wanted to be a Designer. It's interesting to me to see how each guest actually got into Design and at what point of their life that happened.

**David**: Well there's, you know, a second story and a third story to this and…

**Neil**: Oh please, let us know, please, please, please!

**David**: Well, I too loved Design from a very young age. That was Fine Art, whether it was magazine covers or trading cards or comic books or albums which, you know, then turned into cassettes and CDs but I was surrounded by commercial design without knowing it was commercial design and loving things like all of Peter Saville's Graphic Design work for New Order and Factory Records, or just really appreciating Tibor Kalman's design work for Benetton, or for Colors Magazine without even knowing this was Graphic Design or that there were amazing Designers out there that created visual languages that I was actually following or listening to. So I was really in love with all of that. I was DJ-ing while I was pursuing this Graphic Design world and part of why I'm a Graphic Designer is just because I'm not a DJ or I'm not a professional musician; I think I took all of my love for sound and music and put it into the visual world. So that was, yeah, that was a big part of it. I think I always wanted to make something that was like Design for as long as I can remember. I take that back. Before I wanted to be a Designer, I wanted to illustrate comic books, like every eight or ten year old boy I think at some point or another!

*(05:06)*

**Neil**: Yeah!

**David**: But then it turned into Design, yeah, for sure.

**Neil**: So that's the second story or is that the third story?

**David**: What's that, maybe the second story. I think I really got into Graphic Design when I went off and got educated, but we could talk about that a little bit more later maybe.

**Neil**: Well actually that's a good segue into the next question, is where or how did you choose your educational path? Was it something that you kinda knew of a certain university you wanted to go to or was it more of, wherever I can get accepted or…how did that play out for you?

**David**: Sure. I was living in Boston. I was raised in Massachusetts and I was in my mid twenties and hadn't lived anywhere else and I was dating a woman at the time who was going to Art School and it got me really excited about what it would mean to me to go and be educated in the Arts. I didn't think I could be a quote-unquote Art Kid when I was in college; it intimidated me, like the kids who really made Art I just was overwhelmed by it, I thought it was amazing, I didn't know how to enter that stream, even though my heart wanted to. But at this point in my life I decided yeah, that was really something I think I was ready for and I could take advantage of. So I just decided that I would apply to what I thought were the top five programs in the country at the time. Not really knowing much about Design Education at all, or even kind of the subtleties of difference or the big differences between schools. So I just jumped in and decided I'd apply to Yale, and Cranbrook, Chicago Institute of Art, Art Institute, I always mix up those words. And CalArts and the Royal College over in London and just thought, if I got into one of these schools I would go, and if I didn't, well, I didn't feel the need to go and just get a degree. I really wanted to go to a place that had the best of the best in my mind. And…when I got accepted, I was very surprised and very pleased that CalArts reached out and offered me an opportunity. Chicago offered me an opportunity. And I spoke to both of them. Chicago offered me an opportunity with a Teaching Assistant's role and it sounded really interesting and I went to visit and CalArts offered me the same kind of thing and I went to visit. At the same time I was speaking with Yale and Cranbrook and at some point in the middle of all these dialogs, I realized I wanted to go live in California. I wanted to be on the opposite side of the country. I wanted to go be in the forever summer weather and the teachers at CalArt as I started to do my research were really the ones I wanted to engage with. They were the ones in the 1990s that in my opinion revolutionized and pushed Post-Modern Graphic Design in a way that the Faculty at the other schools, even though they were really intriguing to me, as a collective at CalArts they had a power that felt greater than any of the other programs. So yeah, I just jumped right in with all these people that knew so much and I knew absolutely nothing and moved out to California and went to school at CalArts and had probably the most profound educational experience I've ever had or could imagine having. I learned so much about myself and about Design and about the creative process. I learned about all of these qualities of what makes a great teacher. I also learned lots of quality about lots of qualities that make a teacher that makes me uncomfortable and I think that's a real blessing to have this profound range of experiences; everything from loving a moment to deeply crying out of anxiety and fear because you're totally confused and don't even understand, say, the critique of your work and that's where the third story is. When I was there, I really fell in love with Design in a way where it went beyond profession at that point. It turned into a vocation, it turned into a lifestyle, it turned into a way of seeing, a way of being. Yeah, that really took it to a new place and made me realize I was not just a professional Graphic Designer, but that's the way I lived my life.

**Neil**: That is quite a transformation!

**David**: For sure.

**Neil**: And really what, I don't know, what grad school is meant to do!

**David**: Yeah, I would think so.

**Neil**: Definitely. So, at what point during your maybe your education, when was your "A-ha!" moment that you knew you wanted to be an Educator?

*(10:00)*

**David**: Hmm…well it was a little slow coming. I've always been interested in education. When I was a grad student I was teaching part-time in the evenings, or maybe it was the afternoons, to local high school students in Santa Clarita, a Digital Arts Network Program, they called it, where we were teaching high school kids how to edit video, how to make Graphic Design, how to use Adobe software and I really enjoyed that. I taught at a high school summer program for California, the State of California at CalArts one summer as well. And when I was younger, I had opportunities to mentor and such and I really enjoyed that but I never really thought of it as a career path in any way, shape or form. When I got out of grad school I was Art Directing a skateboarding sneaker company. I very quickly found what was one of my dream gigs from early on in my childhood and worked there for two years. I loved the opportunity but while I was there in the second year, I was offered the opportunity to teach a night course at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, Santa Monica. It was incredible. The wife of one of my Professors who taught Photography there had seen my thesis work in Motion Graphics. They were looking for a Motion Graphics Professor to come in and teach one evening class to the Design students and that with them seemed like a good match. So I began teaching in the evenings there and within weeks, I absolutely fell in love with teaching and teaching college students. It was such a surprise, like, within two to three weeks, I was immediately, immediately in love with not just the opportunity to be able to share all this stuff that I had just learned and help people get better at what they do, but I got to see it, right in front of my eyes. So, to be able to watch young Designers make things, to be able to then talk about it, to see them actually hear what makes something different and then to see them put that into action and then by the end of the semester to see their work actually improve, and improve in leaps and bounds. I was just giddy. I would leave after three hours of class and drive home for an hour, just revved in my car, so excited by the opportunity. And then the idea that I was even getting paid to do this just kind of blew my mind. It was really, I think, the first time where a profession didn't feel like a job to me, like it was just a joy, I couldn't believe I was being paid to do something that I was loving every moment of. So that semester ended, the Faculty there saw the work that came out of the class and they were really excited by it and immediately, and I didn't realize how rare this was, they said, we have a one year Visiting Faculty position; would you like it? I didn't have to apply, I didn't have to go through a process. They just offered it to me right then and there. Now, having been a Professor for fifteen years, I know how incredibly rare that is, so I feel very fortunate that I was welcomed into full-time teaching that way. And I…

**Neil**: Yes!

**David**: Yeah, within a week or two just, you know, I thought about it for a few days but within a week or two, I immediately knew it was what I wanted to do and I resigned from my Art Director role at the skate company and starting that Fall, became a full-time Professor at Layola Marymount for a year. And being a full-time Professor as a Visitor Professor for the first year of your, I think your time as a teacher, for me it was fantastic. I very intuitively connected with teaching so I didn't need a lot of mentorship for how to teach, you know, how to pay attention to the learning process, how to cultivate a syllabus that evolved, that built upon itself. I loved coming up with projects; I loved seeing the subtle evolutions of one project to the next, to the next, to the next, growing them, transforming them. So for me, they just kinda let me be and I had a full year of teaching with no other real academic responsibilities, so I just got to focus on the teaching, be deeply engaged with it, really watch it and kind of evolve with it as I saw the things that worked and didn't. It was really magical.

**Neil**: And those are amazing positions where you can just focus on teaching with no other Service duties or Research pressures!

**David**: Again, now, fifteen years deep, I realize that is an incredibly rare opportunity! You either get it at the very beginning of your career when you have no experience, or you get it towards the end when you're just this master and all they need you to do is just kind of show up and teach because you're so incredible. In between, you're doing a lot of other things, you know? *(laughs)*

**Neil**: That's a good way of stating that. So, you got into teaching at Loyola Marymount.

*(15:07)*

**David**: Yeah.

**Neil**: So, how…how did you get to where you are today?

**David**: Oh God, step by step?

**Neil**: Yes!

**David**: Day after day? Year by year? Well…

**Neil**: No, because I think you have a very interesting story as to how you got to where you are today and there were a lot of…there were a lot of decisions that you made, conscious decisions to kind of guide your path through academia and I think hearing that path is quite valuable because I am pretty sure you are not the only person that has travelled down that path before. But yeah, please expand on that!

**David**: Well, I'll pick a couple of things to share, a couple of pieces on this long brick road. After they year at Layola Marymount, the position ended, it was the summertime; I wasn't too sure what I was going to do. I decided to leave Los Angeles after being there for a handful of years, and move back East and drop myself in New York City. But within a month, I knew that that was not where I wanted to be. I thought I was gonna run around New York and do freelance work but having been out in Los Angeles, my appreciation of nature, I know it's Los Angeles, but my appreciation of nature, being outside and living a slightly slower lifestyle than the East Coast, when I got back, it didn't really mesh so well in New York City and when I was younger, I really, really wanted to be there, wanted to be creative in that city but I think I kind of missed my window. I share this because when I got to the city and realized I didn't want to be there, I realized at the same time that teaching was what I really wanted to do with my time, so I looked for some new positions and was hired for the following Fall; as we know as Professors, it's a strange, long process in applying. We live in a world where you make decisions in seconds and you text people and people know about things in moments, but you know, you're teaching and you're applying in October and November. If you're a finalist you may not even know if you get the gig until April or May sometimes. So throughout that year I applied and I got an opportunity to teach in upstate New York, in Albany, where we met, and moved up there and taught up there for two years. It was a wonderful opportunity. I was an Assistant Professor, I had a full course-load, I had some administrative responsibilities and those two years were a time when I felt for the first time like I was part of a bigger community. At Layola Marymount I just went in and taught and I left. So I was with the students. At this school I was really a part of the Faculty, so I got to learn a lot and engage a lot with all sorts of other aspects of academia. How the bigger business functions. How schools operate, how departments work together. And at the same time while I was teaching I was given a lot of freedom by my colleagues. Jean Dahlgren, again someone you know.

**Neil**: Yes!

**David**: An amazing, amazing, wonderful, beautiful human being and educator and administrator. She really believed in what I was doing and gave me the opportunity to both teach professionally in terms of professional practice and exploratory in terms of doing projects with students that were more in alignment say with CalArts' experimentation. And at that time I began to realize that my interest in mindfulness and in contemplation and in meditation could really be integrated into the Visual Arts and to Design because I was doing that on my own for years without realizing that's what it was. So I began to offer projects that integrated mindfulness. A way of seeing deeper into what it was that you were making. Not just the concept. Not just the form and function, but how did it feel internally? How did it resonate? How do colors and forms and messages have a deeper meaning, one that perhaps goes beyond concept to direct experience? And these were things that had been explored in Design, in Art, in Spirituality, in Psychology, in Science, in cultures for hundreds, if not thousands of years and it was interesting to me to see that it wasn't so deeply ingrained in contemporary design education. So I became very excited and had a wonderful time. But at the same time, I really missed being out West, so I decided to look for a new role out West and was offered an opportunity in Portland, Oregon, which sounded amazing until I was offered an opportunity in Santa Fe, New Mexico. And Santa Fe was just one of those magical places that transformed my life in ways where I really, truly could not have imagined before I got there. That opportunity…yes…

*(20:27)*

**Neil**: So…did those two opportunities and in Portland, did those two opportunities happen simultaneously? Or were they kind of a little…OK.

**David**: Yeah, both those opportunities came up as position new roles for me. They were very different. Portland was a Professor position in a very large program in the city. It had a great structure, it had wonderful classes; it was a very interesting department, at least to me and I was excited about it, but Santa Fe was a bigger adventure. They had an Art Department that was looking for a brand new Graphic Design degree and they were looking for someone to teach Graphic Design with more of an artistic bent. The program was very traditional in their Art Department at the time and being in Santa Fe, which is a very traditional studio Arts and Photography community, I fit in perfectly. So the idea was I would go to Santa Fe with no students versus an entire program that was already functioning, and have the opportunity to build an entire four year curriculum from scratch. Write all the class syllabi, structure the program exactly the way I wanted to and the Chair of the Art Department was a Zen Buddhist meditation practitioner and Santa Fe is a very, very spiritual place that they were super-excited by my secondary interest in Design. So I jumped right in and I moved out to Santa Fe.

**Neil**: My gosh, the universe just aligned perfectly for that for you!

**David**: Perfectly! Yep. It aligned perfectly for the opportunity but then there were lots of ups and downs here for the first two years that I got to the school to build the program. I had an amazing time but the program announced, or the school announced that it was millions in debt and was going to most likely have to close their doors. So again, similar to my opportunity as a Visiting Faculty member at Layola Marymount, for the first years I was in Santa Fe, everyone had so many other things to deal with as the School acted like and felt like it was closing that I had all this freedom. So I got to continue to do what I did but on levels that really pushed the envelope of Design Education. I brought a dear from down from Naropa, Naropa University up on Border, Colorado, to teach on the wisdom energies of color from a Buddhist and psychological perspective, so I had Graphic Design students wearing glasses that tinted the world red or yellow or blue or green or white and held yoga poses and meditated and then took those glasses off and felt emotional energies arise in them that then were the basis for their creative process, and it helps to begin to appreciate that there was something far deeper in, say, color than just concept of context. There really was a vibration from that light-wave that vibrated internally in rays that actually triggered emotional sensations and those emotional sensations in each person are also not the same; they are varied greatly depending on your own constitution and the way your basic nature has arose in this world. So, my Graphic Design students had these opportunities to explore things that were very perceptually based but not within the traditional Graphic Design canon of education. I had a great time and then the school was about to close. It was bought by a for-profit educational company called Laureate in Baltimore and we re-vamped and along with four other Professors, there were five of us that were kept on as Chairs of five departments. My program now went from a degree to a department and at that point, we revved up the school again. We were about to close, we started up and for the next five years we had a wild ride. We basically tried to start another school from scratch and my department quickly, quickly gained speed and grew from about three students to a hundred-twenty within about four years.

**Neil**: Wow!

*(25:47)*

**David**: Lots of international students were brought in. Yeah, we had a lot of connections internationally, a lot of Mexican students were brought in which completely transformed my program in the most magical ways that again, I never would've imagined. A whole group of students coming in being trained very, very commercially in Mexico; they come into my program and I tell them they can be Artists and that they can expand what they're making; Visual Communication is so much broader than just making something for branding, just making something for marketing. Visual Communication has a history of thousands of years and coming from Mexico, these students also, many of them were much more connected to a deeper culture, whereas in the United States, we have really unfortunately destroyed our Native American culture as a collective culture in this country. But in Mexico, the Mayans, the Aztecs, the history of their visual communication, at least to me seemed a bit more present still. So they had what I would like to say, a deeper time relationship to the way we work with symbols and imagery. And it was a wonderful, wonderful time. Yeah. Yeah, I could tell you about that program in lots of different ways. We had incredible adventures in class, outside of class; I took students on meditation retreats deep into the mountains, completely off the grid for weekends of mindfulness and meditation and silent, contemplative hikes. Ways of expanding the way we see the world. Ways of expanding how we appreciate your five sense perceptions so that students can come back to the design studio with a much broader group of relationships, so when they make decisions visually, it's coming from a much bigger experience. I think sometimes we're a bit inbred with Art and Design education where we focus really on our lineage, which is wonderful, but we see that as sometimes the truth or the end-all, be-all and I think not just taking in say a trendy topic, which is absolutely fine, but taking in something that might be interesting in Science or Math at the moment and trying to work with that in Design. I think it's really important just to help people see better. Actually understand how complex relationships really are. The inter-dependent nature of everything. Really important.

**Neil**: Agreed!

**David**: We can separate it out when we have target audiences and marketing strategies but as human beings who all share, or most of us share, you know, a way of seeing which is the use of two eyes, seeing form and relationship, color and light is a bit more expansive than, will that convince someone or not convince someone to do something or buy something, you know?

**Neil**: Yeah, very true! So, during this time, so we're at about seven years into Santa Fe, your time at Santa Fe, so during this time, were you starting to…were you starting to put together workshops outside of Santa Fe University or is that something that kinda came out of your time there? Because…yeah, go ahead.

**David**: No, no, please…

**Neil**: No, that was it!

**David**: Yeah, that's exactly what happened. While I was teaching there, I was offered an opportunity to create a class for students of all majors. It was one of those classes, sometimes schools have Freshmen or Sophomore level classes where they try to integrate students into say, a writing course that has a particular topic and these are called the Sophomore Round Table Courses and I created a class called Artful Awareness. It was a dream class. It was a class that explored mindfulness as the basis for the creative process and although I came from a Design perspective, I had students in this class that were coming from all departments on campus. Music, Film, Theatre, Photography, Studio Art, Creative Writing and Graphic Design. And I created a course where we explored all these aspects of mindfulness and contemplation from philosophical, psychological, scientific and spiritual perspectives. There were readings in texts from all of those avenues. We had projects that I created where students could do them in any medium, so it was more about the exploration of that contemplation rather than the medium itself, so for example, exploring Charles and Ray Eames' film, *The Power Of 10*, I then asked students to make their own Power of 5 in any medium. So, in film they could've filmed from the outside of a building inside; or they could've made it abstract with a form going deeper into the color. One student, a writing student, wrote a short narrative and then took a paragraph from that narrative and turned that into a short narrative and then took a sentence from that and turned that into a short narrative and took a word from that and turned that into a short narrative, so they were opening up in ways that expanded a creative practice again, but didn't matter what medium they were in. The benefit of having all these students in the same class too is that students could see how this could unfold in different mediums that they might've never explored or perhaps wanted to but been intimidated by. And because of that, I ran that class many times, maybe seven or eight times…

*(30:40)*

…Because of that, I had really cultivated a way of talking about this process to any type of creative practitioner. While that was unfolding, our school, because it was purchased by a very large for profit educational corporation, they were connected to many, many schools around the planet and because we were specifically an Art School and many of these schools were more generalized Liberal Arts schools with Studio Arts, Graphic Design, Photography degrees, we began to cultivate workshops to offer these other schools. These workshops were a week long, a Faculty member from the school would go to this other school, this other institution and spend a week there. Sometimes we would teach a series of workshops to the same students for five straight days, sometimes it was a group of students in the morning and a different group in the afternoon. Sometimes it was a group just for one day and then I'd hop to another school in the city for the next day and so on and so forth. And within a very, very short time, my proposed workshop of teaching Graphic Design as contemplative art, using Design as a way to look in and out and see the duality of the two simultaneously, for both the use of other and self, became very popular. And within a year, I had the amazing opportunity to fly around this planet and to teach these week-long workshops to students in Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey, all around Mexico, or I should say all around a certain region of Mexico. I went down to Sao Paolo, Brazil. I spent three summers in Milan in Italy, teaching. I ended up living for two months in Spain teaching these workshops in Madrid. I taught these workshops in New Delhi. It was really fascinating. I had the opportunity in the United States to teach them as well down in San Diego, so to really take them outside of my own institution and group of students. And it was interesting because these things that I'm talking about, it takes a little bit of time to settle into feeling the fruition of these teachings. This is not about coming to a class and in an hour I've taught you how to make something differently so you go home and you make it different. It can be much subtler than that. It could be about seeing the relationship of color in a way where it might take a few months or a few years for you to begin to explore what that means in your choice of color in your design work. So at my school, I could gain the trust of my students over semesters or years. It was a very different experience jumping in for a week with students who were being taught very traditional, professional commercial design and having to both share what I wanted to share in a way that excited them, got them engaged quickly, but also didn't freak them out. You know, they had to trust me within a few hours, otherwise what I'm teaching is useless. If you don't trust the person sharing these truths, it just becomes like any other quote-unquote self-helper, you're like, yeah, OK I guess, fine: bye! You know, like, thanks for telling me that: now I'm gone. So yeah, it was a very interesting experience; wonderful, wonderful little period of time. That went on for about a year or two.

**Neil**: So how, I'm curious now, well, not now, but I'm curious: how did the work…how did that differ from group to group? So, the group that you taught in Delhi, New Delhi?

**David**: Yeah, yeah, New Delhi.

**Neil**: And then the group that you taught in…Madrid, versus the groups that you taught in Mexico. How did the…how did the result of their work differ between those different cultures?

**David**: You would think it would have differed a lot. What's funny is that the answer is, it barely differed. And it really at first surprised me and then it was very, very straightforward. These programs were modeling themselves after American Graphic Design Education.

*(35:16)*

**Neil**: *(laughs)*

**David**: And at the time, we are in the blog era; we're right before Instagram and students all around the planet were being taught similarly at these schools and were looking at the same types of Graphic Design work around the planet, and a very singular language started to appear, as I'm sure you're aware of, where it was much less about when I was in school, wanting that great new Swiss design book or that new book from London or new book from Japan because culturally, they were making a very different type of pop culture design work. At this point, things were starting to look very similar. I couldn't tell the difference between countries, that there was that, quote-unquote, international style that was starting to appear. If they were all using English or Spanish, then the only difference was that actual wording in the language but the styles that were appearing were very uniform. There was a handful of different ways of approaching things, the post-grunge thing, the contemporary minimal thing, the hand drawn thing; there were styles. What I found really interesting was in these programs, it didn't seem like they were engaging their students very much with localized design culture. In New Delhi, for example, there was very little that seemed in their work that was based on, and I don't know much about Indian design work, but the history of their pattern-making, say. Culturally their symbols. It was very Westernized. So I would go into theses programs and kind of push in a way where I'd say, well, you know, you don't have to just look at it this way. We could look at the things that are surrounding you in your home based on the history of your own culture. Or you could look at the way you see certain color in your culture. Is there a lot of green, is there a lot of red, is there a lot of blue? Is that a benefit? Should you continue using that or should you do the opposite and use more red because there's so much blue? I mean, I'm just saying something very basic here as an example. But that's what I would bring to them to try to help them actually return to maybe some of this more localized cultural design work, and when I say localized, I even mean just entire countries.

**Neil**: Interesting.

**David**: Yeah. Money is powerful! It gets you to focus on something very different very quickly if that's of interest and you know, all these students in these schools too were very much being taught design to work locally but to really think about it in terms of international business as well and the international languages I think are really closer than ever now in terms of visual choices and styles.

**Neil**: You mentioned that you were at Santa Fe University for about a decade or so. So, between year seven and year ten, was there, did you continue doing what you were doing or were there other…things that came up?

**David**: I did, you know, I continued, I continued doing what I was doing. The school started to shift a little bit. We had a group of Faculty that were amazing creative artists in all of their arenas and mediums and for a handful of years, we were being very, very supported both financially and just mentally and emotionally with what we were doing. But like many businesses, sometimes when the finances get a little tight, decisions start to be made for different reasons and in different ways. And around the time when some of the budge constraints started to hit, like they naturally do with many schools, we had an amazing Vice President at the school. He was really the connection for us between the Santa Fe Art Faculty and the Baltimore administration that was supporting us both financially and structurally. This man was an artist, is an artist and an administrator. He was the perfect, perfect connector.

**Neil**: Yeah.

**David**: But he also did such a great job believing in all of us, giving us the freedom and the support that we needed to really grow these programs in the rich ways that we were trying that he was offered an opportunity to become the Dean of the School of Art at Pratt. When he left our school to go to Pratt, as you can imagine…

**Neil**: You can't say no to that!

*(35:58)*

**David**: Exactly! An incredible opportunity, things in my opinion began to change. For me in my program in particular began to change a lot because the administration at that point didn't fully understand the angle I was taking and because they were coming much more from the world of I am a business person, and I am looking at education as a business, and the models that they were looking at were both for profit and non-profit academic models, but they were really very commercially…commercially-driven Design programs. So over the next few years what I found was I just wasn't being supported in the same kind of ways. At that time as well, we had a lot of things change because we were a for-profit, Tenure was removed from our programs. Our titles were taken away, everyone was just called Faculty rather than having the Assistant, Associate and full-time Professor titles. And sabbaticals were taken away.

**Neil**: *(sharp intake of breath!)*

**David**: So at a certain point I was the Chair of a Department with very little secondary resources like an administrative assistant. I had three digital labs, a hundred-twenty students I was mentoring, a full course-load and many other responsibilities and after about eleven or twelve years of full-time teaching, I began to understand the difference between physical exhaustion and conceptual exhaustion, you know, the conceptual is I don't really want to do this: I'm tired, I can't handle this, I'm not in the mood, but I hit physical exhaustion where I was falling asleep with my clothes on. I couldn't get out of bed in the morning; I had really burned out and I understood why Faculty get sabbaticals oftentimes after six or seven or eight or nine years. I needed a break. I had been giving and giving and giving for so long, I was just, I was burned out. So I stepped away and I took a year personal sabbatical, where I explored meditation and my creative practice on a daily basis in my studio and began to really explore what contemplative design means to me without any clients; what it means to work with design elements and principles in a way that allows the element and the principle to vibrate at its highest frequency. To do what it does for our direct experience in the most refined or expansive way that it could. Very similar to the explorations of perceptual artists like Mark Rothko or Robert Irwin, or James Turrell. These people that were considered or are considered studio artists but are exploring the Studio Arts through what I thought was perceptual expression and the mind of a Designer. Seeing the relationships. So I took time to do that and began to explore that and right as I was about to head back to the school, I decided to step away, the school was becoming a place where things were changing rapidly. Within a year the school then actually unfortunately shut down for good.

**Neil**: Oh no!

**David**: Yeah, it was a really unfortunate time; the economy, things were happening outside the academic arena that were affecting the school. Things were happening inside the academic arena. I really thought this was going to be kind of where I'd be for the rest of my life, building this amazing program; in my mind, in my delusional mind! I saw, you know, Bauhaus to the Black Mountain to CalArts, to Santa Fe. I mean, I was like, this is a direct lineage, I am going to build the next best Graphic Design on this planet; this is where I'm going to be until I die. But like with everything, within impermanence, things change and yes, the school shut down and I found myself humorously as a teacher with no school for a little while.

**Neil**: So, when you were at Santa Fe, you had mentioned that they took away Tenure. Now, did you go through that process at Santa Fe?

**David**: No, I've never been part of that process in all these years. While I was in Albany for the two years, I believe Tenure was there but because I was brand new for the first two years, I was not involved with that process and then I left. When I got to Santa Fe, it was original the College of Santa Fe, which technically was the oldest chartered college in the State of New Mexico and they had Tenure. But it was causing a lot of difficulties because they had Faculty who had been there for thirty years as Studio Art Professors for example who were Tenured. And Tenure's a funny thing. Tenure, I think, makes sense if you are, say a Science Professor and your research is about something that maybe the school doesn't one hundred per cent support or understand or believe in. Having Tenure allows you to pursue that without the fear of say being fired…

*(45:27)*

…Sometimes in the Arts I've seen that it also can allow Faculty to become very lazy. Or maybe lazy's not the right word. Become very content with what they know and not feel the need to have to evolve with the times. Maybe that's a better way of putting it. So some schools removed Tenure because they felt like it had become something that did the opposite where originally it gave freedom, now it actually inhibited departments from evolving and doing more because Faculty could just say no, I don't want to or continue to do what they're doing without any repercussions. I think there were questions about that at College of Santa Fe but the moment we became the Santa Fe University of Art and Design and were owned by a for-profit, it was pretty clear that those things were not in their best interest and they began to run the school like a traditional business where we were not even on annual contracts after the first year, but it was just a traditional business, you know, a traditional two weeks kind of…No one was being fired in the middle of the year but they ran it like that and I think the difficulty with that is it puts a lot of pressure on you as an employee, the idea that you could be fired at any time takes away all that strength of being tenured which is being able to speak your mind in a meeting, but if you disagree in a meeting and you do that a couple of times, that really is a reason then to start to go, hmm, well maybe this isn't the right person for us, and we can fire them if, you know, the conditions are correct and that gives them the flexibility that's not there with Tenure, so it was removed. So after all these years, I've never gone through the process!

**Neil**: *(laughs)*

**David**: Probably for the best. Just let me keep making things and exploring things like I like to without having, I don't know, to convince everybody of its value.

**Neil**: Yes!

**David**: A lot of convincing in the Tenure process!

**Neil**: Well, so then after for your year after, so did you get back into academia after that point or what happened?

**David**: Sure. I left the school, I was still living in Santa Fe and I began teaching part time north of Santa Fe in Taos at UNM, University of Mexico, Taos Campus. I was just teaching one or two classes a semester and I did that for two or three semesters. It was a real joy, the people are lovely up there; it was much more continuing education: it's a Community College, so it's a very, very different group of students than I was used to. I really love going deep with students who are incredibly passionate and just can't stop thinking about this or just want to jump into the studio and make and make and make and I really like kind of cultivating that energy. This program's very different. It was for people who are retired, or high school students looking for college credit or people who were young adults wanting to take a class or two or explore the Arts. Lots of wonderful reasons, but it was a different engagement with the students because of that and I did that for a few semesters and it was lovely, but I knew that teaching full-time was really where my heart and soul was at, the kind of bigger picture experience as a teacher. But at the same time too, I discovered that it's at many schools, impossible to survive with an Adjunct's salary. That some schools may be a salary that can help you pay some bills. This school paid a salary where after an entire semester teaching two courses, I could pay one and a half month's rent. Or two months, I should say, rent.

**Neil**: Oh no!

**David**: And some bills. So I had to make some new decisions. There was a reality check at that point and during that time, I began to look for a new teaching position and was very close with some wonderful opportunities with colleagues for some places that I think were very exciting and pursued that for about a year or two and found myself moving back to Massachusetts, just north of Boston, to take a role at a school called Endicott College, a position as Chair of two degrees: Graphic Design and Photography and that was a really exciting opportunity and that was last year for the full year. And while being there, I realized I really missed the West, that my heart and soul were actually motivated more by the location of where I was living than perhaps my exact profession at the time, so after going back East for a year and continuing as a full-time Professor, I decided again to step away and move back to New Mexico where I am currently living.

*(50:45)*

**Neil**: And working!

**David**: And working. And breathing, yep, all of that.

**Neil**: That is an amazing journey. So we're almost…we're almost at the hour point of our interview, so I just want to leave a little bit of time, if you had any parting thoughts or upcoming projects that you would like to talk about.

**David**: Some parting thoughts? Yeah, you know, I think we are living in a time when so much is run by the economics of the thing. By how much money we're making or losing. I think we're at a place right now where too many decisions are being made for those reasons and it makes sense because we all have bills and we all need to survive, we need a roof over our head, we need food on the table, we need clothing. We have lots of monthly bills like cell-phones and insurance. But I would like to suggest to you, creative beings that you continue to work just as hard making what you make even without a client or without money coming in for that process because there's something really powerful about the creative process that transforms. It's not a conceptual transformation. I think a lot of the concept being put into Art and Design these days is humorously base-level. That we get that information in many other ways now. We can be told those truths in a conversation online, YouTube, many other ways. We don't need to mask it or metaphor it in Art. But what we can do is directly engage in the creative process, the making of things, for no other reason than just to feel the process internally, to appreciate the way it feels to look at color while making something. So for example, if you are designing something for a client and you're working with lots of blues and you're not working with that many reds, when you're staring at those blues for the entire length of the project, that's just like the exploration I was mentioning earlier where students were wearing glasses with blue tint and feeling an emotional energy arise. If you are staring at color for a client, you are staring at color, period. So if you take an hour at night and you make something, say digitally on the computer and you move that beautiful slider in Photoshop between colors and you watch the tone of that form change from red to blue to yellow or in various tones of blue and you just look at it, you can feel if you're calm enough the energy move in your body. You can feel it arise and you get excited about a color, ground and soften when a color is comforting or soothing. You can feel how colors when you move between them make you hyper or excited or kind of irritated or uncomfortable. That's just the tip of the iceberg. By making things and paying attention, you feel the way the energy moves around inside you and by understanding that more, that awareness is put into your creative decisions the next time you make something and then by making things this way, I truly do believe the energy is in a certain aspect of harmony that allows for a much bigger manifestation to arise. And I'll just kinda leave it at that.

**Neil**: Well thank you very much for that parting thought. I love how you describe that process.

**David**: Well it's my pleasure.

**Neil**: Thank you very much for being on Tell It To Neil and I look forward to seeing you soon.

**David**: Thank you Neil, I really appreciate it. Best to you to.

This concludes Season Two, Episode Eight 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 David, please contact him through his website at [www.dgrey.com](http://www.dgrey.com)

*(end of recording 55:14)*

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