Hello, and welcome. I am your host, Neil Ward, and I'm grateful that you are taking time out of your day to listen to the second season of Tell It To Neil; I truly appreciate it.

On this episode, we're chatting with Associate Professor, Nikki Arnell from Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Let's listen in.

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

**Nikki**: Hello Neil, thank you for having me here! I'm so happy to be here talking!

**Neil**: Of course; I'm grateful for you taking the time out of your day to speak with us.

**Nikki**: What can I tell you?

**Neil**: Well, let's get right into it. How did you get into Graphic Design?

**Nikki**: I feel like I'm about to tell a story: once upon a time, there was a girl in the Fourth Grade (that's me!) and my step-grandfather who worked in Chicago was like a Stockbroker businessman, saw me drawing bubble letters and he knew I painted, he knew that I wrote stories all the time. He said…

**Neil**: Did you make fluffy letters?

**Nikki**: Oh yeah! All the time, that was like my gateway into what he thought, you should be a Commercial Artist. You remember that term?

**Neil**: *(sharp intake of breath!)* No!! That's like being a desktop publisher! No!!

**Nikki**: That term! But that's OK because I took that being a ridiculously goal-driven person, even in the Fourth Grade, that was the mid-eighties by the way. I eventually found out that translated to what I wanted was Art Director in Advertising and so I knew since mid-eighties as a Fourth Grader that I wanted to be an Art Director and in High School we had this thing called a Seminar in Visual Communications; I was in that, I became even more sure of it at College, I went to Indiana University, Bloomington and I, for undergraduate, and I made my own degree between Journalism for Advertising and Art for Graphic Design and I had a Psychology Minor but all I learned was that I hated statistics and some stuff about Freud and…but that actually prepared me quite well and I had an internship between my, or before my Senior year then went off to Denver, Colorado and got a job where I'd interned and that's where it began.

**Neil**: You're not disappointed, because that's quite a build up from Fourth Grade?

**Nikki**: *(laughs)* I loved Advertising soooo much, until I didn't.

**Neil**: What made you love it so much?

**Nikki**: It was because, I mean honestly though, it wasn't the Art; it wasn't, I mean, I'm not a copy-writer but I knew how to copy-write. It was the ideas. It was telling the story which was the Psychology aspect of it I like. I like getting into people's brains and figuring out how they work to make them do something which, looking back, I'm like hi, wow, do you have any morals? But it was, I don't know, maybe it goes back to being in Junior High and being like, *(little girl voice)* 'How do I be popular like those girls?' and just figuring out…figuring out how people work. And I loved, I loved it. That sounds so creepy now.

**Neil**: I mean, one could say it's manipulation and another person could say it's persuasion!

**Nikki**: *(laughs)* Manipu…suasion. Yes, exactly. But I loved Advertising very much and I worked for it and of course my twenties happened also, so I did all sorts of stuff including moving a lot. I moved between Colorado and California a couple of times and so I learned how to freelance also with, you guys remember those recessions in the early two thousands and Advertising is its first victim. So, between all those years, I learned a lot about getting jobs, I learned a lot about freelancing, I learned a lot about taxes and to pay quarterly, you must. I learned about health insurance and just the value of benefits.

**Neil**: Are there any pointers that you would give to anyone about any of those topics?

**Nikki**: Well, let's see, to the listeners of this program I would think that wherever you go, you should have good benefits, at least health…yeah, the better the benefits, the better it is and just make sure you're aware of the value of those when you are looking at the amount you'll be paid. And as far as taxes and benefits, I teach a Professional Practice class to the graduating, like in their last semester at Arkansas State and I teach that not from reading it in books, but because I experienced it and I wish someone would've told me! So, yeah. But somewhere in there, so back to…probably about, gosh, about 2006-ish, 2007-ish, I was freelancing somewhere and it kind of gotten crappy again, I was in Denver, I'd recently gotten divorced: that's important because I had very few attachments when we start talking about Graduate School and the freedom that I had…I had that going on and…I just was looking for another job, just to make some money, and I happened to see that this place called Westwood College, which at that time was not accredited, I do not know if it is accredited now, but I didn't even know what that meant, and to teach some Graphic Design, so I went in there, I got hired, I pretty much was told, make sure you dress nicely, that was all I got.

*(05:32)*

**Neil**: So, you didn't really have a calling to be a Design Educator; you kind of just fell into it then?

**Nikki**: Fell into it. I mean, you know, when I was like a kid growing up I was like, *(little girl's voice)* 'I'll play teacher, I'll be a teacher, that's fun' but I mean I never thought I was going to do it: I was just figuring it was gonna fill my time until I got back into Advertising. So I taught for a year and I taught a Portfolio class; I taught a couple of classes and then after that year, the Ad Agency I'd worked at before, which is the biggest one in Denver, gave me a call back and said, and I'd worked at there before but I'd left them when I moved to California and came back, and anyways, they'd called me and said, 'Hey, come on in for an interview', and I was like, 'Oh my God, yes!' And so I got a job there and it only took a year and I realized I was done with Advertising. It was…it didn't have the magic any more and teaching was something where every day you went in, it was different. It was also sometimes incredibly frustrating but remember the reason why I went into Advertising was because I wanted to see how to…how people tick and how to make them understand something and how to make them, I mean, buying beer, which is because I was working at Coors at that Ad Agency, versus, you know, actually learning something for an education: I know those are different but in a way, kinda not, it's just a matter of how to make people understand and how to get that message to them and so I guess that the teaching aspect of it, I guess that is different every day. When you go into work for a brand, it's the same every day, you know? I don't know, something like that, it was just…it was different, so I only stayed at that Ad Agency for a year and then…here's the good part of the story…the very exciting…I got the job back at Westwood and I was working there for a little bit. Meanwhile I was like, and they were searching for Accreditation so the idea of the first time I ever thought of getting an MFA was because they were saying, everybody has to get an MFA in something and…in something, that was pretty much the direction!

**Neil**: Wow!

**Nikki**: And…I was looking at that and I thought…or at least that's how I remember it! And I was like, remember this was all within, like, the last six months of this year, so it wasn't like the full year, this all what I'm about to tell you, all happened within six months. I was like, OK, MFA, I'll start applying. Well I can, I really can probably only afford an in-State school and the best Graphic Design program for graduates is Colorado State. No offence, University of Colorado, but Colorado State's better for their graduate Graphic Design program so I only, it's the only place I applied and I figured, I was good at School, I'll just get in. I mean, it's just a program that's teaching more stuff. Wait on that! So…

**Neil**: Because that's how it goes!

**Nikki**: Oh my God! So I'd quit that Advertising job; I was working that Westwood College job and that was, you know, kinda just a filler, and you never knew how many classes you'd have from time to time, they didn't teach in semesters; they taught in like, nine week courses, but I was like, that's cool, of course I'm going to get accepted to this program. Hello! And so I sold my house…mm-hm. I had, didn't have any real job and I was ready to go to Graduate School, I was like, gee, I wonder why I haven't gotten that letter: I guess I have to have a letter of acceptance. So I went up to Colorado State and I talked to them and that was the first time that I realized, they accept in their MFA program for Graphic Design at this time, they accepted one person every two years and that was it and the closest MFA program in Graphic Design that, because I didn't want anything online, was Wyoming. I don't think University of Colorado even had a program in Graphic Design for an MFA and yeah, so that was neat. But also in that, you know, somewhere around in that time I'd also, you know, divorced. If you've ever been through a divorce, you know what I'm talking about. You just kinda realize, oh, wow, I'm really free all of a sudden and I was like, well, whatever, I'll find something else to do and even though I sold my house and quit my job and oh my God! But then, like in November I think it was, or something like that, or maybe it was December even, I got the letter from Colorado State and they accepted me and I moved in January. So, when people say, wow, how did you choose your MFA program? I got really lucky because the program at Colorado State is AMAZING. The only place I applied and I got in, I mean, I still have no idea how lucky I got. So there's that!

*(10:05)*

**Neil**: *(laughs)*

**Nikki**: And while I was at Colorado State, which is something to make sure to understand for any of you out there who are considering this, aside from the first and last semester, every other year, every other semester I was there and it being a traditional MFA was three years, I went three and a half because I just figured I'd have another half-year in there. Honestly, I was just wasting time. But you can get out in three years, so anyway, every other semester aside the first and the last, I was an Instructor of Record. That is not a Graduate Assistant. The Graduate Assistant looks nice on your CV; Instructor of Record looks even better. I was completely responsible for everything. And that was huge. It also meant that at least at Colorado State, for all of those semesters, I was paid a little bit and I had my…tuition covered. I still had to pay for like, something like overall university fees, but it was a fraction. My tuition was covered…

**Neil**: Which is extremely helpful!

**Nikki**: Yeah, yeah. I mean when I hear about people who are still paying off their graduate school loans and they didn't have Instructor of Record to put on their CV, they got out of school with nothing but maybe an Assistantship, which is not the same thing. I just feel again…really lucky…I went where I did. Yeah. And by the way, the MFA program at Colorado State is much larger, it's just the Graphic Design program has one maybe, I think they might have two people now, I don't know, MFAs, but mine was pretty much one. They have, usually have a lot of painters in their MFA program then they have like one or two in Print-Making and Fibers and I think they had Metals and Photography and…they have New Media now, they didn't, there was Forming when I was there. But anyway.

**Neil**: It makes me wonder when people decide to go back for their MFA in their life because there seems to be a theme that there are times in a person's life, and mine included that you wind up being in a place where you don't have, well you don't have, I don't want to say you don't have direction, but you're kinda at a point where you're like, OK, what next?

**Nikki**: Um-hm.

**Neil**: And…

**Nikki**: But…

**Neil**: Oh, go ahead.

**Nikki**: But I will say though, that I think it's, I think it's very important any of you who are out there considering this, I feel really strongly about this: Design is an applied art. You have to apply it for a while. Do not think that you can get your BA or BFA and then go straight into an MFA. You won't be taken seriously unless you've gone to some institution that is so elitist that they're like, wow! You went there: yay! But for the most part, you've got to apply it. Now, I know that other, like I know that Painting is different, very different. But Graphic Design is an applied art; you have to apply it. I'll get off my soapbox now.

**Neil**: I was going to say, serving up some truth!

**Nikki**: Yeah! When I hear someone who's finishing up their Under-Graduate who just wants to…who has done barely any actual, like, he had to go to the freelancer nine to five and…or loved going to it, either way. And they just want to go straight to school, I just, if they ask me, I immediately say no. Don't…you have to go do it first, you will not be taken seriously otherwise. Have you heard otherwise? Perhaps other people disagree with me. That's possible!

**Neil**: *(laughs)* All comments can be directed to Nikki Arnell!

**Nikki**: Yay! OK.

**Neil**: So, back to your MFA.

**Nikki**: Yes!

**Neil**: So did you have a…a project in lieu of thesis or did you have a thesis paper that you had to write?

**Nikki**: I had a…both a paper and I had a project that had to be done. They did not have to be related but mine complemented each other.

**Neil**: As they should!

**Nikki**: Yes, exactly.

**Neil**: So what was the…what was the topic around that? Did it…was it…in connection with your background in Advertising?

**Nikki**: Noooo.

**Neil**: Psychology…oh, OK.

**Nikki**: Noooo! So, let's start with the written. I'm a little prouder of that, in retrospect.

**Neil**: OK.

*(14:26)*

**Nikki**: The written was a thing that I called, I entitled it something called *The Beautiful Messy* and I had it published a couple of years after I graduated, even in international journal, so…

**Neil**: Congratulations!

**Nikki**: Go me! Yeah. But it was…the entire thing was pretty much my journey from being an Advertising person who honestly, I think, forgot how to be an artist. I wonder if I'd even ever thought I was a real artist because even in Under-Graduate, I did it, I did all those programs to be an Art Director in Advertising, which is being an artist, call-out to all you Art Directors, but you're in communications and there's…from far away there's like some faction of a line there. When you're in it, there's a cavernous divide between Art and Communication and especially for some of you out there who might be teaching individual Communications program versus Design in an Art program; it's very different. I feel like I've just started eight conversations there!

*(15:25)*

**Neil**: *(laughs)*

**Nikki**: So, let me go back to my thesis. *Beautiful Messy*. I, when I first got in there, before we ever got to starting to form a thesis, there was a lot of just independent study. My main adviser was a Graphic Design Professor who was pretty much like every couple of weeks, come in and tell me what you're doing and he was, he would guide me. Very hands-off. Now I did have an entire Committee which had another, had like a Print-Maker and a Photographer on it, a Drawing Professor on it, but while I was just getting in there, I just went so far out of the computer because it seemed like it was confusing, it seemed like I couldn't make art on the computer and be taken seriously. Maybe that was just me, I don't know. I know I got a lot of crap for putting words on things from my Professors who weren't Graphic Design who kept saying, don't tell me what to think and my Graphic Design Professors I would look at them and they'd just kind of smile and go…Mm-hm! Welcome to Art School! And so then it was so frustrating and I'm so thankful that happened because it…it made me see that line between Art and Communication. To this day there's still a line. I think it's a complementary line though. And I, the whole other thing with teaching that I use it sometimes, I don't know that's a whole other conversation, but back to my thesis! That was my…my main thing so you know, I would still write words on things but it got to be so much about, you know, I didn't want to use a filter to make something look messy in Photoshop. I didn't want something that was a hand-rendered looking font. I wanted to do everything by hand for that human connection; I wanted somebody to know that I made that. I mean, I would go to Home Depot. I still do. I go to Home Depot and people are like, what do you need for your hardware? I'm like, I don't even know what this does but it's pretty and I'm going to make Art out of it. I hope I don't get electrocuted. You know, like that's my like, I just wanted stuff. And I know I also have, you know, conversations: is it Art, is it Craft? Oh my God, that's a whole other conversation, but it was…I don't know, that's where I went with it. Now my thesis, aside from that written thing about the *Beautiful Messy*, my final project, my exhibition: oh God! The idea…

**Neil**: You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to!

**Nikki**: I'm glad I passed. The idea was great. The information researched was interesting, but I tried to say five hundred million things and at the end of it all, I kept trying to tell people things and my Committee kept saying, stop telling us. Make us, you know, let us come at it ourselves. So I'll give you the general idea, was that I was…there were three parts to it which was a matter of how people experience Art or Communication and there was the idea of the sanctity of the gallery and so I made stuff that hung on this wall that was purposely kind of messy and it was a spotlight on in a room and you know, I made sure that there was this like, red carpet in front of it and there was a rope that you couldn't touch it: it was gallery space. Versus another piece that I did and they all were in this series, that was printed. I ended up using something like magnets because I wanted someone to be able to get in there and read and do stuff, create costumes that people would put on and it was…and it was on the same style, all very hand-rendered, kinda messy but it was with stuff you could touch, and the third thing was on the computer. And it was a matter of, it was also happened to be costumes but it was a matter of using Flash and putting stuff on there and being able to interact on the computer. Now remember, this was like 2009, 2010 and so that was still a little cutting edge then. I realize you're all like, really, that? Yeah, well it was new then, so there! And I was obsessed with the different way that people interacted. Now the subject matter happened to be something about costumes and…aware of three different religious and how when you put on too much fundamentalism it becomes deadly and it was a matter of the gallery space was Judaism and the book was Christianity. Thinks Protestant Reformation and Gutenberg and then Islam being the most recent was on the computer, those being three related Abrahamic religions that come from the same source. Again, I just couldn't stop communicating.

*(20:04)*

**Neil**: Wow!

**Nikki**: So…I passed! Whatever! In fact, I had a job at a Tenure Track University before I even graduated, so I'm really glad I graduated!

**Neil**: So this makes a really good segue.

**Nikki**: Thanks!

**Neil**: So you're working on your…Exhibition. Were you searching for academic positions and if you were…

**Nikki**: Yes.

**Neil**: OK.

**Nikki**: So, somewhere in there, well, I was, let me answer that question first. Yes, the last semester…well actually I started the semester before the last semester looking, but that last semester, because you know, the jobs weren't really announced, I didn't know that until people would have their budget in like December or January, was when all of a sudden, more jobs started appearing and I started applying and I…and I would look at things, I mean, I started out looking at things like CAA because I heard that was what you had to do but I also soon realized that CAA is not really the land where Designers go. It's gotten better but that isn't really it. I started looking at things like HigherEdJobs.com and stuff like that. It was a while ago so it was like 2009, 2010. I think I even looked on Monster.com but I soon realized nope, this is not where I want to be. I was…I was pretty sure I wanted, I mean, I was like ninety-nine per cent sure I wanted Tenure Track at an Accredited institution, that I did not want to teach online, but in the back of my mind I also knew I would go where I needed to go. Now, if you'd asked me at the beginning of Graduate School, I thought yeah, and then I'll come back to Denver from Fort Collins, Colorado and I'll get a job somewhere, because the jobs, I didn't understand that Tenure Track positions open when either someone leaves a position or a line opens, if the School doesn't take away that line. I didn't know that…I knew enough though also that I didn't want to be an Adjunct because I learned how bad the pay is, and so I wanted to be a Tenure Track and I realized soon after that I would go wherever I had to go. But again, because I didn't really have any connections that were holding me back. I had a dog and two cats and all the freedom in the world, so I was pretty lucky about that.

**Neil**: What a magically…what a magic place to be!

**Nikki**: So, whenever you're going through dark times like a divorce or something, just know there's always an upside! So…yes.

**Neil**: Just imagine all the possibilities with all your free time now!

**Nikki**: Mm-hm! Yeah! Right, right, yes!

**Neil**: So then, did you…did you find yearly contracts or did you go directly from your MFA program to Arkansas?

**Nikki**: So I…I got the job at Arkansas State before I had graduated and it was signed on as a Tenure Track position. Now, granted I didn't actually sign the paperwork until I had already moved my entire everything over to Jonesboro, Arkansas; that was scary. But I took people for their word and I signed the…which was part of the reason why I took the job there, because once I…so I interviewed at Ithaca College in New York. I believe was in a Communications program. I had an MFA, it was still a terminal degree, even though most Communications people there, terminal degree is a Doctorate. MFA is fine. Terminal, doesn't mess with their Accreditation. I interviewed there, before I had heard back from them, I interviewed the next week at Arkansas State and I didn't know anything about Arkansas State. You know, of course I'd done some research before I showed up, but I didn't know how wonderful the program it is, what a strong Graphic Design program; the fact that I went there and met the other Professors, met the students. I felt at home and I would have never expected it. It's a wonderful program and so after I gave my, you know, you have a two-day thing, you interview with everybody and you make a presentation. After my presentation, somebody took me off somewhere and they were talking to me while the group was meeting, I found out, and then within like twenty minutes, they said, can you go and meet with the Dean and the Dean offered me the Tenure Track position. So I accepted it before I moved back, or took my…before I finished my thesis, before I finished graduating, they just said, you're hired on, you know, assuming you will get your MFA and that was it.

**Neil**: And I just want to point out that that is not a typical…

**Nikki**: Nope!

**Neil**: …offer process!

**Nikki**: Nope! And in fact I know now, after being on Search Committees, that things have changed and we are not allowed to do that any more. You…it has to go up through the University, it has to be checked before…there's all sorts of other things that have to happen and it wasn't that long ago that this happened but that was the way it was done in 2010 and now we couldn't do that if wanted. The University has to be the one that offers it…

*(25:08)*

…And in case you don't, in case people out there don't understand it, because I didn't understand it before I got into academia, even though it makes total sense. At most State Universities I know that I've been to, there's the University, there's the College, there's the Department and so the University is obviously Arkansas State; the College, we were in the College of Fine Arts, now we're in the College of Liberal Arts and Communication but it's a College with other Colleges in it, and then there's our Department of Visual Arts. And so for example, every year that we have an annual review to do, that goes to our Department. And the Promotion Retention Tenure Committee, PRT Committee, looks at it after your Tenured, you're on that Committee. I feel like I'm giving you a lot of information right now!

**Neil**: No, I love it, keep it coming!

**Nikki**: Ok, all right, here goes! And I'm pretty sure that that does not go up to even the College level until we have a third year review and I'm so thankful we have that. Those of you who do not have a third year review who are Tenure Track: I'm sorry. It's like pre-Tenure. It is so helpful because you do everything and it's also the first time the College sees you and they, and the thing is, they give you feedback. They…just like the Department, every year, the PRT Committee gives you feedback, they don't just go, OK. Like for example, like the second year I was there, I wasn't doing enough Service because I didn't know and I didn't know how to get a University Service position. And it turns out that's because people had been in them for so long and so the Department was like, oh, we need to move people around. Here: you have this position, because you need it because we know you're going to need it in order to get Tenure and want you to have Tenure, because otherwise we look bad. And we like you. And so, and I know not all Colleges are like, that Departments are like that. So, anyway. Third year review goes up to the College and only when it goes to Tenure does it go to College and then up to the University. But it first has to be defended by the Department, then defended by the College and then the University hears you.

**Neil**: That is a really good taxonomy. Thank you for laying that out!

**Nikki**: Now, I don't know if Colorado State did that because I never, I mean, I was only a student there so I don't…I know what they considered research and not in an Art Department and I can talk about that! But…that's really important.

**Neil**: And for those listening, the unit that structure is a pretty general structure but the third year review that is definitely more specific towards Arkansas State University. So just keep that in mind.

**Nikki**: Yeah, and I know like the Professor who's senior to me in Graphic Design, she didn't have a third year review to go through, so it's a more recent thing. And it's wonderful!

**Neil**: And helpful, yes. So…

**Nikki**: Yeah, well, see the thing is, is that for PRT Committee, now that I'm on that side of the ring, I understand why it is so important to give feedback to our pre-Tenure professors every year, and…you who are pre-Tenure need to know this too, because it's not all on you; if you then don't get Tenure and you have never been told until like the end, like well, you never did Service, well you can be…well, you never told me, so I'm not gonna jump into that legal pool but I know that you can get in trouble if you don't tell your pre-Tenure that there's a problem, so that's all. I'm not a legal person to dispense advice.

**Neil**: So, you've been at Arkansas State for ten years now?

**Nikki**: Yeah, we're going on, well I guess technically it's, I got hired in 2010 so I guess it's almost ten.

**Neil**: Congratulations!

**Nikki**: Thank you!

**Neil**: So you’ve been through the Tenure and Promotion profess and I'm guessing the Promotion process is coming up for you in a few years?

**Nikki**: In a few…well yeah, so we start out as Assistant, as you know, and then Promotion and Tenure go hand-in-hand; Associate and Tenure at the same time. You can do them separately but OK. And I didn't. And then after you have to wait at least five years to go for full Professor. So yeah, in a couple of years I'll be trying that again.

**Neil**: So, the…going back to Tenure and Promotion. They are separate processes there but you can do them together?

**Nikki**: They're separate but we, I mean I've always, I was encouraged to do them together. If you don't do them together, I mean they're separate processes, but they go hand-in-hand. I mean, you know, out there in academia if someone says that they are an Associate, you just kind of assume that means they're Tenured. Now…

*(30:04)*

**Neil**: Promoted: Yes!

**Nikki**: Well, yeah. See, and it could be since I just was like, do what you tell me to do, OK, that's what I'm supposed to do, then maybe I just never questioned it. I've heard of stories where people have gone up for promotion early or somebody came in Tenured because they agreed with the institution and also just stuff that I didn't do and I've never experienced directly, so I just know what I did.

**Neil**: So, did you have a mentor going through your first six years, five years? Did you have a mentor there at Arkansas State or did you have to kind of navigate that on your own?

**Nikki**: I was very lucky because the one person who is senior to me, shout out to you, Kim, she is a very, very warm and loving and giving person and was never like, I've heard so many stories of people who their senior Professors on their Faculty are like, in competition with them and I think that's just that's not what I went through. Kim was always very welcoming, especially when I first moved to the South and she let me know…no, that's what that person means and that's what they mean and you need to write a thank you letter because that's what we do, you know, stuff like that! You know, it was just, she was great. As far as the Department Chair at the time was also happened to be a Professor in Graphic Design who was helpful. Also, I went through Tenure with another Professor who's a very good friend of mine. She's a Painting Professor though, and so she, we went through Tenure together but you know, we obviously had, we followed the same very clear list of what was expected of us for research which, that's another conversation I can go into. Very clearly stated which if you don't have that, you need to ask for it from your Department, especially when it comes to research.

**Neil**: So, what qualifies for research? Let's just get into that!

**Nikki**: Let's just go right down that path! So…I mean, I know it differs from institution to institution. For example, Colorado State, even though I never went through the process there, I know that their Art Department at their R1 University would never, ever consider client work as accepted as research. Or at least that's what I heard. Sorry, Colorado State if I misheard you, but they were pretty clear about that. Now, going to Arkansas State, client work is considered as sort of other. It's still accepted but you need to do more than that. But be careful on that, because there's, if you are out there applying your design stuff, teaching what you do, there's a lot of Art Departments and sometimes it's just them, sometimes it's, you know, people have been in charge forever; sometimes it's Accreditation, but you have to be really careful with, you know, sometimes client work is only accepted if you won some award and good like, paying for, you know, hundred dollar award submissions to things, you know, like Addys or something like that, you know. Doing work for a client, we all know that doing work for a client is part of what we do and sometimes clients ruin the work, but it's important to know that you're still doing it. Anyway. But…so, research is clearly stated on our thing that, remember this is mostly studio artists, that at the very, very top is like independent, like you have a gallery of your own. That's never going to happen for me, so, whatever. But then when it comes to juried exhibitions, juried: important. Peer reviewed: important. If neither juried or peer reviewed is not on something, don't bother doing it. But juried exhibition, international, highest, national: if you're doing regional that's cute. Thank you. Need to have it be more than that. So, make sure when you enter things, even if it seems like it's a regional thing. If it says it's national…even if nobody outside of your region apply, it's still national. So there's that with exhibitions. When it comes to publications, which most of us aren't doing but I do, publications has to do with things like, you know, of course if you write your own book, which I don't plan on doing; writing your own book is a big deal but the you have to be aware of what's the publisher. So I can publish my own book online, that doesn't really matter. And then it's a matter of, but if it's a journal I have gotten published two times, in an international peer reviewed journal in our field, so I can't get like peer reviewed in basket weaving, you know, it has to be in Design. And that's a big deal. An article's going to be under a book but it's still important. And also, my favorite of all: conferences. And most conferences it seems like you have to write a paper in order to get into the conference. You don't have to write a paper. I mean, CAA maybe, but I mean, you don't have to. You can; I've done a lot of conferences that started the paper-writing process, but conferences are so great. Now, make sure they're juried: international is better than national. Don't bother with regional. I would really say don't bother with national: they're mostly international. Make sure it's in your field and again, juried. You have to put in an Abstract and then you show up and you give your presentation. But while you're there, you network. That's how I met you, Neil!

*(35:45)*

**Neil**: Yes it is!

**Nikki**: I mean, was it at SECAC that we met?

**Neil**: Probably!

**Nikki**: Well yeah, but I mean, that's where…I've met so many people that way and gotten so many connections. I just got back from speaking at a conference in Lisbon, Portugal about two weeks ago and met a ton of people and so, and it was an international Art and Society conference. But…so with all those things being, you know, and sorry, on the conference level again it's international, national, it has to be peer-reviewed or juried. So those are very clear directions and the client work was the sort of other. And that was what is allowed for Research. Then of course there's Service and there's Teaching. And as far as my research that I do which could be different than other Design Professors, I always have at least a couple of things in Other. I try to have one or two things in a juried exhibition that is truly Art and there is that divide between Art and Communication, Design again, it's there but I keep doing it because it informs my Design. I usually try to have one or two in a juried national or international exhibition and then I try to go to one or two conferences a year. If I can write something, that's cool, like I've sort of only written two things in the ten years…well three, that have gotten published. But the reason why I do conferences more than the gallery stuff is because the client stuff, you never know if that's going to count or not. Outside of Arkansas State, not that I have any plans of leaving, but the vast majority will not count that, and so therefore, it is not an iron-clad CV. Someone will look at that and they won't take you for real. Conferences and writing: no matter what, nobody can argue traditional academia. But if you don't like to write, then I know you probably don't want to do that. Conferences are just great, they're wonderful, and gallery exhibition, again that's…it depends on, I mean there's a whole lot of Graphic Design that will not get picked up in a gallery.

**Neil**: Correct. Because Graphic Design is all around us: it doesn't need to have a gallery!

**Nikki**: Right, I agree! But when you try to say that to other…so that's another thing, if you're in an Art Department, you're going to have that sort of push-back. Which is so frustrating. It also makes us be better Graphic Designers though, I think. Frustrated designers but…

**Neil**: Yes!

**Nikki**: Hey! But that's why some people I know, sometimes I get the feeling that we're kind of the ugly step-child of the Art Department sometimes, but we also have a whole lot of Majors. We also get a lot of income and there's all sorts of things that I tiptoe through the politics there. If you're in a Communications Department, that is going to be, I don't know, that's just, that's a different world that I don't know. But I know Art is where the research is going to, you're going to have, I mean I've heard if you're in Visual Communications that you have to have client work. You have to.

**Neil**: Yes…

**Nikki**: But by the way I also, even though I'm hired on to teach Graphic Design, I also teach the History of Graphic Design class that is required at our School, so there's Art Historians and they very gladly say, you teach it and I say sure, thank you. So, normally that would require someone, you know, Art History, their Terminal degree is a PhD, but because I have my Terminal degree, I can still teach, doesn't mess with Accreditation, and a lot of my writings have to do with the more traditional research of Art History.

**Neil**: So, real quick…

**Nikki**: So I'm a weirdo! Yes!

**Neil**: For those out there that are teaching the History of Graphic Design for their first time, what is your advice to them?

*(39:35)*

**Nikki**: Oh!...it's…well…I….that was a lot to answer there!

**Neil**: *(laughs)*

**Nikki**: Well I'm kind of torn because as soon as I say Meggs…you're going to know what I'm talking about. The Meggs textbook is what everybody teaches from. But I do not think he, I mean, loved Meggs, out there, I know he's gone but family and whatnot. Post-modern, I don't teach Post-modern from that book. I switch over to a book called *No More Rules* by Poynor. And the things is that it's impossible, whenever somebody argues, well why didn't you teach more about what happened last year, I'm like, well first of all, it's called History and second of all, I teach from cave painting until pretty much Shepard Fairey's Obama, and then I touch on other stuff. So…I mean, that's a lot to get through. Now that's something that I've also been, because I know there's some people that start with Gutenberg, with the sort of thing like, oh yeah, and there were some Romans, think serifs and we started writing, and I understand that point of giving more, you know, attention to history since Graphic Design has even been started calling Graphic Design, you know, that wasn't until like a hundred and fifty years ago, so I understand that argument, but how can you not mention illuminated manuscripts? How can you not really push the idea of what Gutenberg's Bible and, you know, well, Gutenberg's Bible was Gutenberg, and that affected the Protestant Reformation; that affected history and that affected this and of course then there's the whole idea, oh, by the way, this is just Western. I try to bring in some idea of like, by the way, like now I'm very adamant about it, like this is Western. I mention things about the invention of writing, how it wasn't Western first. I give, I try to give props to…to China, to Japan, to everybody who I can't think of right now…to Phoenicians, to Egyptian, to, you know, to Philistines, to all of the trade routes to all of this stuff and encourage further research, which is another reason why, why can you start at Gutenberg when you don't talk about the development of writing, then it's more Western, Western, Western: Europe is the best, you know, it's…yeah…so there's that!

**Neil**: *(laughs)*

**Nikki**: But I mean, I definitely, I definitely when I do teach it, it's pretty much, I put it in things of like the beginning of writing, the development of writing, and then I go to illuminated manuscripts, and then I'm pretty much like, there was some stuff that happened in the middle that I can't think of right now and then…and then we get to the beginning of Modernism. I pretty much jump right in with Modernism starting with Art Nouveau, and then, you know…sorry, Arts and Crafts Movement, and then Art Nouveau. And then I just go forward, I give a lot of props to William Morris with Arts and Crafts because that's going to eventually link to something else. I mean, everything starts to, the links are obvious then. But to completely ignore everything before that time, to completely ignore the development of writing, it does a disservice to the history of Graphic Design. And yeah, I could keep talking! Tell me when to stop!

**Neil**: *(laughs)*

**Nikki**: I mean, like, illuminated manuscripts, talk about parchment. If you don't understand the writing material and how that affects Graphic Design then you're at a loss, so…

**Neil**: No, I recently taught a History course…

**Nikki**: Isn't that fun the first time?

**Neil**: Which is why I asked you what advice you would give to those teaching it for the first time and I would add…

**Nikki**: Yes.

**Neil**: …to set aside plenty of time to put your slide-deck together for a lecture.

**Nikki**: Which is great because the first time you teach it, you can just update it a little bit. But the first year you teach it, it's a…yeah. Yeah, it's horrible.

**Neil**: It's a lot of time!

**Nikki**: Yeah! Now, by the way, I have a couple more things to add after teaching History of Graphic Design for many years.

**Neil**: OK.

**Nikki**: Two things: one is, every week, I have quizzes and they're done online and people can use their notes and they're really, they're graded but they're not, they're like a fraction of their final grade, it's more like, if you're not doing this, you're just a dumb-ass and your grade will show that. And then when it gets to the mid-term and I have the mid-term and I have the final, the final is not, and the entire year. There are two separate sections because it's just…even though essays could cover the entire year if you're referencing back, but those quizzes become a direct study guide. At the first half of the mid-term, I have multiple choice; it's just recall, basis of Bloom's Taxonomy, you know, like easy stuff, and it's pulled directly from those quizzes. It's also, the thing is that the students know it by now. It's a security blanket, like don't be so scared. And there's a sort of under-written…'cause you should be scared of the essays. So the second part after I take those up and I gather those, then I have, I'll put, I've done years where it's just one image, I've done years where it's two images and you have compare and you know, you have to list, OK, here's the general, you know, like any Art History class, here's the year, here was the artist if know, here was the material; now tell me about it. Sometimes it's just tell me about it, sometimes it's tell me about compare these two. Now I do allow them to have a study guide, which the class was four thousand, it's now been pushed back to three thousand level because of an Art History thing about surveys, that wasn't me, but it's still an upper level class and people say, study guide? Yeah, whatever, I let them have a one page study guide and I have to see it before they have to hand it in. Again, they know it, they're kinesthetic learners when they make the study guide, they're just studying. If they don't know it by now, it's not going to save them on an essay.

*(45:48)*

**Neil**: *(laughs)* So true!

**Nikki**: So that's what I've learned from that and again, break it up. Mid-term and final, now that's where you can understand on the final, if they need to reference something like, well because you know, back on illuminated manuscripts when they used parchment, blah-blah-blah, I don't know why they would reference that, but whatever. So there's my first bit about weekly quizzes that end up being a study guide. That's my suggestion. The other thing is very often, I know you might get some push-back if you're teaching at your own University, I don't know, sometimes they say you have to write, the students have to show evidence of writing, you know, that's part of what an Art History class has to be. First of all, they write in their essay, I do not want to read twenty five or thirty essays from students about…I just don't, I don't want to read that: it hurts! So what I've done, I haven't got any push-back because they still have to do some writing, and they also have to use InDesign and our Graphic Design Art History is mostly only for Graphic Design Majors. Anybody else who takes it who's another Major, I will given them some other overall like sort of massive project to do, like that probably would be a written report, but for their InDesign, it's a Graphic Design timeline and they have to make an InDesign document that uses Master Pages and Character Styles and it's just I give them all the images but they have to put them in. I give them all the names, and they have to put that in and then they have to write a couple of overall short essays and in the end they have a pdf that they have made and again, kinesthetic learners: they did it, they know InDesign better, they have more awareness as they're putting those images in of…oh, now I see how that connects to that. Now I see it. Because they're not going to see it when a lecture is four weeks later; they're not going to see that, but when they see it altogether, I think it does more than any overall, let me take one person and write a report, so I'm an expert on that one person.

**Neil**: That's a really good idea though.

**Nikki**: Thanks, it took me a while to develop that. I understand though, some universities will get push-back of saying no, we have to see evidence of academic writing and a couple of paragraphs on this is not going, or on your essay is not the same thing. I've just been very lucky not to get push-back yet.

**Neil**: And hopefully, you won't!

**Nikki**: I hope not!

**Neil**: Well, we're getting near the end.

**Nikki**: Yes.

**Neil**: So I just wanted to leave a little bit of room. Is there any, do you have any parting thoughts or upcoming projects that you would like to talk about?

**Nikki**: Well…um…

**Neil**: Ooooh!

**Nikki**: Not so many projects for myself. But while you're out there listening, everybody, we started this past year, and I teach a lot of the final courses at Arkansas State, Professional Practice, used to be called Branding and Portfolio. Two separate classes by the way. They should be pushed back when they aren't. And we're doing a Portfolio Review. I'm also on the…I'm also the Education Director for AIGA Memphis, which is our parent Chapter and we had something called, just a huge Regional Portfolio Review and we got a ton of reviewers in; in fact it's, I needed as many students or as many reviewers, that's how I did it. And because the best way to do it, otherwise there's just five reviewers and lines of people. The point is, I need reviewers so…if any of you are within, I can't drive you in or fly you, I can't pay for it! We're a State University, come on! But Memphis is fun, you should make it a vacation and come in, it's usually the last week of April or the first weekend of May, so it'll be on a weekend, a Saturday, and you should come in and be a reviewer, because you know it looks really good on your Annual Report, mm-hm, being a Reviewer at an Accredited Institution that's also being run by AIGA Memphis. It looks really good! So you should, so you should contact me, again either last week of April, first week of May, it'll be on a Saturday, come into town and be a Reviewer, especially if you're in driving distance or you want to fly to Memphis and have a vacation. That's all.

*(50:06)*

**Neil**: That sounds like a lot of fun! Reviewing is always fun too, to see what the students are up to!

**Nikki**: Yeah. It's really, it'd just be very helpful.

**Neil**: Well, thank you again for taking time out of your day to come here or not to come here, to talk to me!

**Nikki**: Thank you for asking me and for all of you who are out there who are considering Tenure Track, I think it's an amazing thing to just realize you will have to move where the job is, if you want Tenure Track. And don't forget to research Service and Teaching. You have to do all three. If you want to be just a teacher, this is not the route for you and for those of you who are in the middle of the Tenure process: keep going, make sure you clearly understand what they want. That's all.

**Neil**: OK! All right, thank you again!

**Nikki**: OK, thank you!.

This concludes Season Two, Episode Two 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 Nikki, please contact her through her website at www.nikkiarnell.com

*(end of recording 51:26)*

*© 2020 – Tell It To Neil*