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

On this episode of Tell It To Neil, we're chatting with Associate Professor of Graphic Design, Sarah McCoy, from the Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Let's listen in.

**Neil**: Hi Sarah, how are ya?

**Sarah**: I'm good, how are you?

**Neil**: Pretty good, pretty good. Thank you for being on Tell It To Neil.

**Sarah**: I'm happy to be here.

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

**Sarah**: Well, I think it started as a child really; I spent a lot of my time drawing and lettering. I would say I was, I've always been interested in letters, typography. So I started making like little cards for my family and neighbors and I kind of just did that all the time. Then I think around end of second grade or third grade, there was like a summer school class that my mom signed me up for a calligraphy class and so I loved it. I like, had little nibs and I was learning different shapes of letters and I had so much fun, so I kept up doing that. And then I think…you know, all through high school I took Design courses; I was always interested in Art History as well, I think just the historical past so I think that has followed me with my love of like, historical letter forms from the past as well, but then I went to the University of Iowa and I majored in, let's see, Graphic Design and Art Education and so I did both of the courses simultaneously, you know, like my Art courses and then my Education classes and then there was a moment where I had to take a Type class or an Education class and I think you know which way I went! I think I took the Type class!

**Neil**: Oh yes!

**Sarah**: And I think I called my parents, I said, I'm not going to be an Art Ed major any more, I'm going full-on Graphic Design and they were like, what is that? You know, so it was a relatively new field. This was, I entered the University of Iowa, Fall of 1995 so of course the computer was new. I think we shared two iMacs in the Art Department like in the Graphic Design Department…

**Neil**: Ooooh!

**Sarah**: Yeah, we like signed up for slots. And then I declared Journalism as a minor area because they had some fun Design and Typography courses and they also had a pretty…they had a nicer…computer lab, so I would hang out there and you know, send my job to print, which took forever, so I just loved, I loved design and I loved thinking about color, composition, typography, and I think the difference was, the reason I wasn't like a Studio major was that I really liked communicating a specific thing, so, giving ideas like meaningful form. I'm not saying that Studio Artists aren't communicating a specific thing because they are, many times with their work, but I liked the idea of working with someone to create work that communicated something that they needed done, and I think to this day, that's the part that really gets my brain going as when I have a project with a client and they have a problem or a set of information that they want to have conveyed, and then having me work through it. Or helping them working through it, you know, like is this a digital project? Is this a printed project? I like thinking about the best solution for them, so I think at the heart of it I'm still sort of this problem-solver. But not at all in the way that my Engineering husband is a problem-solver! So, mine is much more with color and image and depth and, you know, how things are conveyed visually.

**Neil**: Absolutely. And you know, Design…Design can kill people too, just like bad Engineering could kill people!

**Sarah**: This is true! This is true! It can. You might lock off onto a tarmac where you shouldn't be, because you read the sign wrong, right? So yeah, I do. I think…I love…I think that is an interesting part of our job as Designers which is different from, you know, Fine Artists or Studio Artists that we're solving our problems…the idea of solving a problem is more forefront to what we're trying to do.

**Neil**: Do you think that it's more problem-solving for people's needs or just problem-solving for the particular problem that presents itself?

**Sarah**: Could be both. You know, my own since I do a lot of press printing; usually they want to convey, you know, generally something happy. I mean, I do prints and things that are you know, to have to do with sympathy and things like that, but they come to me because they want to give visual to a specific event or thing or time, I mean moment in time or something and so I think that's an interesting part of my job, you know, is to…they don't…I mean, some of the things they're doing might be a want but for the most part it's a need that they have that they need to have, they need help with.

*(05:25)*

**Neil**: Absolutely, and that's what makes our field so much fun!

**Sarah**: Yeah, yeah, I mean I think about the different clients I work with; they've been, you know, universities and bike companies but then they've also been corporate projects so the gamut's wide, you know, and then you know it's like creating stationery for you or your mom or you know, so the…I think I also really like that part about my field is that I don't have necessarily one specific client, I mean, I have a couple, I have, you know, repeat clients and certain clients but I love being able to help someone with a problem they had that they can't design it themselves or they don't have the tools to do that and I'm happy to, I like being a part of someone's help or solution.

**Neil**: It is very rewarding, definitely.

**Sarah**: Yeah, definitely.

**Neil**: After you graduated with your undergrad, what happened at that point? Did you go directly into a graduate program or did you go out and work in the field?

**Sarah**: I...at the end of my time with my BA in Graphic Design, I went to Austin, Texas in 1999 and I worked for a small company that managed a bunch of associations of Texas so I did like newsletters and brochures and this was when the internet was still…well fairly…not prevalent right, I mean it was emerging. It was emerging. So everyone was trying to figure out what to do with it, so I still had a lot of print projects, so I learned how to get projects to press and things like that and I worked for a pretty small company and there weren't a lot of people my age and so I kinda started looking for a new job. My pay was kind of bad; it wasn't, it was like the same as what I had made the summer before in an internship in Chicago, so I was looking for a little better pay, a little better benefits and really, to be honest, looking to be a part of a little something bigger than me and trying to find a better design community, you know? At that time Austin did have a AIGA, I just didn't, I think I didn't know how to go about networking or really join that, so like if I were to go back in time and talk to my younger self, I would've been like, go right to those, go to all those socials of AIGA, AIGA Austin, and meet people, because I think that would've helped me find my newer job, the job I eventually took, sooner. And I would've felt more a part of the design community, you know, you can move to a whole new town, I had moved from Iowa City, Iowa to Austin, Texas and I didn't know anyone. And my husband had a job as an Engineer and so he had a bunch of young people he worked with so we did a lot of hanging out with them but my office, I think everyone, you now, here I was twenty-two, twenty-three and the rest of the people in my office were like forty and up, and you know, just a different place in life; so I did a lot of interviewing and I wound up taking a job that October with National Instruments, which was a hardware and software company in Austin, Texas and that was our headquarters and they are based at the world as well so I had a lot of interesting projects to do, product design, like box design, product design; I did a fun billboard, lots of other, just catalog pages; some, we were starting to put things on the web, so re-siting some things, that was emerging, a lot of advertisements still and like…kind of technical publications, so…I loved it though, because I was with, like I think our corporate design group had twenty other designers, or at least like…

**Neil**: Wow, that's a big group!

**Sarah**: Yeah, like maybe eighteen designers and then we had like a photographer, we had an archivist who was like taking care of all of our images of all the products and things. That would include our Art Director and Creative Director but it was great and it was such a flourishing environment for me as a young Designer. They paid for us to be AIGA members; they wanted us to be active that way, so it was just a great place as a young Designer to just grow, so I was there from '99 'til…2001 and then that…that May, we, my husband and I quit our jobs and we traveled abroad a bit and then that Fall, my husband started graduate school and I had thought about it, but we weren't sure if like both of us could afford to be a student, you know, and not work and we weren't really sure financially how to all make it work, so we kinda moved and Andy had a Research Assistantship and I looked for new jobs so I worked locally and I was sitting for Corcoran Communications doing design for them, which they did a bunch of publications for small, private colleges and universities so I did all kinds of look-books, if you will.

*(10:29)*

**Neil**: Oooh…

**Sarah**: And that Fall then I thought, you know, I kinda, maybe I want to go back to graduate school, so I applied that Fall and then I started that January, so January of 2002 I entered graduate school. And I, you'll laugh, like the first class I signed up for was intro to letterpress printing. I'd always wanted to take it as an undergrad; I was like, I'm gonna take that class! And then, and I loved my Design seminar. and I can't…I can't even remember the other…I think I took about three courses a semester and then I worked as a Teaching Assistant, quarter-time, and then half-time, Research Assistant, I worked for International Programs, so I did all the design for all their different international speakers and events and I loved that because it was such a broad range of speakers from Bosnia and Ghana, and so the visuals were fantastic. So I did newsletters and publications for them all the while I was in graduate school so…At the time, I wasn't exactly sure like, the, you know, what was going to be my thesis, what was my area of interest in graduate school, but I just thought I'd just start, because I always liked talking about Design; thinking about Design, and I found that even in our, when I was back in Austin, when we'd have critiques, I would find myself talking about like, why I used the type I did, and why I did what I did, more so than maybe some of my other colleagues. So there was some kind of spark there, of like the whys and the hows of Design.

**Neil**: And it just came so natural to you too, which is really awesome.

**Sarah**: I think it was helpful that I worked for a few years and then did graduate school, only in that like I had to hit deadlines, had to deal with clients, had to deal with projects that didn't go well, that did go well, you know, like I had the gamut of kinda all the situations like how to get something approved through the approval process and you know, in the corporate world and so all those things I think really did help me as, you know, back in graduate school I kinda treated grad school more like a job, like you know I did my classes, I went to my classes, did my work during the day, kinda like a job, you know, and then I'd come home and do my homework at night, so I think it was a good chance to like separate from how, you know, a lot of lounging that took place during undergraduate, so you know, it helped me kinda focus that way, I guess, if that makes sense?

**Neil**: That's so funny, you use the term lounging!

**Sarah**: Well, you know, there was a little more down-time in the undergrad world. I think I had a, I kinda nannied for a family, you know, but the, you know, here I was having to show up at my other job, then leave it, go to class and maybe come back to my job, you know, so you know, I think that was helpful in getting me kinda, thinking that way more, if that makes sense?

**Neil**: Yeah, absolutely. So, when you were in your graduate program, did you have a Graduate Assistantship with that or was it just…

**Sarah**: I did.

**Neil**: OK.

**Sarah**: Yeah, so I was a quarter-time TA, so I helped with Graphic Design 1 and then I…and then the other half-time, so I pretty much worked three-fourths time, is what my Assistantship was, and that, so that other half-time was over there at International Programs and I was at International Programs for like three, four years, I think. Because at Iowa you do your MA and then after two more years you get like your MFA, it's kind of a weird…I don't know, you get an MA along the way of getting an MFA if that makes sense?

**Neil**: OK.

**Sarah**: And I was also in the Center for the Book Graduates Certificate Program. Now you can actually get an MFA at the University of Iowa Center for the Book, but when I was there, they didn't have that. You could just get a Graduate Certificate, which you still your did your body of work or thesis work in that, so I basically was working on two programs at once. And so after I finished my MFA in 2005, I had one more year left with my Graduate Certificate program at the Center for the Book, so I…so in that last year I shifted and I worked at the University of Iowa Museum of Art as their Graphic Designer and I shifted to work there, because I thought it would be more exciting to do more signage, if that makes sense?

**Neil**: Yeah.

**Sarah**: And has a few bigger exhibition things but, which it was good, the work was good and interesting, although I had more flexibility and I had a little bit more freedom at the International Programs position, so I did find that out later, so I always tell students like now, if you find a job where you have good freedom and creative license, that could trump a job that has more prestige or would appear to have more interesting work, when I had to really, like, the Gallery Director had a kind of specific aesthetic I had to follow, so I kinda traded one thing for another and, you know, it all worked out fine but looking back, I should've stayed at probably International Programs.

*(15:40)*

**Neil**: Yeah?

**Sarah**: I had a really awesome boss, Lois, who was awesome and she just gave me freedom to do things and she was just awesome, and I traded it for a more intense boss, so looking back, Lois was number one!

**Neil**: Well, I mean, that just goes to show that, you know, every opportunity that comes along is never perfect;

**Sarah**: Right.

**Neil**: There's always something that's not exactly what you want but you can compromise.

**Sarah**: Totally.

**Neil**: And yeah. So then, what did you…what was your thesis project about? Now, did you do a project in lieu of thesis or did you do a paper?

**Sarah**: Both. I did a body of work and then I had to write it so …that's what Iowa…yeah, yeah. Yup!

**Neil**: Oooh! Yup!

**Sarah**: But my MA work built upon my MFA work if that makes sense, I wasn't starting all over again. My interest at the time, and it still kind of is, is I was interested in current events and at the time, Flash was a newly emerging technology so I was interested in making, I called them digital response collages. So every day, I would find a news story and then I would respond to that news story with text and image that would, like, move and convey the information in a set of like steps, you know, like in an animation and so some of them were humorous news stories and others were really specific. I mean, this was during the Weapons Of Mass Destruction time, so I had a lot of news stories to work with, so every day I'd find a collage and I'd make imagery and then I would physically print everything out, like from the computer, and like mess around on like a blank piece of paper with them, and so I would make the collages and then I would scan them and digitize them and then activate them in Flash, if that makes sense?

**Neil**: Yeah.

**Sarah**: So…there was an interesting part about you know, like one, the news story I chose; two, the…I tried to be objective, if that makes sense, so I did try to find news stories that were not like slanted one side or the other if that makes sense? So I wanted to try to show the…again, as a Designer it was my job to like, present the information as best as I could without trying to say my take, if that makes sense? But of course visually I was making decisions, you know, on how to visually present the work. But my goal wasn't to try to like, promote one side or the other, if that makes sense, but it was trying to be more neutral in the presentation of the information so…which is funny now, like in light of all the fake news, right, like…

**Neil**: Yeah!

**Sarah**: Like, wow, I guess I was ahead of my time! But again, like I think I did a news story about monks that were making beer out of washing machines, like…and then I would do one on, like that they did or didn't find Weapons Of Mass Destruction. So, I mean, it was all the gamut, again, it was like whatever that day I found interesting. But I wanted to challenge myself, one, to find something every day and respond to it, so I was kinda in this process of every day, you know? And some collages turned out to be fantastic and others turned out to be just kind of OK, right? But I went through the process every day of making them. While I was doing them, I was researching and looking at futurist page spreads, so you know how expressive the Futurists' work was, now of course they ended up, you know, kind of being co-opted by various governmental agencies…

**Neil**: Well yeah!

**Sarah**: But the way that their pages were super-active and the typography was really expressive, that was one of the things I was trying to do more. You know, I'd come out of working in a corporate environment where everything had a brand standard, so I really wanted to step away from the computer and like, while I generated things through that, then I would print it out and rip them up and layer it and work through kind of unique ways of working.

*(20:08)*

**Neil**: Yeah. So Dadaists would've gone a little too far?

**Sarah**: Yeah, I mean, I looked at Dada work too. I think I just had a couple of Futurist books and so I was looking at that and then I had been in, this sounds so glamorous, but I had been in Rome and I had seen a Futurist show so I just was kind of influenced by their approach, if you will, so…

**Neil**: Well yeah, and what better context to see that all in too.

**Sarah**: Yeah, yeah, so I still have a little soft-spot for all the Futurist typography. So…and yeah, Zang Tumb Tumb is still part of my life! Marinetti, so…

**Neil**: Yes! Well, so then you graduated and I guess my next question is, how did, when was the "A-ha!" moment where you knew that Design Education might be for you?

**Sarah**: Well, like I said, I really enjoyed teaching, as my Teaching Assistant, I really enjoyed that and I...I just liked talking and thinking about Design and I liked looking at student work and helping them and watching them grow, so you know, looking back, I started as an Art Ed major, right? I like education side of things but I just, the thought of, you know, doing clay every day in a high school just brought me down! Nothing against my Ceramicists but I, you know, I think, so then all of a sudden the "A-ha!" moment was like, oh, well maybe I could teach Graphic Design. So I did look for Design, Graphic Design positions but I wasn't…and I wasn't really looking at other Design, you know, just regular Design jobs. But I could have; I just was kind of interested in teaching, I thought I hadn't done that yet. I mean, I had done a Teaching Assistant but I hadn't like, you know, led full classes, full syllabi, like for a whole, you know I mean I had dipped my toe into it but I hadn't done it in a big way, right, like three course, you know, whatever. And so I don't know, I just applied for a bunch of different teaching positions and I applied, I had quite a few interviews. I think I was young and earnest at the time, so I was number two in a lot of them, just because I barely looked older than I think the students and so that was one of the challenges, you know, and they'd be like, well, how would you handle this situation in an interview? And I'm like, why? You know, I'll be new to that and I'll try…so I think I was probably fairly young and earnest. I interviewed at like West Virginia, and University of Minnesota, Duluth and Pacific Lutheran in Seattle or Tacoma area and…

**Neil**: Wow, all amazing geographic locations!

**Sarah**: Yeah, yeah! Yep! I was pretty open. My husband was open to, you know, he had done his PhD in Civil Engineering so he could've easily gone the Fellowship route or academic route. He chose, again, sort of similar to me, he kinda wanted to be doing the work every and problem-solving so he stayed in more of a consulting role and that's where he still is now, but he was open to moving and so he interviewed all over in like, Maryland and San Francisco and…the one place we both, like overlapped, was Des Moines, and we're from near here so I did remember thinking on a plane ride, I think I had to go from Iowa City to Chicago and then Chicago to Tacoma on that interview, and I remember thinking like, hmm, you know, our families are in the mid-West, we would do this route like once a year maybe, like visit family or they'd come see us, but I was thinking like, hah, maybe the mid-West is all right, you know, I loved our time in Austin and I still go back to Austin; it's totally different now from what it was twenty-one years ago when we lived there! And I still have friends who ask me about where they should eat there and I'm like, I have no idea; it's all changed. But I loved it there. When we moved there, Austin felt like Iowa City and Des Moines because it had all the like, governmental things and it had a big university and so it felt like a big, like Iowa City and Des Moines kind of feel. And now, it has a whole different, that doesn't feel like that any more, it's like a tech-hub now, so it's a totally different, you know, when we left there, people were starting to move there from California but no one else was moving there from like New York or Nashville, you know, it was just a different time. So I would go back but our house, the house we had there…has been like, it's like five times the price we paid for it!

**Neil**: Ooooh!

*(25:00)*

**Sarah**: And they built like three times the size onto it, so we wouldn't even recognize our old neighborhood, I think. We lived in central Austin and…

**Neil**: Oh wow!

**Sarah**: Now I don't think we could even afford to move back to the home we bought initially, so…but anyway, Des Moines is very overlapped and we thought well, you know, yeah, maybe in the future we might have kids and being near our families would be nice for that and it turned out to be really nice to be there and Des Moines is a great town; it's affordable and everybody's friendly and it's great, you know, our normal…rush hour, is what fifteen, twenty minutes from about five-fifteen…

**Neil**: Yeah, about that!

**Sarah**: From about five-fifteen to five forty-five it's busy around Des Moines! I remember Austin, even back in 1999, rush hour started at like three…three to seven, you know, and it sucked! So I don't miss that.

**Neil**: Oh wow! Yeah, I wouldn't either!

**Sarah**: No, so…

**Neil**: Continuing with the narrative here, so you were applying all over the country for these, for Graphic Design jobs, and how did you, how did you land at Drake?

**Sarah**: Yeah, well it's funny; Drake wasn't even a full-time position; it was Visiting at the time! But I think in Andy and I thought we would try it out and I think there was a point where in the interview, they were talking about how it's Visiting but it would go under full-time if that worked out or whatever, so, I don't know. It just, it just turned out to be a good spot for us. I think the thought of Duluth, the folks at Duluth were pretty awesome but I was trying to picture winter there and that's really far north and I knew, like, there'd be months out of the year we wouldn't go anywhere. Hey look now, we're in quarantine; we're not going anywhere! But I just was like, oh for a bunch of months out of the year, Duluth's really awesome and then there's like six months where it's really cold and dark. So I had an offer there and I chose Des Moines over it and I'm glad I did. It's been a good fit for me but…the other thing in the back of my mind was that I wanted to open up a letterpress studio and have a place to work and print and I knew, like Tacoma, that might be harder with rent, you know, and just higher rent there. We knew, like, for Andy, San Fran, that was like a, that was just like wow, that was just gonna be in our house, you know, so that wasn't ever gonna be an option to have a studio in San Francisco. So that was in the back of our minds about things and we thought, well maybe Des Moines would be affordable to do that. So between a good job for both of us and family nearby and the option to have a studio, you know, we really thought that could be good.

**Neil**: And what a great decision that was! *(laughs)*

**Sarah**: Indeed! Indeed, and it's worked out great and I don't think I could be doing the same thing I'm doing in a different place, you know, like being able to teach some days and work in the studio some days and then have a mix on other days, you know: it works, for now.

**Neil**: Well, so I'd like to go back just a little bit. And you had mentioned that starting at Drake, you were in a Visiting position which I'm guessing a lot of our listeners might be in that boat! Or might be in that capacity. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about going from a Visiting Professor into a Tenure Track role? And how that transition kinda happened?

**Sarah**: Sure. I…it was so funny. Like, every other day I felt like they were like, you know this is Visiting, right? I'm like: I do! So I would say, you know, if I were in the position of being a full-time Faculty member and I had an awesome Visiting person, visiting, I probably wouldn't tell that to them like every other day. Because…

**Neil**: Well no!

**Sarah**: It really didn't help me feel a part of things, to be honest, but I just figured, you know, with Andy's role, he was in Des Moines but they had a lot of offices everywhere else in the country, so we both thought like if it didn't pan out, we would just, he could either stay in Des Moines and I'd figure it out or you know, we'd just move then. So you know, I think it freaked everybody out at Drake when we bought a house. But we had bought a house in Austin, we had bought a house in Iowa City and kept selling it. You know, now I think if I were to do that, I don't think we would've bought a house, I think we would've just rented! But we had a…I had my letterpress equipment and so we kinda wanted a house to stick it in, you know, like a garage and things but looking back now, I probably would've said like, OK, get an apartment and then just get a storage unit or get a studio and pay the rent on the studio, just sign a shorter lease or something, you know. I think I probably would've done it a little differently. And you know, the housing market has since then been a lot more volatile than it was during the years of grad school and our time in Austin so I would give that advice for sure, but I just tried to do a really good job, and then I figured I would just apply, because I think…I think I came in and this will be familiar for many people. I think I came in and it had been a failed search.

*(30:44)*

**Neil**: Oooh…

**Sarah**: So were just in a position where they really just needed someone to step in. I think, Neil, that John was actually…I think he was on sabbatical when I stepped in.

**Neil**: Possibly!

**Sarah**: And I think I came in and I was like, oh, it's me and some part-timers. I think we had Kay, we had an Adjunct; we had two Adjuncts maybe or…I don't really remember.

**Neil**: That sounds right.

**Sarah**: There was two Adjuncts and me; I was the full time Visiting, which I remember the Seniors were like, asking me a lot of questions about graduation stuff and I had no idea so I had to figure that out fast. And to this day sometimes I feel like I, I kind of missed the normal, like, introduction into a department because people were on sabbatical, I just kinda stepped in, it was a little chaotic, so I came in and I think it was a field search, I was Visiting for one year and then they were going to start the search again, so I knew I could at least apply, you know, so I just figured I'd kind of go and get some experience and you know, it seemed all right, so I did that and then I applied for the position and I was one and then they had someone else and…boy, I don't really remember the other person's interview; I don't really remember that, it seems so long ago, it's like fourteen years ago, and so somehow I got the job, I guess, but I don't think I was the first choice and I think the Dean told me that! Which I'm not sure…

**Neil**: Oh no!

**Sarah**: I think they were like, it's OK to be second choice, and I was like, oh, of course I didn't know I was second choice! So one thing I would say is like just try not to take all these things personally, right? Because multiple times I was told it was Visiting, right, which made me feel that they were saying, we don't want you here but you're our only option, right? So I just tried to like move forward and enjoy my time and like the people that I work with, so that's a good…I would say just let things roll off your back, try not to get into the political stuff and all that, so…and then I was in the Tenure Track and I was in that for five years I think and then in my fifth year I had my second baby! I had my first baby after, let's see, I started Fall of 06 and my daughter arrived Spring of 2008, so I did kind of a weird two week maternity leave and then I came back part time; I did like an hour in the morning, an hour in the afternoon which I wouldn't advise anyone, and I didn't have an actual good maternity leave. I don't know why they didn't do that but they didn't present that as an option so I don't know. Anyway. Looking back now I would fight differently. And now looking back, there's a much bigger maternity leave that they have now and so, looking back, maybe I should ask for that time back, huh?

**Neil**: *(laughs)* Yeah!

**Sarah**: And then in 2011, February, I had my second daughter and I was running my studio out of my home, my letterpress studio doing work for clients and I had Gemma and it was just all out and, I don't know, I don't know. I just…I just lost interest in the grind of it all, I think, and so I just said, I'm gonna resign from my Tenure Track position.

**Neil**: Oh my! Well, I mean, your priorities change.

**Sarah**: My priorities had shifted, I felt like I was running in twenty different directions. I had two small kids, you know, three and newborn, and I was doing client work which I loved and I didn't want to let go of and I don't know, you know Neil, some of the things that get said to you before Tenure like, well, maybe you'll get it, maybe you won't, you know, and it was just all like a…pfufff…and I just, it seemed like a big mountain to climb and I'd been doing fine but I still don't think…I think my drive had just shifted, my priorities had just shifted, so I resigned and then I came back and I taught one class because they needed me to and I really still enjoyed teaching, you know, it's not like I…I just, I think it was just the grind of like, the reviews and the thought of going, the whole writing the Tenure narrative seemed…I don't know, it just all…I don't know, anyway, so that was that. And then in the Spring semester they said, hey, could you teach two classes instead of just one. I was like, oh yeah, OK and then I started looking at what my pay way as an Adjunct for two classes versus full time pay for three classes and I was like, wow, maybe I should just go back to full time.

*(35:31)*

**Neil**: Yeah, it's a big contrast.

**Sarah**: It's huge contrast. I mean, it wasn't, by the time I actually paid childcare when I was doing the one class and showing up, I think I brought home like two hundred dollars, you know, all said and done. It was worthless. But I enjoyed the students and I enjoyed getting out and I enjoyed teaching and so, you know, I started to think about like, you know, Adjuncting was kinda nice with the stage of life I had because I didn't have to go to a ton of meetings and things like that, which helped, you know, with having small kids.

**Neil**: Yep.

**Sarah**: But you know, once Gemma got to be about three and Charlotte was in elementary school it was getting a little bit easier and so I just was like, well shoot, maybe I should just apply for my old job, so I did. I just applied for my old job and I think they were all like, whoa, why? And I'm like, well, I was already teaching two classes, it's just one more and the pay and the benefits are a lot better! So…and I did miss some of the feeling connected to Campus so then I applied back. But I would say, you know, it was a real long-shot, getting my old job back. It's not a route I would tell everyone to go, you know. I think I knew worst case scenario, I would just go back to a design job then or running my studio so I wasn't out much by not applying, you know, it was like well I'll just throw my hat in and if it's meant to be, I'll be there and if not, then it's not and you know, I loved seeing students grow from when they come in to when they leave, it's just amazing and you don't get that in your normal Design job which, you know, that was part of the thrill of, and it still is for me watching students grow, so I thought it'd be wise to just try again and if not, then it wasn't meant to be and I'd just go a different direction, so…

**Neil**: Yeah, well, and I'm gonna make a huge assumption here. And I think I'm on-point. To those that are listening, this is where it pays off to be nice to everybody.

**Sarah**: Oh yeah!

**Neil**: And to be collegial and be cordial to everybody and do your best even though the situation may or may not warrant it, because in the future, you never know where you're going to be and you may have to rely on the people that you worked with to help you!

**Sarah**: Totally! And I don't think round two, when I came back for my old job, even though I was currently doing my old job, even though I was currently doing the job and doing it well, I don't know if I was a finalist, like I think I did a phone interview, but I don't think I got the on-campus interviews if I recall and I thought oh, OK, so I guess I'm gonna finish this semester and mosey on. And that's not how it happened. I…I think it went a different direction and then I was called in to do a presentation and do an on-campus interview and so again, I would say to see it through, you know, regardless of how it was going to pan out, I was just going to finish well the semester and then if you know, that was done then I was done, you know? And yeah, there was multiple times I could've burned those bridges I think, and I didn't and because that's…you just never know. It's the same thing with your own design jobs, you know?

**Neil**: Oh yeah!

**Sarah**: You do a job for a client and I had one snafu job which was something I don't do in-house, so I sent it out of the house to have done and then it didn't come back correct.

**Neil**: Oh no!

**Sarah**: Yeah, and they didn't see the extra flaw until they had sent all the invitations out and nor had I. We were all awed by the…and I should have seen it; I didn't. And so I paid for entire mistake, even though it really wasn't my responsibility, right? Like they…

**Neil**: Oh no!

**Sarah**: And…you know, a year ago they came back and I did another project for them and it went great and I saw every through and I kept everything in-house! I don't do painted edges and different things and so it was just a different job and I have also learned from that kind of thing that when it's something that I don't do a lot of or it's not my wheelhouse, just to send them somewhere completely different and say hey, go here, they'll handle you well. Which is what I should've done, you know, instead of try to do the parts I should, yeah, anyway, so I've learned. I've learned to say no when I should say no; I've learned to say yes when I should say yes. I've learned not to burn bridges because you never know. Plus you never know who they know, right?

*(40:05)*

**Neil**: Oooh, that's the bigger key there.

**Sarah**: Right, like they might talk to somebody like, oh yeah, we're thinking about interviewing so-and-so and then…and you were a big…you know, not nice person to them, they're not going to say anything good for you, right? So I just…and I've tried to go through like being a peacemaker and not a…not one who stirs the pot. So maybe it's my middle child syndrome/GenX, you know, that's just who I am but I think it's helpful, you just never know and so you should always try to end on the best terms that you possibly can, you know. I mean, there's people who I won't pick up projects for, because it just it's gone…urgh…and I don't want to deal with them again, but I'll say it in a nice way like, you know, I'm not able to take that project on right now, you know. But I just try not to burn any bridges because you never know.

**Neil**: Absolutely. Well, so kind of in the interests of time I'm going to speed through and let our listeners know that you were on the Tenure Track route, you went up for Promotion and Tenure and you were Promoted a year ago?

**Sarah**: 2018. Two years ago.

**Neil**: Two years ago! Amazing!

**Sarah**: I gotta get back in gear here! I think I took about a year off to kinda like…oooh, I got through all that.

**Neil**: That's what I'm feeling right now!

**Sarah**: Yeah, yeah, and it does take about a year to like, decompress and now I've got some ideas for new research projects and things so I feel more energetic again but yeah, it does, it's draining and you know, and I think I had…I had a good friend from a completely different institution weigh in and read my things, which was helpful. I also had someone from Drake who is not in my department at all, completely different department, look over my things and give some thoughts and feedback because they knew the environment at Drake but, and they had been very successful at Tenure so they were a good sounding-board as well.

**Neil**: Absolutely, yes, that is very good advice, having someone outside of your department to review your work, writing anyway.

**Sarah**: Yup, but they kinda know Drake's environment and kinda people and everything, so that was helpful I think, she could help me; hey, don't forget to talk more about this or that, so that was good.

**Neil**: Well, so I want to kind of circle back. So, throughout this whole time, and you know, we're talking from early 2000s to 2020, so a twenty year block of time!

**Sarah**: Twenty years! Thanks for making me feel old, Neil!

**Neil**: Oh, I'm right there with you: don't worry! But, during this time, you were working towards Tenure, you were starting a family and you had a letterpress company and I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about that trajectory of it?

**Sarah**: Sure, yeah. I started the letterpress company, The Permanent Collection, from my basement with a good friend from grad school, actually, we started it together. He was in Iowa City, I was in Des Moines, so I was the Des Moines branch, he was the Iowa City branch, and we'd have printing parties at my house on the weekends and we created a line of cards and things like that. But, and then after oh, about a year or two, it was just challenging to have Brad further away and so we just decided to, like, he was just gonna be done from the company, which was fine and we're still really good friends to this day, so there's no hard feelings, we didn't have any massive blow-out, he just…it just got challenging with his own life situation, so he went one route and then I kept going and so I…I did work mostly for family and friends and then friends would tell other friends and their friends would tell other friends, so I just kinda did word of mouth; I never advertised, never had an actual business plan, which I would suggest highly to all people, but…so it slowly evolved. My husband has been really helpful at like, he helped file all the small business paperwork and taxes and all that kind of thing, and to this day, he still, he helps me pay my sales tax and payroll tax and makes sure I have insurance for the right things and so he does a lot of the…we call him Businessman and I am Creative Services on all other levels.

**Neil**: I love that!

*(44:37)*

**Sarah**: It's really helpful to have someone else to help. I can only imagine like, if I was wearing all the hats of like, running all the business side of things and then…I do have an accountant that does our taxes because that's just too challenging with everything, but so I did everything out of my house from the beginning, so 2006, we founded the…well I think January 2007 the actual paperwork went through. We founded the company and then I was in my garage and basement for that entire time and then in 2015, I moved to a free-standing studio. The purpose was, in 2015 couple-pronged. One, if I didn't get Tenure! I'd have a place and we'd have established it and maybe could make a go. Two was to get all the stuff out of my house because it was getting challenging to like, you know, we couldn't use our garage, the basement was overflowed and it was just challenging, so…and then thirdly, people were asking me why were you moving out of your house, why were you opening a studio and we were like, I don't really know, I'm just going to have the space. And all the while, I thought of two reasons why I wanted the space. One, so I had more visibility and two, so I could do fun stuff like post-parties and things, which I haven't done as much of but it's fun, like I hosted a guy, a printer from England that came by and just stuff that I could do, you know, outside my house. So one of the impetuses before getting the studio was that I had a woman come to one of my Open Houses at my house, which is what I used to do for friends and family, and she just saw that I had it on Twitter and she drove down from Ames and came to my house! And that's when I knew it was like, well yeah, we had a complete stranger in our house. This cannot do! So I started looking for a place and there were multiple places around Des Moines. I actually talked to like a commercial real estate person and like, all the rent was like hideously high like, you know, three thousand a month, which I'm sure if anyone hearing this on the coast is like, WHAT?What? Three thousand, that's nothing! But to Des Moines that's a lot, and if you're selling five dollar cards and twenty dollar prints, and doing the occasional custom projects, which it's not as occasional now, I do a lot of custom projects but you know, I mean, if you just do the simple math of like, what if I get nothing for custom and I'm just selling cards. Well, I don't know how you're paying rent, three thousand dollar rent. That's moving a lot of cards, right?

**Neil**: Well yeah!

**Sarah**: So, I…I looked for like two years to find the right, so in two thousand, like twelve we really started to kind of think about moving out of our, like moving it out of our house, and I started looking for places and you know, I thought about Valley Junction and, which is close to my house but at the time, it had kind of a different vibe than it does now. Now more places are moving there that are hipper, if you will! But one of the bonuses to be in the East Village which is downtown Des Moines is that my husband's office is a couple of blocks away, so he can come down and like help out over lunch or man the shop or do different things so that…and it's kind of a fun place with a lot of foot traffic, so that seemed like a good place. And then I had a good landlord who gave me kind of like a slower growing rent, does that make sense? So like I came in at a smaller rent that like slowly built up. So it kinda would grow as I grew, which was really helpful. So you know.

**Neil**: And what a great incubation model too.

**Sarah**: Yeah, yeah. And I mean, I would remind people that I was in my house for like nine years before I moved out, you know, and so it was scary to take on rent and like and then, you remember Neil, we used to not have internet down at the shop!

**Neil**: Yep!

**Sarah**: Let's see, we basically paid for like lights, like electric and that was about it, you know, like I didn't have a point-of-sale in the shop. I just used Intuit which was like Square but cheaper!

**Neil**: Yeah!

**Sarah**: Andy did all the research and Square costs too much for us, so you know, and I did Farmers' Markets, I did a lot of events to get my name out there and be at like different pop-up shops and things and then when we were going to go get the point-of-sale, we were open for like two years without a point-of-sale. I asked all my fellow merchants around the East Village like what point-of-sale they used and what were the good and bad points of things and so they were all really helpful too, like fellow retailers are really good at like, asking a lot of questions to and being friends with because they…and then they're like, sweet to like, oh, have you been around the corner to see Sarah's shop? You know, go see The Permanent Collection, you know, and so we all do that with each other in the East Village, we have a nice tight-knit community so it's really fun, like you know, being a part of a fun community which when I first moved in, I thought it would be fun to be in the East Village but now it's like, super-fun and I know a lot of the retailers down here and it's just fun, it's fun to be a part of, you know, a vibrant part of our downtown Des Moines scene.

**Neil**: Yeah, and being a part of that community is so fun and stopping by to see you!

**Sarah**: I love it!

*(50:00)*

**Neil**: On a sunny afternoon!

**Sarah**: I love visitors! I know, I know! It's fun. And then we slowly built the website up too which you know, right now, we're in quarantine and so that's been super-helpful.

**Neil**: And what is the url for the website?

**Sarah**: I'm www.thepermanentcollection.net. So, and you can, what's nice is that you know, I would say that took a long time too, to like photograph everything, write all the product pages and so don't underestimate the amount of time that that kind of thing takes. I'd I kinda laughed because some of the local leaders were like, oh well just turn your brick and mortar East Village shops to an online shop and I'm like…yeah, well that takes time and money which is hard for small business people.

**Neil**: Yep!

**Sarah**: You know, so I would say all the while, keep building the other parts to your business that, even if they don't seem important at the time or time-consuming, you just never know. Like, I'm so glad it took us like three years to get the website, like we would slowly keep adding inventory to it and checking inventory and we've had some bumps along the way like I've sold something I didn't have, you know, like it was on the web; we forgot to turn it off that when we sold it, and getting inventory to talk that way and be like, oh it's all a learning curve and so…but like now it's been really helpful because it's been helpful to sustain business that way, you know, during this hard time with not being able to have my doors open, so…

**Neil**: Yes, I'm so glad that you're talking about running a business while working towards Tenure, while raising a family, while doing all this other stuff!

**Sarah**: It's challenging! I mean, I have to try to remind people that like, it does…it's all like small steps turn into big steps so like you know, that first draft of your narrative: just do it. It's gonna be really ugly; it's gonna be poorly written probably, right?

**Neil**: Yup!

**Sarah**: But just like, get it down. One of the things I would say is, I'm very good about carving time for certain things. Like, this is my time to do this; this is my time to this; this is my, you know, if I have fifteen minutes at home before I'm going to shift to something else, then I start the load of laundry, like it's not fun but I try to use, like be really efficient with time blocks so, like, on days when I'm on campus, I try to see all my students then, you know, but if I need to make time to see a student, I make sure to block it before I go down to the studio, you know, or tell the students: hey, I'm at the studio all day here, you totally come and see me here if you want to talk to me about something, but trying to be efficient with blocking your time that, like, carving, like, OK I'm going to carve an hour or two hours every Monday to work on my Tenure stuff, like I'm gonna take photos; I'm gonna write the captions for my images; I'm gonna write this chapter or I'm gonna write about, you know, like I did small chunks like, OK, I'm just gonna write about 2006 to 2010, a four-year time period, I'm gonna make that, write that chunk in my narrative today, you know, and so like just break it, you know, as the other teachers say, just break it down into small tasks and then they turn into big tasks, you know, eventually. Or they amount to something a lot more, you know. It's the same with the shop. People come in and they're like, wow, look at all this stuff you've printed and it's like, you know, well I don't do it every day, you know, I just…even today, when we get done talking, I have two things I'm going to get done; those are my two things, you know? And I try not to get down on myself on the things I don't get done. But like tomorrow, I'm going to start working on my Fall, one of my Fall classes because we don't know yet, you know, if we're going to have to do online or in person and so I'm like, OK, I'm going to make my outline for how I want my Fall to go for this one class and then I'm going to try to start to fill in those blanks, right? And I'm gonna set that aside. Then you know, Friday will be another print day or something. But, so like having, I think if you could try to be intentional with your time, which people talk about all the time but it's really true, like just try to block certain, even when you don't feel like it and I think it's times when like, if I didn't feel like I could write very well or whatever, then I would just like make the list of the brainstorm things I need to talk about in it, or I would write the captions, or I'd try to at least find the images that need to go with that chunk that I need to write about, you know, so I would say that, you know, like just try to do small tasks every day towards the bigger tasks, you know? But if you leave stuff 'til the end and think you're going to write this magnificent narrative, I'm here to tell you, you're not!

**Neil**: Oh, that's a disaster!

**Sarah**: You know! You know, Neil!

**Neil**: I do! Yeah, definitely not a night before type of thing!

**Sarah**: No, no! It's not gonna go well and so I would say do the time at the small tasks, you know, and then just they'll build into the big thing.

*(55:03)*

**Neil**: Absolutely. Well, we are almost at the end of our interview or our time together. Are there any other parting thoughts or upcoming projects that you'd like to talk about? And there doesn't have to be, but I just like to leave time.

**Sarah**: Yeah, I would just say, you know, I know where some people were at and it's challenging when you're like, oh will I make Tenure, will I not? And I would encourage you to feel like, you know, just do your best on all those things and I think I told you this, it's like, if it's meant to be, you'll be there. But if not, then you're meant to be doing something else and it might seem kinda hard at the time but you know, sometimes you just kind of have to walk those different paths and then new things kind of break out, you know, like I don't know why I felt overwhelmed and had to quit that round one, you know, but I think actually I look back and it really was the incubator time for the company. I did a lot of stuff on the company building at that point, which if I hadn't had that time, I may have not been able to do all the shifting that I did later, you know, and so I just try to, I think you know, it's like really hard when the path before you you're like, I don't know, what should I do? And I would just say, lean in a direction, go towards it and see what happens and if it's not right, you'll know and then you'll just shift directions but sometimes I think we feel like we've got to make these momentous decisions or big, you know, as I can tell you right now with this quarantine situation, you know, I have no idea how the shop's going to fare through this, I mean, I'm thankful I don't have a huge payroll but you know, for us we're going to like, all right, we're going to go through the Summer, see how it goes. We're gonna go through the Fall and see how that goes. And then in the New Year, we'll kinda make some decisions, you know, if I need to say move home or stay here or what we need to do, you know, but I can't run twenty steps ahead: I gotta just like, all right, what can I do today to improve the situation and I'm not going to worry about the six months from now because who knows?

**Neil**: Yeah, it's almost impossible to plan for that right now.

**Sarah**: Yeah, and I think the quarantine's been helpful in that way of saying, all right, I'm just going to try to live each day how I can, you know, it's the same, just the same thing like with this big Tenure process. Just do the small steps of the things that you needed to do to make Tenure, then they'll build into the bigger thing.

**Neil**: Yes. And just to let everyone know where this is being recorded in April, the end of April 2020! All right, well thank you so much for your time, Sarah.

**Sarah**: Yeah, thank you, Neil.

This concludes Season Two, Episode Three 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 Sarah, please contact her through her website at www.thepermanentcollection.net

*(end of recording 58:13)*

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