



MAKING A LIVING AS A JEWELER WITH GWYNNE RUKENBROD SMITH THRIVE BY DESIGN WITH TRACY MATTHEWS

As you know in 2008-2014 the cost of precious materials really rose. So a lot of artists actually started experimenting with alternative materials creating new and exciting and innovative work. - Gwynne Rukenbrod Smith

You're listening to Thrive-By-Design business marketing and lifestyle strategies for your jewelry brand to flourish and thrive. Let's get started.

Tracy: Welcome to Episode #32. This is Tracy Matthews your host today for the Thrive-By-Design podcast and I'm thrilled to be here today because I have a very special guest for you, and I've been wanting to interview this person for so long so I'm so excited to have her on the show today. So my special guest, which wait for it, we're going to be talking to Gwynne Rukenbrod Smith the Executive Director over at SNAG, the Society of North American Goldsmiths. And we're going to be talking about making a living as a jeweler.

Now as you might have noticed being creative and also having the business side of things can sometimes be a challenge for some of us who are super creative. We would prefer most of the time to only focus on our creativity and not necessarily some of the business side of things in marketing and selling our work. However, as we all know, and that's why Flourish and Thrive Academy was founded, you have to be able to market and sell your work in order to have a successful business.

Now I'm so excited to have Gwynne here today because SNAG who was traditionally really more focused on the academic side of the jewelry industry and grooming jewelers to become either educators or museum artists, has really made some amazing changes to support entrepreneurship and emerging artists. So it's no wonder and no surprise that I'm really excited here to have Gwynne from SNAG to talk about some of the exciting changes that are happening in the jewelry industry to help support artists making a living doing what they love. So without further adieu let's jump right in to the interview. Gwynne I want to welcome you today. Thanks so much for being here with me.

Gwynne: Thanks Tracy and thanks for having me.

Tracy: So I am so excited to have you here for multiple reasons. Robyn and I just love SNAG, you know that. And I remember when you were at our live even last year you said something really adorable like we at SNAG and Flourish and Thrive Academy have been courting for a





long time, now we're dating so we're starting to partner on some stuff and I'm really excited because we're going to be speaking at the SNAG next conference coming up in May. So I'm thrilled to have you here and before we get started I wanted to just do a little brief intro for our audience if that's cool.

Gwynne: Absolutely.

Tracy: Alright so Gwynne Rukenbroad Smith serves as the Executive Director for the Society of North American Goldsmith also known as SNAG, an organization dedicated to the support and advancement of contemporary [3:00] jewelry and metal artists. Gwynne has been the Executive Director for Handmade in America and the Curator of Fine Craft at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft. Gwynne is also a glass jewelry artist and your husband is also a jewelry artist as well correct.

Gwynne: Correct. He is a full-time jewelry artist.

Tracy: I love that. So before we get started and sort of dive into some of these questions why don't you tell me a little bit more about yourself and your journey and foray into the jewelry world.

Gwynne: Absolutely, well you know I'm one of those people that, like many, have a pretty unusual journey to get to kind of where I am today. I went to Ohio State. I grew up in Ohio and went to Ohio State for college in my undergrad degree. I have a Bachelors of Science and Health Education and Community Wellness. And my first job out of college I was a chemical dependency counselor for HIV positive heroin addicts. And so I really was passionate about the field and thought that was the field that I was probably going to develop my career in.

Went back to Ohio State for grad school to earn an MBA, which by the way I never finished, but I did learn a lot and thought that I was probably going to become a director of kind of social services type of nonprofit, but as we all know things happen in life. And when I was 25 years old my mother passed away extremely suddenly and unexpectedly. And so I kind of found myself questioning my path in life after that, which I think is a common thing that happens when you lose a parent, especially at a young age. I started dating a gentleman who was running the Hot Glass program at Columbus College of Art and Design, and he said to me one day I am leaving for Chiang Mai, Thailand for three months and I really think you should come with me. It would be a great time for you to kind of really process the death of your mom, decide what you want to do for the rest of your life and just hang out in a really cool country.





So I said yes and we went. And what happened or transpired was he was going to Thailand to build a hot glass shop for an American that he had met and wanted to actually have a hot glass shop in his house. So about a month and a half into our trip the hot glass shop was completed and we turned on the furnace and they turned to me and said do you want to learn to blow glass. And I said yeah. I just built all this equipment with you. Of course I want to learn how to blow glass, and so that was really how I came into kind of the craft community and the craft world as an adult.

I grew up with crafts all around me. My mother was kind of more into the heritage crafts of needlepoint and embroidery and quilting, but I grew up in a family that embraced it and wanted you to celebrate it, but it was a great hobby to have. It was not a way to make a living in the world. So I kind of took that path in the health field instead. But [6:00] after learning to blow hot glass in Thailand I came back to the United States. I decided that I did not want to work in social services but I wanted to work in the arts. I got a job as the Assistant Curator for the National Heisey Glass Museum which was a pressed glass factory located in Newark, OH, about 45 minutes outside of Columbus.

So I did that, and I continued to practice blowing hot glass and I actually spent about five and a half years blowing glass, making work, selling it wholesale and retail, doing a lot of the local art festivals and fairs and that sort of thing. At the same time I managed a nonprofit glass art facility in Columbus called Glass Axis. So I just really became completely absorbed into the kind of craft world of selling and making and managing a studio, and I did that for a while and really enjoyed it and then kind of moved on to serving as a curator at another museum in Ohio. I really loved being a curator. I loved meeting the artists and having an opportunity to get them to have their work shown.

Then I actually moved to Houston, Texas to be the Fine Craft Curator at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft and was there for three years and absolutely loved it. In the meantime I had gotten married. I had met my husband Matt at the Glass Axis where I worked. He came in to learn to blow glass so we both were hot glass people, but in our move to Houston he was really forced to downsize and went from a 4,500 square foot studio space in Ohio to 120 square feet in Houston.

Tracy: Wow.

Gwynne: And at that same time he was moving away from glass and getting more into working in silver and resin and wood. And so he developed a jewelry line because he could do a jewelry studio very easily in 120





square feet, and started making a living by making production. He has a production line that he does and he does that. He goes to the wholesale and retail festivals and fairs and kind of does the show circuit now. And I as a curator, curated for a while and then decided that I wanted to actually go back to directing nonprofits. And so I started looking for a job and I got a job running an organization here in Asheville, NC called Handmade in America.

What was really cool about that organization is it was not really an art organization but economic development organization where it revived small towns and small town economies through building the crafts and helping craft artist be successful at their work. And I had done some professional develop training and classes over the last 12 years to different audiences. And so it was just a really great fit and I did that for 3 years. Like many nonprofits during that [9:00] period of time, 2008-2010, it was experiencing a lot of financial difficulties and eventually I kind of burned myself out and left. And I kind of wasn't sure what to do but I took some time off and I took a job that I call my summer job that wasn't really challenging my skillsets but it was paying the bills and it gave me a break from kind of the stress of running nonprofits.

During that time I had a variety of board members from SNAG as well as the former director from SNAG contact me and encouraged me to apply for the job of executive director. So I did and in October 2013 they hired me, and so I've been here a little over two and a half years and it's been an exciting journey and I'm really excited about the future of where we're going with SNAG.

Tracy: I am excited about the future of where you're going with SNAG as well. It's so exciting. So speaking of can you talk a little bit more about the evolution of contemporary jewelry and specifically what are some of the big changes that you guys are seeing in the art scene, art/jewelry scene?

Gwynne: Absolutely. You know SNAG was founded in 1969 by 7 academic teachers and jewelers and metal artists who really felt that there was a need to bring a group of like minded individuals like themselves together to create opportunities for gathering, conferences and peer-to-peer learning as well as to help create exhibitions. So SNAG has been around for a while and has seen the evolution of jewelry over those 45+ years. And at the time when SNAG was founded in the late 60s, early 70s that was when jewelry and metal programs were starting to be added to college and universities and become accepted as a true academic type of program.

Today unfortunately because of the economy and the struggle in education with finances, there has been a lot of programs that have





closed over the years. And so what used to be pretty much an easy to take path where you would go to school and get your Bachelors in Jewelry and then you would get your Masters in Fine Arts and Jewelry and then you would be able to get a teaching job, that reality is getting smaller and smaller and narrower each year. So artists to stay in the field have really tried to figure out different ways of making a living and figuring out ways to be successful and to thrive in their businesses.

So we've watched artists go from doing just craft fairs to really breaking into a lot of the art fairs and entertainment type of fairs. So as you know in 2008-2014 the cost of precious materials really rose. So a lot of artists actually started experimenting with alternative materials, creating new and exciting and innovative work. Also technology has [12:00] really evolved in the field. So you're seeing artists over the last few years incorporate technology and 3D printing into their work which is really pushing kind of the boundaries of what you would look at as considered traditional type of materials. It's been really exciting to see that.

Then I think you've also seen over the last really 10-15 years the scholarship writing and documentation of the field has really changed where you see people actually trying to make sure that they're doing a decent job of documenting what's happening in the field, but the reality of survival has also become more difficult for jewelers in the community because there are less academic positions that are available because of the closing of a lot of programs or the programs being absorbed into more of a 3D program. And so SNAG which had done a really great job over the last 14 years focusing on the art, jewelry and kind of academic side had learned through strategic planning that we really needed to expand the programs and services we offered to the field so that we could actually address some of the issues that some of the other sectors of the field were experiencing.

So we have a new strategic plan that we just voted in in January and we're very excited about some of our new programs and some of our new initiatives that have specifically been created to address some of the needs of jewelry artists.

Tracy: Awesome. I love it. Do you want to talk about some of those initiatives?

Gwynne: Absolutely I'm happy to. One of the things that we've done is we've created a program with the American Craft Council for their Baltimore Wholesale and Retail Show where we get every year to invite ten SNAG members who are interested in entering that field that have never shown before where they can come and participate





by getting a booth at the ACC Baltimore show. And they have the choice doing wholesale, retail or wholesale and retail. And then around that we've developed a peer-to-peer learning program where people who are SNAG members that have been doing this show for years get on the phone with those that are new to the show and we have two-two hour conversations about how you do certain things. Everything from booth design to merchandising to line sheets to how do you bring and unload your work and where's the best hotel to stay at.

So we've created some new peer learning opportunities. We also are working on expanding our entrepreneurial training program, what we call Road to Success, and some of the ways that we've been expanding that are with partnerships with other organizations like Flourish and Thrive Academy. Earlier you said that what I talked about is we got connected and I didn't know a lot about you and Robyn and what you offer to the community. So it took some time to court each other to understand that. And then I did have that [15:00] opportunity to attend your live event which I thought was amazing, last September in New York City. And that's when I said okay we're dating now.

So I think we've actually gone into the serious part of our relationship because not only did we create some great partnerships with your Laying the Foundation course, but now we also have you guys coming and doing two presentations at the last initiative that we have just developed which is called SNAG Next and that is taking place in May in Ashville, NC, and the focus is on how people are making a living in the field. We do a conference every year, but the last 44 years our conferences have really been focused on the concepts, the ideas, the innovation that's happening in the field, and we really felt like it was time for SNAG to be a leader in establishing a formal platform where artists can actually tell each other how they're actually making a living in the field, how they're surviving and thriving because artists were coming up with really fun, unique and innovative ways of doing that.

So that's what our SNAG Next in Ashville is all about, and like I said you guys have partnered with us to come and do some workshops with our attendees which we're very excited about.

Tracy:

And we are so excited too because we love teaching jewelry artists and designers how to make it happen because it can happen for everyone. Everyone has the opportunity with the right mindset and the right positioning and the right marketing skills and sales skills. So I'm excited. We're really excited and thrilled. We're going to talk a little bit more about the conference in a moment, but I just want to sort of like segways here because I think an important piece of





success in any type of business as an entrepreneur or as an artist or whatever is really about mindset. So what do you in your opinion, what do you think needs to shift in the jewelry industry or in the field in general in order to get designers and makers to a point where more of them can create viable businesses with their art?

Gwynne: Well I think, what I always tell artists is artists are really good at making the work but they're not necessarily really good at running themselves like an actual true business, and that is the part that is hard because a lot of artists who come out of school are not told that they also need to understand how to market themselves, how to be a shipping company because you ship your work and you've got to ship so that it doesn't get damaged and how to keep you books and be an accountant. So as an artist, you have to wear so many hats that I think that if artists could really understand that not only do they have to be good at actually making their work but they actually have to figure out also how to run themselves like an actual business and be their own CEO of their own Tracy Matthews Jewelry Company, is kind of a huge thing. [18:00]

That's hard for artists because those skillsets don't necessarily come naturally to them like a lot of the visual making part of their job does. So that is definitely something that I'm pretty passionate about, doing professional practices and professional development training with artists to get them to understand how to do those things and how to get those skills so they can be more successful.

Tracy: I mean I know from personal experience it's always way more fun to be playing and drawing and working in the materials than it is to be tracking your receipts for taxes, but it has to be done. Take it from somebody who's been audited a few times. You need to do this.

Gwynne: And if there's some aspect of that business side that you absolutely hate, what I always say is see if you can find someone and hire somebody to do that for you. My husband and I had a conversation not too long ago. He is obviously a full time jewelry artist. He's at a point where he has so many shows and so many wholesale accounts that he either needs to hire somebody to help him make his work or he needs to hire someone to do the business side. And so we talked about it and he really doesn't want to have to manage somebody to make his work. He wants to make it. So then we said okay well then that's time for you to really look at seriously finding somebody to help you with some of the tax and the receipts and the accounting that you do and of course I happen to have that ability.

So we kind of entered into an arrangement or a formal agreement where I'll take over doing these items for you so that you have more free time to make more. But that is a struggle that artists will





definitely always deal with as they run themselves as their own jewelry business.

Tracy: That's like a power partnership, you and your husband working together because you really have such a strong understanding of the business side of things. I mean I've seen over the past year and a half or so or longer that we've known each other like how powerful you are from the perspective of like running an organization like SNAG. So he's really lucky to have someone like you step in and help run the business. It's cool.

Gwynne: Yeah and I mean it's fun. When we first met we blew hot glass together because hot glass blowing always requires at least an assistant. And so I think early on we worked out how to do that in our relationship so that we don't take that into our actual relationship because we have this business relationship and then we have our own relationship. Yeah absolutely, I definitely have the ability to understand the business side of things. That's something that is a match, comes naturally for me, actually making work and being creative and making what I would say powerful art is much more of a struggle for me.

So understanding both sides and having experience in both sides I feel allows me to have a different perspective and share that perspective with artists and that's something that I really love doing and I'm very passionate about.

Tracy: **[21:00]** Well SNAG is lucky to have you because you're really making a difference over there and I can see it which is awesome.

Gwynne: Thank you. I have to be honest. It's not just me. I have an amazing board and I know a lot of people are like EDs always say that about their nonprofit boards, but I have worked in the nonprofit field for the last 18 years and the SNAG board of directors that I've been working with for the last two and a half years is by far the most amazing board I've ever experienced. They are ready to help. They want to make SNAG survive and they want to have SNAG be a leader in the field and serve a broader constituency than it has in its past history. So I'm fortunate enough to have them behind me as well and then I have a great staff too. So it's not just me, but it's all of us working together that's really been an unbelievable experience for me and I'm very excited because we have been able to institute quite a lot of change over that two and a half years because we all work together really well.

Tracy: And I've noticed the changes from an outsider looking in so it's amazing.

Gwynne: Thank you.





Tracy: So I want to hear more about SNAG Next. I would love for you to share that and also a membership, what that involves for a membership to SNAG because we should talk about both of those things.

Gwynne: Absolutely. So I'll start with the membership for SNAG. SNAG, we offer a variety of things, benefits to our members. Everything from we have on our website what we call our "maker profiles" where every member actually can upload photos and their contact and website information and then we actually promote those maker profiles through paid advertising so that people who are curators, gallery owners, collectors can actually come to the site and easily find artists that they're looking for. We have a few people that have actually gotten quite a few commission jobs through the maker profiles. So it's just really a nice visibility benefit to our members.

We also produce a magazine five times a year called Metalsmith Magazine that really documents kind of the art jewelry side and the scholarly side of the field and we find that is truly not only a formation magazine but is also a great inspiration for creativity. We also do a variety of exhibitions from online exhibitions to our annual exhibition in print, and we also then partner with other major institutions to support jewelry and metal exhibitions as well. Last year we partnered with the Pratt School of Design and Art in New York City to support a show they did focusing on the history of gestures around jewelry. And then this year we're actually partnering with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for their Beyond Bling exhibition [24:00] which is opening in October, and that is an international collection from the Boardman Family that was gifted to the museum and they will be debuting that collection. That collection is kind of an amazing piece of history of the field because they've been collecting for so many years. So they have this great evolution of work that they're going to be showing.

Also we do things like our entrepreneurship training program called Road to Success as well as some technical. We do have a technical education director who works on technical articles and information articles like that. So there's a wide variety of benefits to membership. We also have, in a partnership with you all, that if your clients are interested in joining SNAG, they get a discount on their membership and that code, which I will make sure you can post on your website, but the code for this year FTA, as in Flourish and Thrive Academy, 2016, but if people are interested in joining SNAG, they'll get \$15 off their membership if they're clients of yours.

Tracy: We'll definitely have that code and the link to apply for a membership on the blog post. So definitely check that out and it's so





generous of you guys to give the Flourish and Thrive Academy community a discount on that. Thank you.

Gwynne: Absolutely, absolutely. We're happy to.

Tracy: So now tell me a little bit more about the SNAG Next Conference. I mean I know about it, but I know our listeners want to hear about it as well.

Gwynne: Absolutely. We're very excited about SNAG Next. The board came to the staff back in October of 2014 and said okay we recognize that we need to create a unique and different conference experience and we really want you all to come up with something that's very different than what we traditionally have been doing for the last 44 years which is going to a large city like Boston or Chicago or Minneapolis and then the whole conference focuses around the concept, ideas and innovation happening in the field and then it all happens inside the hotel. So you could go three days without even going outside the hotel. And those conferences are great and they're amazing, and they certainly feed our members because we typically have anywhere between 500 and 800 members attending the conference. So it's a great place for also networking and coming together with your community.

With the recognition that we needed to help serve some additional sectors of the field and artists that were interested in having SNAG actually provide new skillsets to them so that they could be better at the business side of what they do, we created SNAG Next. It's going to be in Asheville, NC. It is not inside a hotel, but it is going to be held at five different community venues. Anything from the Orange Peel which is where our morning keynotes will be. And the Orange Peel is a [27:00] big music venue here in town that people go usually to listen to music so it's kind of fun to have our opening lectures each day that are going to be there. Then we're also going to be at the art museum, the Masonic Temple, the On Broadway Arts Building and then the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design.

So because Asheville is such a walkable city it makes it very easy to have our presentations and our workshops and our lectures at multiple venues so that people can get out and actually experience the culture of the city as well as see the inside of different buildings. So that's different than our traditional conferences and then the conversation that we're having of course is very different because we're really focusing on how people can make a living in the field. And so we have artists that are going to be coming in and sharing their story about how they're surviving and they're thriving. We also have professional development, people who are going to come in and talk about e-commerce or you guys are going to be talking





about the brand and how you find your brand. And so what we've done is we ended up dividing all the speakers that fit into four themes.

What's nice about that is each day, morning and evening, each theme will be addressed by the speakers. So our four themes are Finding Your Voice, Multi-Pronged Approach to Making and Selling, Holistic Practices or Wellness Around Keeping Yourself Healthy and Whole and Your Making, and then the last one is Bridging Art and Fashion. So we have a variety of speakers from the field that will be coming in and speaking to each of those themes. So we're very excited and it's May 18th - 21st.

Tracy: I'm so excited. It's my birthday weekend.

Gwynne: Oh my gosh. Well we have to make sure that we celebrate your birthday then.

Tracy: Yeah I always like, I remember last year when we were at the conference it was my birthday and Robyn got me a cupcake in the morning. Yeah I'm excited to be contributing to this on my birthday weekend because for those of you who have followed me for a while you know I always make a big deal out of my birthday. So I might as well do something in the industry. So I'm super excited. I'm really excited to be speaking and I know Robyn is too. We're just thrilled. So where can people find out more information about SNAG Next, Gwynne?

Gwynne: They can go to our website which is www.snagmetalsmith.org and they can find out about not only the membership and the benefits and they can see some of the different activities that we're doing, but they can also click on the SNAG Next banner and get information on programming and how to register and all that other good stuff.

Tracy: Okay amazing, and we'll definitely have a link in the show notes and in our transcript as well so that you guys can check that out. Gwynne thank you so much for being here today. I'm really excited for all the big things that are on the horizon for SNAG and for our partnership together as well.

Gwynne: You're welcome. I'm happy to be here [30:00] and I'm looking forward to continuing our work together as we move into 2016 and beyond, and I just really appreciate you thinking of having me.

Tracy: It's my pleasure. Thanks so much.

Gwynne: Thank you.





Tracy: Thank you so much for joining us today. Wasn't that a fun interview. Gwynne just has so much energy. I always love chatting with her. So I definitely want to make sure that you pop on over to the show notes over at www.flourishthriveacademy.com/episode32. You can check out more about SNAG, check out the discount that they're offering for the Flourish and Thrive Academy community for membership and then you can also check out more about the SNAG Next Conference. We would love to have you join us. Robyn and I are going to be doing two talks at SNAG Next. So please, please consider it. Ashville is going to be a blast and you can come and celebrate my birthday with me in May.

Alrighty so if you enjoyed this episode, I can't help but remind you to make sure that you "Like" the episode. Make sure that you rate the review the episode and tell us what you think and what you're liking about the show so that we can bring more of this goodness to you every single week. Alright thanks so much for listening today.

