

Art in the Loft's "Art Pop"
MCACA & Long Haul Productions
Creating Connection 2020
Audio Transcript

JUSTIN CHRISTENSEN-COOPER: My name is Justin Christensen-Cooper, I am the Executive Director of Art in the Loft. I was born and raised in Alpena.

ASHLEY REPKE: My name is Ashley Repke. Justin and I have actually known each other for 36 years. Him and I have been very, very close friends since kindergarten.

JUSTIN: I went through the school system here ...

ASHLEY: His mom was actually our kindergarten teacher. I actually introduced him to his wife. And then they went to Michigan State and I went to Michigan Tech, but we were still remained really, really close.

JUSTIN: my wife and I had our first son in Colorado and never did we think that that would lead us back to Alpena. I think anybody that grows up in a small town wants the quickest way out, but then they realize that was always their home.

MUSIC

ASHLEY: When we moved back to Alpena, Justin was already working back at Art in the Loft.

JUSTIN: Alpena has been steeped in this industrial, very blue collar environment. So when I came back, our biggest task was was to make art relevant. What's important to those that live here? How can arts help what you want for your family?

ASHLEY: As my husband and I moved back into town, I was actually shocked at how many of us are back here to raise our families in the same way we were raised.

JUSTIN: And that was also important to me, and how I wanted to raise our family. It made it easy to want to be here again.

MUSIC

ASHLEY: My oldest will be three in February. When we used to be able to go to Art in the Loft, he knew what parking lot it was, he knew what it meant when we pulled up there. If I didn't have his hand, he would run screaming across the parking lot telling me it was time to see Mr. Justin.

They put a huge U-shaped table in their art classroom. It's backed up to really, really large windows that let in a huge amount of light. It's one of the most colorful scenes. If you can think about taking a bunch of different colors, buckets of paint, and dumping them all over, that's what these kids look like when it's done.

GOV. GRETCHEN WHITMER TAPE: Today, I'm issuing a stay home, stay safe, Executive Order for all Michiganders. And it goes into effect just after midnight tonight.

ASHLEY: When COVID hit, we were actually in Florida at my parents, and I was 32 weeks pregnant with twins. So we had to travel from Florida back to Michigan with closed gas stations and closed restaurants and nowhere to go to the bathroom.

JUSTIN: We ended up having to say, "Nope, sorry, we're going to cancel this week's, but hopefully we'll see you next week." Well, next week turned into next month, and then I think we kind of know how that went.

ASHLEY: And then it was kind of settling into the new norm. I don't recommend your husband having to work from home with you in your same office space during the day, but that's what happened. On top of that being super pregnant ... (laughs)

JUSTIN: At that point, a lot of things were closing. Restaurants were limited, anything that had large gatherings, that was all closed too.

ASHLEY: And Rowen was really pretty disappointed. He was just over two years old. So like the deep understanding of what was happening wasn't there, but he knew that we couldn't go see his friends, or if we were gonna see his friends, we had to do it outside.

JUSTIN: I think as a town, we were all feeling that, and as a state and a nation, we were all feeling that, but on an individual level, it was putting people out of

jobs. And I had to make those phone calls and say “We're laying you off for X amount of time. And we don't know when you're going to come back.”

TAPE: Michigan had a record 384,000 people file new claims.

JUSTIN: So that was very hard. A lot of our businesses are just mom and pop shops around here. And when other small businesses are not doing well, we're also not doing well.

ASHLEY: It was par for the course for almost any small business in town, especially one that's run on a budget like theirs is.

JUSTIN: But we still wanted to make art relevant to those that live here. What is it that we can do? Beginning of April, we decided, well let's go all in. We held many meetings to sort of rally the troops. How can we package up what we do? So we took some of our more popular programs. One of those programs was called Art Pop, that one's been really popular. It's two projects for toddlers, every two weeks, and it's paired with a story time ...

JUSTIN ON YOUTUBE: Come on over for story time!

JUSTIN: They can go onto our YouTube page and watch the story ...

JUSTIN ON YOUTUBE: This is called “Stranger in the Woods.” Look at those two crazy moose!

CHILD ON YOUTUBE: Deer.

JUSTIN ON YOUTUBE: Oh, deer, sorry. Let's find out what happens, here we go!

ASHLEY: When we do Art Pop from home, Justin records a video, and his kids are always sitting there listening to him reading the story, which is super super cute.

JUSTIN ON YOUTUBE: I am the strongest and I am the biggest, said the young buck. I should go first. (WHISPERS) Don't pick your nose.

ASHLEY: And Rowen starts trying to talk to his kids every time. And then he tells me he misses his friends. So it's very very sweet.

JUSTIN ON YOUTUBE: I think they like the carrots the best. The end! Ok friends, you are gonna make two snowmen for your projects. Have fun doin' it, say bye!

ASHLEY: As soon as I set my laptop on the kitchen table next to his booster seat, he knows that it's time to do Art Pop. He knows that Mr. Justin's gonna to read him a story, and that we're going to get super messy.

JUSTIN: And then the parents have to set up their tables with all the supplies and then their kiddos get all messy with the project. We cap that at four years old, so, you know, it's going to be messy.(LAUGHS)

ASHLEY: I don't know how his crew does it. They must have like a library of stuff. They literally provide everything, everything but scissors. Every time I open that bag, I'm shocked at what's in there, the Q-tips blew my mind. They can make dots with them, and swirls. I never would've thought of it. You know, I would have handed him a paintbrush at home, and then I would have been cleaning paint off my walls.

JUSTIN: Our parents are always willing to put pictures and show what they're working on. The ones that really made me laugh are I like doing this at the loft 'cos I didn't have to clean it up. That was a good one. But, you know, if we were making other people's houses dirty because of the arts, I'm fine with that. That's okay.

MUSIC

ASHLEY: I'm struggling with getting one-on-one time with my three-year-old, with twins at home, having something special for just us. When the twins take their first nap, I know we're going to do Art Pop, and I know he's going to be engaged and he's not going to be running crazy, to be honest. And that he'll have something that he's super, super proud of to show. And then he asks me to take pictures cause we have to send it to Grandma and Grandpa in Florida. And then to Daddy at work. And then he wants me to show Mr. Justin. He thrives on routine. So I honestly think if I missed a week, he'd probably let me know.

During these COVID times, when we're stuck at home, it's a huge, huge help to have something prepared that gets my son involved in the arts. I mean, we're not a big town up here, and we're not a wealthy town, so to speak. So the fact that they do some of these projects at no cost to kids is out of this world. And they've done an exceptional job at taking care of our community that way.

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