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EP8 - Cone Johnson Art Philanthropy, Experience Design, Painter
<https://soundcloud.com/totallifecomplete/ep8-cone-johnson>

BRETT COWELL (host)
CONE JOHNSON (guest)

Brett Cowell: Hi, it's Brett Cowell, and this is the Total Life Complete Podcast, coming to you from the dream room at The Grove. Today, I meet with Cone Johnson, art philanthropy board president, experience and interaction designer. Welcome, Cone.

Cone Johnson: Thank you so much, Brett. It's nice to be here.

Brett Cowell: My pleasure. Hopefully today we'll talk about street philanthropy, conspiracy, and maybe a little bit about painting later on. We'll see how that goes.

Cone Johnson: All right. That sounds grand.

Brett Cowell: So, the first question I ask all our guests is how do you introduce yourself at a party when people ask who you are?

Cone Johnson: Ooh, that's a good one. I think I introduce myself differently at different parties, but recently, because of my involvement with Art Conspiracy, I do talk about street level philanthropy and raising many in the community. So, I do have a day job, but that is my love, is participating in the community, especially in arts. So, that's probably how I would introduce myself. Sometimes I have to explain my name. So, sometimes that is how I introduce myself, because they go, "What? What did you say?"

Brett Cowell: We were talking before the show started about a Texas senator, and I did my little bit of research before you came on.



Cone Johnson: I love it.

Brett Cowell: Are you any relation to the other Cone Johnson?

Cone Johnson: Yes indeed, I am. My great, great, great uncle was William Cone Johnson from Eastland, Texas. He was, apparently, a very famous orator; people would come from all over to hear him talk. He was a teetotaler; interesting. He ran for governor of Texas; he lost, and so did several other candidates. And so, the governor appointed those three men to start the Texas Highway Department. So, I always tell people, "If you like the highways in Texas, I'll take some credit for that. And if you don't, then I have nothing to do with it."

But, a lot of people know the name for two reasons. One, my father was named Cone Johnson, and I'll talk about him in a minute. The other reason is, those three politicians had ferry boats named after them. They went from the mainland to the island down in Galveston. So, there was a boat called the Cone Johnson, and a lot of people remember that from their childhood. And so, sometimes when they meet me, they go, "Cone Johnson?" And I try to help them figure out where they knew me. And the other thing, which I don't know if you found this during your research, but there was a punk band in Fort Worth Texas called the Hugh Beaumont Experience. They put out like five records. I mean, literally, five LPs, and one was called The Cone Johnson [EP]. And it's extremely rare. A few years ago, I tried to buy one on eBay, and it was like \$900 for an album from the 80s.

So, yes; it's the connection to the politician. There's a lake called Cone Johnson in Texas as well. So, I'm very proud to have the name. I was supposed to be a boy; I was the oldest, of course, and they were going to call me William Cone Johnson, and call me Will, since my dad went by Cone. And since we were talking before, you mentioned that you had a radio show, my father, too, had a radio show, and instead of using Cone Johnson as his moniker, he was Dr. Jazz. Because he was a doctor, so he had a jazz radio program for 25 years, maybe longer, in Abilene, which is west of here at the NPR station. Yeah. So, it's a great name.

Brett Cowell: Very, very interesting.

Cone Johnson: I'm honored to carry it.

Brett Cowell: All right, well I have to think about giving the guests some guest names as well as monikers that they can use on the show while they're here, if not Dr. Jazz, or whatever it was. I'll give you some time to think about what yours might be.

Cone Johnson: Okay. I'll think about it, a good nickname.



Brett Cowell: We can do that. And also, we'll see if any listeners out there have got a line on this rare punk LP; just send us an email at Podcast@TotalLifeComplete.com

Cone Johnson: Well, I do have to tell you, I went to an event once, and I ... You know how you just start talking to someone, I shook this guy's hand, and said, "Hi, my name's Cone Johnson." He goes, "Cone Johnson?" And I'm like, "Yeah. Do I know you? Do you know my dad?" He goes, "You mean like the punk album?"

Brett Cowell: Oh, really?

Cone Johnson: Yeah.

Brett Cowell: Now, that's kind of cool, I think.

Cone Johnson: Well, he was a huge punk fan, and that was cool. That's the first time I've gotten someone respond like that instead of saying ... Actually, what he said was, "That's not your name." I go, "Yeah, it is." He goes, "Like the album?" I said, "You must be a punk fan," and sure enough, he was. Anyway, enough about my name.

Brett Cowell: Talking about being recognized, I think ... There's an English guy that appears ... He's reasonably well known, some people have heard about him on a talent show that some people watched now and then called Simon Cowell, and people always want to ... I kind of have to say, "Like Simon Cowell, no relation," when I talk about who I am.

Cone Johnson: To understand your last name. Gotcha.

Brett Cowell: People get it now, they can spell it, so that's some benefit. And I'm not related.

Cone Johnson: My family on my dad's side came from Georgia to Texas, so I believe I'm fifth or sixth generation Texan. So, yeah.

Brett Cowell: That's lovely to know, and for the listeners who were expecting some light entertainment, they're going to get some education and history as well. And so, don't say you don't learn anything while listening to this show. Let's talk a little bit about Art Conspiracy, or Art Con.

Cone Johnson: Sure.

Brett Cowell: What is it, to start off with, for people who are not familiar with it?

Cone Johnson: Okay, simply Art Con is a community of people in the Dallas area who want to give back to the world of art and music here. Art Conspiracy, and I'll talk about how it was founded, but the way it functions now is, we work towards raising money, and that money every year is given to a different non-profit. Our goal is



to have as much impact as we can with that money. We're not able to offer a million dollars, by any means, but in the last few years, we've been able to give our beneficiary every year somewhere between \$20,000 and \$45,000. And basically, that's done by auctioning off art, and having musicians play at these auctions.

So, I'll just jump in at *Seed* is our summer event; S-e-e-d. And it is exactly what it sounds like. We have that event to raise seed money in order to put on the bigger event, our signature event, which is in the fall. And the Seed event is curated. We contact local artists and ask them to create art of any stripe based on a theme. This year, our Seed event was at the beginning of June. Our theme was phobias. And so, it kind of ties in with 13; this is our 13th year.

And so, the artists were encouraged to do anything based on a phobia; you know, fear of heights, or fear of spiders, or whatever, whether they had that phobia or not. And then, those 40 artists donated their work, we had an event where we auctioned off all 40 of those. The cool thing is, a lot of these artists are up and coming artists, a lot of them are well-established, and you can start at a very reasonable price. I believe all the artwork started for Seed at either \$20 or \$40, very reasonable price. Then, that money we used to kind of do the same thing again in the fall.

But in the fall, it's open enrollment, if you will, to any artist. The 40 Seed artists that participate in the summer are invited back, so they're automatically part of our 150 artists. And then, we get about 300 people that apply; it's an application online, we have a call for artists. And it's a random choice. And then, they come in for what we call "Artists Day", and we turn a workspace into a great, big art studio. Each artist gets a 18 by 18 inch square board of plywood. They can do whatever they want to it. It can be painted, or sculpture, or collage; anything they want. And then, the next week, those pieces are auctioned off.

We have three simultaneous auctions, and it's wild and crazy, and it's a big party. Lots of people come out to see the art, buy the art, listen to the bands, have food and music, and drinks, and just enjoy the opportunity to do something good, because that money that's raised then goes to the beneficiary. And I can talk a little bit about the beneficiary this year, if you'd like.

Brett Cowell: Yeah, maybe we'll come back to that, really, in a second. I wanted to say two things; number one, really thank you for coming in and talking about this, because I know the leadership of Art Con continues to evolve-

Cone Johnson: Always.

Brett Cowell: -and you've been involved in it for a period of time as the-



Cone Johnson: Yeah. Actually, that's a good point. I have been an attendee, and a fan, a big supporter of Art Con, but I am new to being part of kind of the infrastructure, if you will. We do not have staff. We are an all volunteer group. We don't have an office. Everything that we do is kind of ... I don't know how to put that. Virtual? We meet at different places. I am on the board. In addition to the board, we have volunteers who work year round. And then, we also have a huge group of volunteers that come in right before an event, work the day of, and then help us tear down. So, I'm talking about many, many, many people that it takes to put this all together. And because there've been lots of people involved over the years, enough people have been able to kind of take the cultural knowledge from one event to the next, to the next. And so, even though we have new people that have joined us this year in 2017, we have people who have done events before. And so, we're able to put together some pretty great events.

We were very pleased with what happened in June; our Seed event. We were thrilled to raise plenty of money in order to get started with our fall event. So, yeah.

Brett Cowell: Now, there's a lot of philanthropy in Dallas.

Cone Johnson: Yes.

Brett Cowell: One of the things that really jumped out about Art Con and triggered me to reach out to the organization to speak with you guys further was this idea of street philanthropy. I mean, that you're not getting a bunch of, courting some rich donors who are going to give this money.

Cone Johnson: No. We are not. I think anyone would be surprised at the fact that it is very bare bones. I mean, I think we throw a good event, but it's very approachable, it's inclusive. The idea is that someone who wants to help their community could come in, and for a very small amount, purchase a piece of art. Maybe it's someone they know, maybe it's someone they don't know. And that that money's going to go to a good cause. So, you don't have to be some very wealthy person going to a fancy \$500 a plate dinner in order to raise money. I'm proud to say that, in 13 years, Art Conspiracy has raised over \$300,000. And, of course, we've done that in small amounts. It's not like someone has given us \$20,000 at a time. So, I think it really speaks well of us. And when I say "us", I really mean not only people who are involved with Art Conspiracy now, but in past years. I mean, it's a wonderful legacy to be involved with, for sure.

Brett Cowell: Very good. I love that idea of the money going ... Essentially, artists creating art and then those proceeds going to sponsor some of the beneficiaries like that. So, maybe we could talk a little bit more about that; how the beneficiaries are selected-



Cone Johnson: Sure, sure.

Brett Cowell: -and maybe this year's, last year's beneficiaries. Yeah.

Cone Johnson: And, remind me, we'll talk about kind of how it started, too. So, this year's beneficiary ... And I'll talk about how they were selected. This year's beneficiary is called *Seek the Peace*. They are a refugee support group. I've learned from *Seek the Peace* that Dallas is one of the top five cities in the US where refugees from all over are re-situated. I don't know that that's the right word, but you can imagine if someone has grown up in a refugee camp, or even been displaced in any way, that it's a really tough situation.

And so, it's a huge community from all different faiths, all different languages, all different countries. And so, when they applied to be a grantee, we were very impressed with what they wanted to do with the money we'll be raising, and that is they're bringing in an arts program. And that's where, that was our sweet spot. So, they're bringing in a program called First Aid Arts, and it is designed to work with the trauma of refugees. In fact, First Aid Arts goes to refugee camps. And so, that is what they're going to do with, hopefully, as much money as we can raise this year.

So, the process is, we have an open call, a grant cycle. We have applicants, we review the applications, we choose a top five, and of those five, we go and visit with them. We call them "site visits"; not everybody has a site. For instance, one of the organizations this year that we visited is a theater group, and they don't have their own theater, but they are a group. And so, of those site visits ... And, by the way, this is a committee made up of many different people within Art Conspiracy. So, volunteers as ... Well, we're all volunteers. But, volunteers as well as board members. And this committee then recommends the top three to the voters, and we all vote. One, two, three. And so, that's how *Seek the Peace* was selected this year.

So, I'd like to say it's a rigorous situation process for us, because we want to make sure that the money that we raise will be meaningful, and they'll be able to do something that can really impact the community. And in the case of this First Aid Arts that *Seek the Peace* is going to implement, part of the training is geared towards each different culture. So that, let's say, they could train someone who's from Burma, then that person would be able to train this technique to his or her community, and so on, and so forth. So, we saw an amazing reach there with this particular arts program.

Brett Cowell: Let's go back to the start, then.

Cone Johnson: Sure.



Brett Cowell: Where did the conspiracy start?

Cone Johnson: So, I didn't get to go to the very first one, but we were talking earlier and I told you that I went to the Texas Theater in Oak Cliff last night, and [now] we [a]re just across the street from the sixth floor museum, and Dealey Plaza. And, unfortunately, Dallas is known far and wide for the tragedy that happened so many years ago; the death of Kennedy. And so, there were a couple of tie-ins. One, there was a group of people, and they were feeling a little bit helpless, Hurricane Katrina has happened. Many people were coming to Dallas from New Orleans, and so on. And, especially kids, and they wanted to help. And so, they realized that \$10 here and \$10 there wouldn't mean as much, but if they could pool their resources, they could really do something great.

And so, this group of people picked an organization that Paul Simon was involved in, and it helped children specifically. And so, they said, "Hey, let's get some bands and we'll charge a little bit of money for people to come hear the bands." And then someone else said, "Hey, let's get some artists and we'll sell some of the art." And so, I think the quote is that someone said, "Well, let's get 20 artists." And someone else said, "Let's get 100." And so, the first event was actually held at Texas Theater, which it was before Texas Theater had been renovated and was operating as a theater. So, there's that tie in, definitely, the conspiracy aspect of Texas Theater. And for those of you that don't know, Texas Theater is where Lee Harvey went after the shooting, and he was found by policemen ... I think his name was Tippit? [J.D. Tippit police officer shot by Oswald, then Oswald ducked in to Theatre, according to reports]

And so, it has that infamy to it. So, yeah; the conspiracy name is definitely tapping into that, but in a good way. And then, we call each other conspirators. Because we are all conspiring to do good work and help our community. So, as I said, it started to help kids who were having problems because of Hurricane Katrina, and it was such a great success that ... And it was planned to just be a one off thing, that people said ... And, in fact, this was long before social media was so pervasive, and people were like, "Well, when's the next one?" And so, it was like, "Oh, okay." So, then it became the second, and then the third, and now we're up to the 13th Art Con. There's some great history on our website, by the way. So, you can go read more about it.

Brett Cowell: What was your journey to get involved in this? You started off attending the events and-

Cone Johnson: Yeah, I did. Actually, I'd like to give some credit to my parents. I was raised in an upper middle class household. My father was a doctor and my mother was a nurse. And I was raised to give back to the community. That was just something that I've always done, and I've been participating in lots of different ways over the years. I would get involved with an organization and try and give them my



best work. So, the last few years, I have been serving as a board member for several different arts organizations. So, I don't actually remember who approached me and asked if I would be interested in Art Con, being on the board. I was very flattered, and very honored, and I said yes.

And so, that's how I got involved. But, of course, I knew about Art Conspiracy as an attendee, as someone who had gone to the events. I feel like I kind of knew what was going on, but you know, it's very different when you're actually planning an event than when you go to an event. So, I'm learning. There's a lot to learn. A lot of moving parts, and as I mentioned earlier, we're so lucky and grateful that we've had that kind of continuous opportunity, and people know what to do, and then they pass that on to the next person, or the next group. And so, we've got a really nice model of sustainability there. It is not me that does this. I'm just part of this very large group; great community.

Brett Cowell: Yeah. And I'm glad that you said the word "community" because that kind of leaps out in what you're describing. Everybody wants high quality events, and nobody wants to organize them. I think that's the thing across the world in every possible thing and-

Cone Johnson: Well, sure. You want to go and enjoy yourself. The cool part about this is you're not only enjoying yourself, but you're doing something nice to help your community. I mean, again, it's that concept of kind of like a giving circle. If I get a group of people together and we all throw in a couple of bucks, that can really add up after a while. And that's how I see Art Conspiracy. Yeah. I mean, just kind of looking back at some of what we've done with other beneficiaries, there've been some great organizations. And, in fact, let me just mention that one of the things, too, that I believe has happened in the past is that beneficiaries have been chosen ... They don't necessarily need to be a new nonprofit, but they just need that little oomph of that money coming in. And it could be the difference between things going great, and things not going so great.

And that's a really nice feeling, too, that as a group, you could make such a difference to a organization and then whoever their constituents are. I love that.

Brett Cowell: So, to be a volunteer, do you have to have an arts degree?

Cone Johnson: You do not!

Brett Cowell: Do you have to do a test-

Cone Johnson: No!

Brett Cowell: -where they examine you to see if you're an artist or not?



Cone Johnson: No. In fact, we need volunteers of any kind, especially around the events; and you don't have to have any skills in order to help us. We do all kinds of things during the event. For instance, the artwork is hung in a presentation manner. We need help with that. We need help with selling merchandise. We sell t-shirts, Art Con t-shirts. I mean, there's a million things that anyone can do, but if you want to become involved even more so, and maybe you have a skill, or you want to hone a skill that we would love to have you come on board. I know often what happens is someone will get involved, and they'll bring in their friends, and they'll bring in their friends, and so on, and so on; which is fantastic.

Artists are very motivated and enthusiastic, but you don't have to be an artist. And, in fact, I wanted to mention that a lot of people, whether they are a working artist or just a weekend artist, they can participate. Anybody can put their name in, be chosen as one of the 150, and do a piece of art, and then get all your friends to come to the event and raise the price and say, "I'll give you \$20. I'll give you \$40. I'll give you \$60." And just think what a great opportunity that is, that all your friends could help you raise money based on the artwork that you made.

So, I mean, there's a million different ways that people can help. I should have thought about this sooner, but contact me. Contact anyone. Find us on social media. We are on Facebook, Instagram; whatever. Just find us and we'd love to have you. I'll press you into service, Brett.

Brett Cowell: I'd like to serve. That's great. And as always, there'll be some show notes and a transcript available-

Cone Johnson: Thank you. That'd be great.

Brett Cowell: -at TotalLifeComplete.com at the end of this. Before the show, we talked a little bit about creativity versus artists; you're a creative person or you're an artist. What's your view? Is there a distinction between the two?

Cone Johnson: Yeah. I have a lot to say about that, actually. I believe that creativity shouldn't be held up and out on some pedestal, to say that someone is a creative, or someone is an artist. I know that there are people who do that, and that's fine. But, my theory is ... And this might be something that some people don't know about. There are a lot of people who are famous in one area, maybe being an actor. I'll use the example Tony Bennett. He's a singer. Some people know him as a singer, but he's a fantastic painter. And I think once you have tapped into that creativity that everyone has, it can manifest itself in any manner. So, that's why you meet some people who are multi-talented, because they've been able to do that.



So, I don't like it when people kind of set it off like, "Oh, you're a creative person." Like, it's weird or something. Because it isn't. And sometimes I think it's just a matter of learning the tools and the techniques. Something I've always wanted to do, which I haven't, is learn how to weld. I think I have a sculpture in me. I've never done that before, but I think if I could learn the techniques and understand the tools that something could happen. And sometimes I feel people pigeonhole themselves, and if I could step a little to the side, you mentioned that you used to be in consulting. And I've worked for several large organizations, and I remember one time we had ...

It was supposed to be a team building exercise, but guess what? It was the opposite, because what we did was divide ourselves by our interests and our skills. And we were given colors. And so, people who considered themselves analytical and interested in details, they were blue. And I don't remember all the other colors, but I was orange. And guess what? I was the only orange in that environment. And it really stigmatized me because people were like, "Oh, yeah. You're just a creative." I'm like, "What do you mean "just" a creative?" I didn't want to be known just as that one thing.

So, I guess, in some ways what I've done with my background is ... I was lucky enough to be picked when I was in elementary school to go to summer school. And you might think, "Summer school?" But it was for talented and gifted artists, and my teacher saw something in me that I didn't know I had. And that really changed the course of my life. Even though at one time when I started college I had planned to be a lawyer ... Which is kind of funny, looking back on that. But, I ended up studying in Paris and becoming an artist. So, I actually have a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting. And I don't make my living painting, but that doesn't mean that it's not still very important to me.

Anyway. I feel strongly that one of the things that Art Conspiracy does is allow people to participate who may not be, quote unquote, artists. And I've been really out there selling it to friends, and family, and colleagues and saying, "Put your name in when we do the artist call," because you don't have to be a trained artist. So, we'll see. We'll see what kinds of folks participate. There are people who probably would never go into a gallery in the design district, or during the gallery walks ... They do one in the fall and the spring. And maybe they feel that's not for them. But, they would come to Art Con. And I love that. I think that is exactly what sharing and being part of the community should be. I really feel strongly about that.

Brett Cowell:

In my life, one of the things I notice from moving from Sydney ... There's a number of great artists in Sydney, but I think moving to London, and not knowing many people, and living there for six years, I think, gave me a completely different perspective on art, because I didn't have all the preconceptions about whether I was an artist or not. I would definitely not have



called myself an artist, but because there's so many great galleries in London that are tourist attractions as well that I could just walk up, and ponder in, and not have to rush around; I felt that they were part of my life, and I could go there many, many times, and slowly, over time, learn more about art, and the people that made it, and why they made it. And then, over time, that gave me a completely different perspective on it and opened up a door for me as to who I was as a person. I'm not just a globe-trotting consultant that is a big analytical person that can solve your problems and then move on. But, there was something inside that I wanted to try and do.

Cone Johnson:

You were interested, yeah. Yeah, to think that, for whatever reason, the art world has, over many, many years positioned themselves to be ... Kind of have throw up this wall. I don't really get that. But, I love that we're kind of tearing that down a little. I really, I do like that. And I do want to mention that, kind of over the years, I've seen very young up and coming artists be involved with Art Conspiracy, and then the next year, more people know who they are, and the next year ... You know? I've seen that. I love that someone could kind of make new fans through this kind of set up. I think that's really cool, too. So, that you don't have to have a show at a specific gallery.

Actually, I overheard someone saying this the other day, and I thought it was so great. She was talking about submitting art to a gallery and they said, "No. Thanks, but no." And instead of trying to go look for another gallery, she said, "I'm just going to do my own thing." And I think that is the kind of person that we would love to interact with. One thing that I've got in my head, and I'm just saying it out loud right now, but I'm hoping to kind of tap into some non-traditional communities who do art. So, for instance, there's an arts program downtown with one of the homeless groups, and I would love it if some of those folks might participate. I'd like to get some younger kids, maybe from Booker T. That's the arts magnet school downtown. I want to see if we can kind of reach out to some other folks. Like, I've said, it's been in my head. I haven't really fully formed that yet.

But, I think that the more people that know about what we're doing, the better. And that will allow Art Con 14 to happen, and 15, and so on.

Brett Cowell:

You talked about a day job before, and I want to know what an experience designer is.

Cone Johnson:

Oh my gosh. You know, because I had a degree in art ... I studied fine art and art history, and I was really very lucky, because right after I graduated ... I went to SMU, by the way. I fell into the advertising world and worked as a graphic designer. I think most people know what a graphic designer is. I worked as an art director, and then I started being sort of a project manager, and then I became a producer. Instead of print, we're talking about online, and apps, and things like



that. And one of the things I would do as a project manager or producer, is I would talk to the client, or the service, whatever it might be, and try and figure out what the crux of the problem was; "What is it we're trying to do here?" And then communicate that to the team that was building the product or the service.

And I discovered that that, actually, was a field of study. And it's called user experience, and it really is that someone thinks about how you're going to use your windshield wiper in your car, and someone thinks about how you're going to use the email on your phone. There's someone who's thinking about that and planning that out. And so, I was lucky, again, to learn all of that on the job. So, as a user experience designer, I really help determine the experience between a thing, a something, and the user. And it can be an app, like on your phone, it could be enterprise-wide software, it could be a website. It's something that I kind of was already doing as an art director, I just didn't know what it was called. I mean, that's what you do when you work as a designer or an art director, you figure out what the problem is, and come up with a solution.

So, it's super hot the last few years to be in UX, and there are different sub-categories within the whole UX field. There's lots of specialties that you can do, and I've done a little bit of everything. So, I've worked for startups, I've worked for ad agencies, I've worked for in house, a headquarters for a big company, I've worked for just kind of a little bit of everything. And, as I said, it's not that I'm not passionate about my day job, but I'm not passionate about my day job. I really am much more passionate about the things that I do nights and weekends. So, having an opportunity to be involved with different organizations ... And it's something that I've done within my field as well. I've been involved in user groups in professional organizations. So, it all kind of ties back to what I said that my parents just kind of raised me to be involved in the community, and help as much as I can; and so, I still do that.

Brett Cowell: It's nice to know that someone is thinking about users still and amongst this increasingly automated and disjointed world. I feel quite often that people are not thinking about me as a user.

Cone Johnson: You know, let me just say, in the defense of my field; sometimes what happens with a product or a service is that does get skipped. You know, "We're in a hurry, we've got to get that to market." And it's a shame. But, I think that as a culture, we are all much more savvy and know when you get a new phone for instance, let's say you switch from one operating system to the other; there's some stuff built in, there's things that we kind of know to expect that just a few years ago we didn't even think about it.

And the example I use when I'm talking to maybe young students who are getting into the field is I say, "There's user experience everywhere, we just don't realize it. And when you walk up to a door, and you look, you have to figure out,



"Is it a pull handle? Or a push?" That's user experience." When you go into a department store, I don't know if you've ever noticed when you go into a department store, but the cosmetics and perfume is right up front. Jewelry. Guess why? Because you see it when you go in, and you see it when you come out. And those can be impulse buys.

So, grocery stores are organized for user experience. Your car. You might go on a trip and rent a car, and it may be a car you've never driven before, but you can quickly figure out, "Here's all the information I need in order to drive the car. Here's how you turn it on. Here's how you," ... You know. There is someone who's thinking about that. Sometimes it is not implemented, but there definitely is someone who's thinking about that user experience. And I'm hoping that, as we as a culture continue to grow, that will even be more important moving forward.

Brett Cowell: Given this professional experience, what products or services, without naming any names, do this really well or badly? Do you literally walk through your day going, "Oh, I'm so mad about that! They should have thought about that better."

Cone Johnson: I have to say, I do. There's certain things that are just like, "Ugh, that makes me crazy." I don't know. I'm probably more forgiving than some. I do spend a lot of time ... It's interesting, right when you were asking me that question, I thought, "I'm using a lot of the skills that I have gleaned over the years with user experience. I'm using those with Art Conspiracy." So, I'm trying to think how people view the organization, and how we can continue to be opening, and welcoming, and inclusive. It's kind of cool that I'm able to put that in place. But, yeah. For instance, if I read about a new app, I sign up, because I want to see, what is that experience? When you get the app, do you need to sign on through Facebook? Or do you use your email? All of those things are of interest to me. So, yeah. I guess I don't spend a lot of time being annoyed, but I'm probably a little bit more aware of it than some people.

You know, it was funny, right out of school I mentioned that I had a degree in painting. And you can't walk in and get a job with a degree in painting. And so, one of my friends taught me how to proofread. So, someone has written something, and you have to review it, and make sure that it makes sense, and that words aren't misspelled. Even when you have spell check, things can be misspelled. So, once I learned how to proofread, then I saw typos everywhere. I would go to a restaurant, and there would be a typo on a menu, and I was like, "Ah! It's making me crazy." So, I think anytime you get immersed in a field that you can suddenly realize that, "Oh, it's everywhere."

Brett Cowell: I'm glad that you drew the line between your professional experience and Art Con, and just more generally, what happens in the community; people having the opportunity to participate in these experiences, which actually not only



delight them, but change the way that they look at their own community. And, you know-

- Cone Johnson: We hope so. For sure, yeah.
- Brett Cowell: That's something that I'm constantly on the lookout for in Dallas and elsewhere, is to say how do you create those opportunities for people, whether it's an individual to see their life differently, and to realize their potential, whether it's for groups of people or teams, or whole communities to look at the situation they're in differently and have a shared experience.
- Cone Johnson: Yeah, I'm nodding furiously at you. Yes.
- Brett Cowell: Yeah.
- Cone Johnson: I realize that doesn't show up. You can't see that I'm nodding. No, I agree. Wholeheartedly.
- Brett Cowell: It's always just trepidation when you try and discuss visual adds on a podcast here like there. You need to have some pictures and links for people to do. But, hopefully, we're having a scintillating conversation that people can follow along with- and delights them.
- Cone Johnson: Oh, good. I think so, too.
- Brett Cowell: Let's talk a little bit about Dallas. Traditionally, people listen to the show around the world, and even for people in Dallas; how do you explain Dallas? What's the heart and the soul of it? What's it about?
- Cone Johnson: Oh my gosh. I don't know. Okay. So, I am going to say ... I'm going to fall back on something that I had an opportunity to do a few years ago. And I don't know if you've ever heard of this presentation technique; it's called *Pecha Kucha*, you have 20 slides and five minutes, and they're timed. And I participated in a show where multiple people were speaking. I think the title was Dallas, My Dallas, or something like that. And I had a really tough time when I was given that topic, and I realized that, for me, Dallas isn't a place, it's the people. And I'm sure you have come to realize that Texans, by their very nature, whether they're a recent Texan like you, or a native; they are open, and friendly, and kind, and generous. I love that about Dallas.
- And I mentioned that I went to school here. I moved to the East Coast and lived there for several years, and it's different. I learned there's a certain way to hail a taxi when you're in New York. There is a certain way when you go into a deli to order lunch. And it's because people are in a hurry, and they're busy, and it's a different lifestyle. So, I like the lifestyle, but I like the people. So, sometimes



what frustrates me about Dallas is we're so spread out. I have no problem going from ... I live in south Oak Cliff, and I have no problem going to visit a friend who lives in North Frisco. That's a long way away ... Because I'm from Texas, and driving is no big deal. But, I wish that I didn't have to drive it. I wish that we were a little more compact from that standpoint.

So, there are geographical issues sometimes, but I never gave it a thought, but I know I have met people who live in North Dallas, Frisco, Plano, and they would never come down to Fair Park and go to the State Fair of Texas. And I'm like, "Man, you're missing out." But, I do see that there's kind of a thawing in some of that geographical isolation, and that is that Klyde Warren Park has just been such a magnet for people. I have a friend that lives ... God, she couldn't live any further away. Oh, I can't think of the name. But, way up there by the airport. Flower Mound. Far away. And she will bring her kids to Klyde Warren Park. And I love that. I think that's really great.

So, my answer is ... What do I love about Dallas? I love the people. And I'm so grateful to have an opportunity to meet a lot of people. I was going to say that's another reason I'm enjoying working with Art Conspiracy is I'm meeting people I don't know that I would have met any other way. So, that's kind of cool.

Brett Cowell: For people that don't know what Klyde Warren Park is-

Cone Johnson: Oh, I'm sorry; yes, please.

Brett Cowell: It's a park on a freeway, basically.

Cone Johnson: It is! And it's amazing-

Brett Cowell: And it's a great thing actually.

Cone Johnson: It is a great thing. Dallas is ... I should have mentioned this. Dallas has the most amazing arts district. I don't know how many acres it is, like 22 acres. And our symphony hall is next to our Asian museum, which is next to the Dallas Museum of Art, which just had a really great show on Mexico. They had like 80,000 people come over the course of that show, it was fabulous. And just everything ... We have a performance hall. All of that is really within walking distance. And the cool part about Klyde Warren Park is that it kind of is the bridge, if you will, from the arts district to what we call uptown. It's been such a great uniter. I don't know. It attracts all kinds of people. It attracts kids, and dogs, and families, and there's lots of stuff happening at Klyde Warren Park.

It's been so interesting, because I think before that highway just bifurcated that area. And so, you were either uptown, or you were downtown, and having that ...



And I don't know, it's like five blocks wide. And then, of course it is over a highway. It's just fantastic.

Brett Cowell: I get down there regularly. I go with a two and a half year old son who loves playing in the water that they have down there. But, just to kind of build on what you were saying, I would sum up the place, this kind of park on a freeway. Dallas has got lots of freeways and not many, parks necessarily, communal parks

Cone Johnson: It's true. We don't have a lot of-

Brett Cowell: You know, there's parks around. But, I think this has been a real focal point.

Cone Johnson: It has.

Brett Cowell: I observe there, and I think one of the strengths about the whole thing is the socioeconomic mix of folks that are there.

Cone Johnson: Exactly. It is.

Brett Cowell: I can't think of any other time in my week ... And that maybe says something about me, I hope not. But, another opportunity where ... We've talked on this show, Dallas is divided up by its freeways and it's areas that people don't necessarily cross over

Cone Johnson: Mm-hmm (affirmative). It is. It is.

Brett Cowell: And this seems to be one focal point where people can kind of come together and go about the things that people like doing on weekends, and playing with their kids at a park-

Cone Johnson: Exactly.

Brett Cowell: -et cetera. Hopefully, these other things like Art Con, and the other community led projects that are coming up there are also spaces where people can come together from different backgrounds to have a shared experience.

Cone Johnson: Yeah. For instance, when we had our Seed event in June, we were at a venue called Life Deep Ellum, which is ... And for those of you listening, Deep Ellum is an area that was really well known maybe like in the 20s for jazz and blues. And it's near ... The part of the area is Elm Street, E-l-m, which is the same street that we're on right now. But, it's further down. But, it was called Ellum by a lot of the black musicians. That was just kind of a quirk, so it got tapped as "Deep Ellum". And I think that it's the same kind of opportunities in Deep Ellum ... People might not go to Deep Ellum, but they would come for our event, and then they would get to know Deep Ellum.



And one of the things that Art Con has done over the past few years is try and find a venue ... They have to be bigger and bigger every year, which is kind of cool. But, try and find a venue that is in an area that people might not normally go to, and kind of attract people to that area. So, I think that's kind of nice, too.

Brett Cowell: Sometimes you physically just have to still go somewhere, even in this internet age and everything else, social media; you need to transport your body down there and inhabit that space for a period of time to be able to kind of understand what it's about. And then to go back and visit it again. We're almost out of time for today-

Cone Johnson: All right. Okay.

Brett Cowell: Any words of life advice-

Cone Johnson: Oh, gosh.

Brett Cowell: -that you want to offer our listeners? What have you learned in all the things that you've done that you would pass on to people?

Cone Johnson: Well, I heard myself say just this afternoon, "Don't be shy. Don't be timid. If you want to go and help with an organization, you want to be involved with a community, just go and do it." And I would say I think that's pretty good advice. So, it's something that I have done; there've been lots of things that I've been interested in, so I just make my way there and do it. So, as I said, Art Con was a natural progression for me, and I'm thrilled to be involved. So, we'll see what happens.

Brett Cowell: Cone Johnson, thanks for joining us today.

Cone Johnson: Thank you, Brett. I appreciate it.