

Interview with Ginny Tennant
August 27, 2014
Lemonade Concert and Art Fair Project
St. Cloud State University Archives
Interviewed by Margaret Vos

Vos: Here we are at St. Cloud State University. It is Wednesday, August 27th and in the studio with me today is Ginny Tennant. And Ginny, do you want to say your name for me and spell your last name please.

Tennant: Ginny Tennant, T-E-N-N-A-N-T.

Vos: Wonderful. Ginny you and I kind of go way back, don't we, when we think about the Lemonade Concert and Art Fair.

Tennant: Yes, way, way back (both laugh).

Vos: As my son would always say, "The Earth was probably still cooling," when you began an event that really, is one of our signature events, the Lemonade Concert and Art Fair. You just put on the forty-first Lemonade Art Fair back in June, and here we are today getting ready, did you say for your forty-second?

Tennant: Oh yes, I've already started to work on it.

Vos: And what do you think about the forty-second art fair?

Tennant: It will be the best ever.

Vos: Best ever. Which is, your statement, I think, about every single one of those art fairs?

Tennant: Yeah, and I meant it from my heart, because I believe it.

Vos: Talk about your role with that Lemonade Concert and Art Fair. As I said it's on our campus here at St. Cloud State University. We think of it as our signature event because we've just loved what happens to the campus on that Thursday in June. But you're the one that has worked on the artist part of that art fair for all forty-one art fairs.

Tennant: Yes I have. It's a fabulous event for our community and I personally know how people look forward to it. It was created like forty-two years ago. Actually two people, Arlene Helgeson and Mary Reilly, started an organization that was called the St. Cloud Community Arts Council.

Vos: The St. Cloud Community Arts Council, which really, kind of worked with artists within the community to really support artists in the community.

Tennant: Yes, they actually started this organization to get to know the artists of the community, and to help them, support them. And this started to happen.

Vos: So, you sat on that St. Cloud Community Arts Council, you were a member of that.

Tennant: Yes, I was asked to be on the board. So I was. I said what can I do to do a good job? By being on the board I was assigned to find out as many as I could out of the artist and crafters that existed in St. Cloud.

Vos: In the St. Cloud area. You would even reach outside of St. Cloud proper, Sauk Rapids, Sartell, out to Foley, Princeton, and Cold Spring. So, it really was the greater St. Cloud area.

Tennant: It was. I drove all over.

Vos: So you would drive around, and look for artists?

Tennant: Well, I would have help from different friends so I would know where I was going, which helped a lot. Then once I would contact the artist then I would ask their help in letting me know where I could locate other artists. So it started to work for me--it started to snowball.

Vos: Well, I also would guess that had met some of the water colorists and the acrylic artists just through, well, someone very close to you who happened to frame artwork?

Tennant: Oh that's right. I did get a lot of them from my husband. My husband is a framer--has a frame shop. I did get a lot of artist through the shop.

Vos: In fact John, still frames, and we were just looking outside of our recording studio here. Some of his latest work he had just done some work for KVSC, which is the studio that we're in today.

Tennant: That's right.

Vos: So, Arlene Helgeson, and Mary Reilly, had asked you to help, kind of organize, artists and then, all of the sudden there became this event that had the Minnesota Orchestra. So, they were kind of in charge of the music, we are going to bring the orchestra to town, can you find some artists that could be at that event?

Tennant: Right, I just asked Arlene and Mary, I said, "Now that you're bringing the orchestra in, what if I had a few artists and had like an art fair?" They said, "Sure go ahead but you have to do the work." So I did (both laugh).

Vos: How many artists do you think was at that first Lemonade Concert and Art Fair? And we're talking July 9, 1974. Do you even remember?

Tennant: I probably cannot say it exactly, but I know that it wouldn't have been more than fifteen.

Vos: Okay, so somewhere around ten to maybe fifteen. I'm going to say thirteen, it's about midpoint.

Tennant: Okay.

Vos: Now, here's I think, a fascinating part of this tradition, Ginny, that you are so much a part of. You had one of the artists who was at that first art fair back in 1974, has never missed one.

Tennant: That's right, until, well, she came--

Vos: Well, I'm thinking about Bob Trisko.

Tennant:--Oh, Trisko. Now Trisko has been here for every art fair. He's very supportive of wanting to give back to the community for the way that they have given to him. So, yes, he has been for forty-one years.

Vos: Bob Trisko's jewelry is so unique.

Tennant: Yes.

Vos: Very unique designs, because he, well, he says they're almost like mathematical equations, his pieces of art. But you actually asked Bob to be at that first art fair?

Tennant: Yes, he was a teacher at South Junior High here in St. Cloud with this beautiful long blonde ponytail, and children absolutely adored him. He made rings out of horseshoe nails at that time and everybody loved him. Now he's known nationwide for his beautiful jewelry. But I went

over very, very scared to ask him if he would want to come to the art fair. He was just so nice and receptive and he said, “Yes.” So, he’s here every year.

Vos: So, let that be a lesson to all of us, never be afraid to at least ask.

Tennant: That’s right. I will never regret it. It was wonderful that I did it.

Vos: Then you mentioned that there was one other artist that this year they were not for the first time. So, for forty years, the Nerons.

Tennant: That was the Nerons with their wonderful pottery. They are, I’m going to say “retired” now. They couldn’t come this year, and I will miss them just terribly much. Their home is in Sartell.

Vos: And they do pottery and painting.

Tennant: Yes, pottery and painting.

Vos: But they had been at forty of the art fairs. So, now today, Ginny, so you’ve seen it kind of grow, multiply, over the years. Now you’re over two hundred artists. I know some years you’ve almost reached three hundred artists. How do you make that happen?

Tennant: Well, right from the beginning I knew that I had to drive around to the various art fairs like in Little Falls, Duluth, then Brainerd, and Minneapolis and I collected cards. I mailed out to them and I got quite a few back that did come to the art fair--I still do that. I may not go to as many as I used to but I still get new people every year. It’s always over two hundred.

Vos: Would you ever go larger than three hundred? Because there are some art fairs out there, Ginny, that are five hundred, seven hundred artists.

Tennant: You know, I've said I didn't want to go beyond three hundred, but I think I have some helpers over here at the university that might think differently. I've got to have a talk with them (Vos laughs).

Vos: But do you feel like three hundred, is kind of the maximum, because of area that we have? You like to put the artist's under trees, in grassy hills, knolls, along the sidewalks. So, you're looking always, to protect the flowerbeds (Vos laughs). And then for them to be strategically placed. I think one time you mentioned that people get overwhelmed when there is more than three hundred artists.

Tennant: They do.

Vos: That that's a lot of information to take in and observe. So, three hundred seems like kind of the maximum, huh?

Tennant: It does. I've heard people say, when we were close to three hundred, there were a lot of people that thought it was a bit much. If we would go past three hundred, we're going to lose the charm of the university campus, which is so important because so many of the artists say it's the most beautiful place they go to be a crafter and set up their booths.

Vos: So, most artists would say, their venues are usually parking lots, asphalt, gravel. Here we provide because of the beauty of the campus--the layout of the campus. They have beautiful oak trees to shade them, grass, and sidewalk.

Tennant: Right, and convenient facilities for food and restrooms. Like you just said, Margaret, the trees, and the grass, the flowers. So, we are a unique art fair and I personally think we should stay like that and not go over three hundred, because it satisfies a large amount of people who are

very, very happy with the art fair and the artists comeback because they love it and I think they would hesitate to come back if it got too big.

Vos: I read somewhere that the Lemonade Concert Art Fair, is the largest one day art fair in the upper Midwest. And that's because most of the art fairs that people would go to would be a two day, three day, four day art fair. Why just one day?

Tennant: You know, I don't know if I know how to answer that. We started this and people used to say, "Why on a Thursday? Why a one day?" But it worked, it just worked. So, we've kept it that way. People even ask off for their jobs and they mark it down on their calendar and then they don't have to work that day (Vos laughs). So they can come to the art fair.

Vos: This is the meeting place for families, for people to get together. I know that you've mentioned this in other conversations that we've had that, even though it's just a one day art fair, you start loading in artists actually at what, six in the morning?

Tennant: Oh easily six.

Vos: Maybe even a five-thirty.

Tennant: Yes even at five-thirty.

Vos: The art fair begins at eleven o' clock?

Tennant: Yes.

Vos: Then the concert is at eight o'clock that evening, right?

Tennant: Yes.

Vos: But they will say that even though it's just a one day art fair, they do very well.

Tennant: Oh, they do. Even this last show or art fair, it rained at about five o'clock I think it was, and the artist I went around--I always check with all of them. They said it was one of their best shows ever, and if it wouldn't have rained, they would have set a record. So, at the forty-first art fair, when they say that, you know you've done something right.

Vos: Let's talk about weather. I mean, it is a rain or shine event. Certainly with the orchestra because we've had the Minnesota Orchestra and then for the last fifteen years or so it's been the St. Cloud Symphony Orchestra. So, they always need a rain site? Right?

Tennant: Always, always.

Vos: Violins do not manage rain very well. So, we always put them at Ritsche auditorium now for their concert. But, in the beginning, you actually had a rain site for your artists?

Tennant: Yes, we did. We had to go in two different years, in Halenbeck, one time up in the balcony and another time down on the floor in the field house. Miracles, it worked. Somehow we got them all in there, and it worked and they were happy. And we haven't had to do it since.

Vos: And one of the other reasons that you probably can't even think about offering a rain site, is because it has now grown. So, I think back in those early years you might have hit a hundred artists, and you could handle a hundred.

Tennant: That's right.

Vos: There's no way you could handle two hundred, certainly you could not handle three hundred artists.

Tennant: No.

Vos: Do you think also the artist setup has change over the years? That the artist tend to bring their own canopies? Their protective--

Tennant: Margaret, the first years, you could count on one hand the artists that would have a canopy. Now, you can't hardly find one that doesn't have a canopy. And they're very loyal, they'll stick around as long as they can and they'll pull down the sides of their canopy until they know that it's just going to keep on raining. So, then they pack up and they go.

Vos: And those potters, they probably don't mind the rain.

Tennant: No they don't mind (laughs). It can rain on the pottery and they don't mind.

Vos: But not the water colorist?

Tennant: No, nope. They'd lose their mind. Water colorists would go crazy. They have to get protection as soon as they can, and they do. They are all very efficient and very good at what they do.

Vos: So, there are some estimates that would say, your first Lemonade Concert and Art Fair back in 1974, attracted up to a thousand people. This last year in June 2014, the estimates are close to fourteen thousand people.

Tennant: Yes (laughs). Quite a change.

Vos: Some great growth there. I don't think it just automatically happens, Ginny, I think, when people come to the Lemonade Art Fair, they come, because they know there is something for everyone.

Tennant: That's right. Like I said, our art fair is unique, it's a semi juried show--

Vos: And what do you mean by that?

Tennant: Well, it can't be a completely juried show, it has to be--our fear for everybody, including children, and even though I try as hard as I can that everything is handcrafted. There's things for everybody. Like I said, even for children. It has to stay that way. I require pictures and try my best to keep it all handcrafted.

Vos: So that Ginny's standard is that it's handcrafted first and foremost. It does not have to be, a famous artist to have that work of art. It may be on the side of craft?

Tennant: Right.

Vos: Which is very appealing to children, that they find some pieces of art. And that idea of thinking about children starting to appreciate and enjoy art, also carries over to the orchestra performing.

Tennant: That's right. Yes, yeah.

Vos: So, the whole day is meant for family?

Tennant: Oh, it is really. And there's a children's area, we can't forget that. A very well ran children's area where they can make crafts and do artistic things. So, that's another part of our Lemonade Art Fair that is very special.

Vos: So kind of an educational component

Tennant: Yes, yes.

Vos: And you work with the Paramount Art Group to oversee that, you know, they throw pots, they paint, they make things--and its children. I think they're packed busy, from the time they open at eleven, until they close down at about six o'clock in the evening. So, that educational part, is a part of the mission vision?

Tennant: Yes. And actually, Margaret, it is all really basically done by the people at the Paramount. They really set it up and run it and they do a fabulous job. We'd have to really contribute the success of this children's area to these wonderful artistic people at the Paramount.

Vos: And I think you call it the Little Lemons.

Tennant: Yes, the Little Lemons, yes.

Vos: You know, Ginny, I think if we just did the simple math, you've seen thousands and thousands of artists. But are there any artist that are memorable over the years?

Tennant: You know, there's been so many I can't pick out one for one year because it wouldn't be fair. There's been, yes every once in a while I do get an undesirable when in. But basically not, and there's so many that contribute to the art fair that I really cannot pick out one that was just above and beyond the rest of them.

Vos: How about maybe challenging? Have there been any artists that have kind of challenged your--

Tennant: Oh yes! (Vos laughs).

Vos: Too many stories to tell?

Tennant: You know, they'll argue with me sometimes that all their things are handcrafted and I know they're not. I have even found labels on things that would say, made in someplace like China or something. So it isn't always easy, but basically those two hundred and some artists and crafters, they're there, and they're just representing handcrafted things that they've worked very, very hard on.

Vos: And some of your handcrafting actually happens right there, during the art fair.

Tennant: Yes, yes.

Vos: You had a gentleman, I believe, that did willow furniture, or furniture out of twigs.

Tennant: Yes, yes. And one year there was a gentleman that brought trees.

Vos: The whole tree?

Tennant: Yeah, they drug in trees and he made furniture, there's been some interesting ones.

The jewelry people will create jewelry right that day and a lot of the times they'll create jewelry that children can buy. And the children get very excited because they can pick something up for their mom and they love that. Years and years ago when it first started, leather was so popular. Now, I might have like two leather people.

Vos: So like belts, and wallets, and purses and that type of leather making?

Tennant: Right. It has trends, it will go to pottery, it'll go to jewelry, and then the leather comes back.

Vos: So, this last year, what do you feel you had a lot of? That really you hadn't seen before?

Tennant: Let's see, I'm thinking that there was a lot of wood--creative items of wood, even canoes. I felt that the art fair had some wonderful, wonderful creative wood products last year, and were well received. Of course, we had a good number of pottery, lots of jewelry--beautiful jewelry, outstanding. There are some people that create the most beautiful jewelry you can't find it any place else.

Vos: So really, coming to that art fair is what some people would say, I do all my shopping for the next year. I take care of birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays--

Tennant: Christmas, and they really do, and they talk about it. I can hear them and they get unusual things at the art fair. They're not just your run of the mill. They're different and beautiful.

Vos: And you have also, I think, every year, opened to new artists. You're always opened to new artists, you are looking for new artists. But my guess is, every year there's one, two, maybe three artist that might never have done an art fair before, and Lemonade is their first.

Tennant: Yes. They'll put on their application, "Ginny, please help. We are first time entries into the art fair. So, please help." So, I write them a letter, and tell them just exactly how to drive up and unload and then I'll let them know with the map where their parking is, and they'll be shown their set-up space. So, they receive help, I always make sure they get help.

Vos: That personal touch, Ginny, that you give each and every artist, is also one of those signature items, you know--it's the Ginny touch. Because not only do you write notes to the artist, but they write back to you.

Tennant: They do, yes. Yes, there's some artists that there's been notes every year and sometimes we write, how many moons have passed you know, (laughs) and we're still writing down things. I try really, really hard to talk to each one of them during the day. I go around and welcome the new ones, and say hello to the old timers.

Vos: Kind of do a check-in, a Ginny check-in.

Tennant: Yes, right. I try to do that, because without them, we wouldn't have this special event if it wasn't for those artists and crafters. They make up our event, we need them.

Vos: So, you work actually, never stops.

Tennant: No it doesn't, no.

Vos: Because as soon as the Lemonade Concert and Art Fair is over, that evening, all of you get together

Tennant: Oh, yeah (laughs) yes.

Vos: And you have your first really informal meeting, but it's really that check in. What worked? What went well? What do we need to think about for next year?

Tennant: Yes it is. There's so many people that contribute, like at the check-in--there's six check-ins.

Vos: Six check-in points?

Tennant: Points, where the artist drive up, where I assign them close to parking lots. And we have people, mostly university people, volunteering and they take care of the check-in spots. Even my daughters help do that. Then, of course, the university crew, the landscaping people,

it's always like the campus is beautiful. The grass is cut, the flowers, there aren't any weeds--it's perfect. And I mean this is all the university people that do this.

Vos: Dave Lee is our head of grounds, and you and Dave probably have had many conversations over the years, down to which branch needed to be trimmed, right?

Tennant: Yeah we'd walk, and still to this day, they just tell me to tell them if there's a tree that needs trimming and if I find a branch that's hanging down to low that will hit the canopies or obstruct the artist. I just let them know and they're always right there. There's been many a branches cut down over these forty-one years.

Vos: But no trees?

Tennant: No trees, no. The storm took out some trees that made me sad. I mean (laughs) I wish they were back to trim off a branch but they are absolutely magnificent.

Vos: But your relationship with the grounds crew is very critical because, we also have underground irrigation. So you know exactly where an artist can or cannot put a stake.

Tennant: Right, it's on their application, do not stake down because of breaking a water line. They're all good about that, they use weights on their canopies so they don't stake down.

Vos: So, Ginny, as you think back over forty-one years of doing this event, are there words of wisdom or if someone was listening to us and was thinking, you know what, our community could be well served to have our version of Lemonade Concert and Art Fair. What kind of advice would you give? How do you start something like this?

Tennant: First, you have to really want to do it and really love doing it.

Vos: So there's that passion of, and commitment to the arts?

Tennant: Yes.

Vos: Because you have been doing this as a volunteer?

Tennant: Yes.

Vos: Because you're pretty passionate about the arts.

Tennant: Yes, and even though I'm not artistic--I can't draw or do anything. But I sure love it all and I wanted to do it. That's why each year, I still want to do it, you know. It's very, very rewarding to see--you feel like you're really doing something good when you see all the people that attend this event, and come to listen to the music at night. When you see that, it's very rewarding. And eating the food, you know, provided by the university, it's just really a good thing. And they look forward to it.

Vos: So, passion of the volunteers.

Tennant: Yes, you have to want to do it, and do it with care and love. You have to. And you have to stay patient, and you have to be nice, even if someone isn't nice to you. You just got to stay nice back to them, and you have to do it that way.

Vos: Well, that lemonade day my guess, is a very long day for all volunteers, especially, though, for you.

Tennant: Yes.

Vos: What time do you arrive on campus on that day?

Tennant: I usually come at four.

Vos: Four o' clock in the morning?

Tennant: Four o' clock. And I have to say right at four there isn't any artist or crafter there yet, but by five, you're going to have one or two, and then now a few set up the night before. So, they might come early about five and just get their place, you know, all ready to go.

Vos: And you want to be there.

Tennant: And I want to be there. I want to be there when any activity--and I'm there the evening before when they're setting up the night before. I'm there on the campus.

Vos: You don't sleep on campus though despite the rumors?

Tennant: No, I go home about ten because it gets dark and they're not setting up anymore. But I am here when they are setting up the night before, to greet them.

Vos: Then the day probably goes till ten o'clock at night, if not ten-thirty and then you have your wrap up meeting. So, maybe you'll get home about midnight, or one o'clock in the morning.

Tennant: Right, that's true, that's true.

Vos: So, almost a twenty-four hour day?

Tennant: Yeah, that's true. And I usually just fall down on the couch and go to sleep (laughs).
But happy, though, happy sleep, happy tired sleep.

Vos: So, be passionate, find good partners, be willing to be nice even on days you probably aren't being treated the same way.

Tennant: Yes, and I never have been sorry, not one year. I always look forward to the next year. It's been a wonderful thing in my life, and a marvelous experience working with the university. We are very fortunate to have the university in our community.

Vos: And I think the university would say the same about you and the other volunteers. Ginny, from the community, who because they are passionate about art, and know that art is a very vibrant part of the community, it's really a wonderful partnership.

Tennant: It is really, and, you know, I was so glad that forty-two years ago that, it happened. It's just that everything fell in place by these two lovely women getting the music, just working so hard, getting the orchestra here, and me just surprisingly asking to do an art fair. Never dreaming that in forty-one years, I'd just did forty-one of them. I'm just very thankful and grateful that it happened.

Vos: So, Ginny, I can't help but think forward to the forty-fifth, or the fiftieth. If money was not an issue, if you didn't have to worry about raising the funds. What would the day be like for either our forty-fifth or our fiftieth art fair? Don't worry about funds, don't worry about what the budget can manage. What would you want to see here on our campus?

Tennant: Well, just the same, because what is happening every year, is just almost perfect. I mean, yes, sure, there's things that don't always go right, but not much. Almost everything is just taken care of by special people. Just like this year, the sidewalk exploded where the music and the chairs were supposed to be and the people would sit down.

Vos: It didn't actually explode, but kind of. A major water main did explode, which all of the sudden there was water on the mall, and that was the day before the event.

Tennant: Yes.

Vos: So, they worked all night long until, I think, seven o'clock in the morning. The semis came in and filled it back in and by ten o'clock, the mall didn't look like anything had happened.

Tennant: Yes, that's right. They were out there immediately, and the pipe, like you said, Margaret, was a pipe that had broken or exploded. But then they had to break the concrete up to get to the pipe.

Vos: They had to dig down I think to twelve feet to replace that main.

Tennant: Yes, but it was done. It was done, like they worked through the night so that when people came for art fair, the artists came to unload and check in, they would never know it was all flat and just beautifully done.

Vos: So, that's where that partnership comes in, Ginny, because no one person can do an art fair of this magnitude.

Tennant: Oh no, no.

Vos: That it really takes that buy in of our university, everyone.

Tennant: Yes, sure, I get the artists and the crafters, yes. I get all of the artists and crafters, but I could never, ever have an art fair if it wasn't for these people, and the university, and the campus being ready, and the buildings are open, and I think people in all of the buildings were ready to do any kind of help or like that crew that fixed that sidewalk. It was done, they worked through the night. They wouldn't have done it any other way. It had to be ready for the art fair, and I know that without the campus I could never do what I do.

Vos: What a wonderful partnership.

Tennant: Yes, yes.

Vos: I started out talking about it is one of our signature events. We have our community, looks forward to coming to campus, our alums look forward to coming back to campus, our students and employees, faculty, and staff. All help do whatever they can to volunteer. But I do have to come back again, Ginny, to your commitment, and to really thank you, for not only sharing the story, but for already planning the forty-second.

Tennant: Oh, you're so welcome. I'm so fortunate that I've had this in my life, and it's filled my heart with great chi, and I'm looking forward to the forty-second year already and it's going to be the best ever.

Vos: Thanks, Ginny

Tennant: You're welcome. Thank you, Margaret.