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Interview with Ellen Gilliam

Ellen Gilliam

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Interviewer: Catherine Fisher
Interviewee: Ellen Gilliam
Makers@PPL, Portland, Maine
4.25.2015

CF: We are here at the PPL with Ellen Gilliam, and Ellen, you have shared with me that you come from a large family of makers. Most of your family members still make in some way.

EG: Yeah, that's true. Really generations of makers and I don't think anybody would call themselves a maker. It's just kind of in our DNA. Somebody's always making something. My uncles, my mother's brothers, were carpenters and they had a business together. Their father worked on the Baltimore and Ohio railroad and in the 1920s and 30s, as a part-time job to support eight children, he hand-painted billboards. I think in those days everybody was kind of a maker because they had to make a lot of their own stuff. But in terms of having interests and skills and talent for creation, it's always been part of our family DNA. My brother and sister are both ceramic artists, my other brother teaches music. One of my brothers needed to make some money when he got out of college, and because he was so good with his hands, he wanted to figure out some way to make money with his hands. He went to school and became a dental technician to make teeth, and soon figured out he really hated making teeth. In our family, everybody does something with their hands.

CF: And how about you?

EG: And me? I'm kind of the – I don't know – you'd call it the outlier. I have a tremendous interest in making. I've always sewn and I knit and I was a printmaker. I'm always putting something together. Last night, I was mending all the holes in my socks. I make the socks and then if they wear out, I mend the holes in them. It's just something we do. I honestly can't sit still without having something in my hands that I'm interacting with, that I'm making. Otherwise, I'm just miserable. I was sick last week with a stomach virus and I knew I was sick because I wasn't making something. I just kind of sat like a blob and thought, This is so not right.

CF: Where do you usually make things? Do you have a dedicated space?

EG: I make things all over my house. I live in a small condo. I moved to Maine from Massachusetts after being laid off from a high-tech computer company after 15 years. I had a lot of personal transitions and tragedies that occurred that made me want to move away from Massachusetts, start over fresh someplace, so I chose the midcoast of Maine. With my severance package, I bought an old farmhouse on the water that was falling apart. I had \$50,000 and I had a choice—I could either do what was practical and raze that house, put a

new foundation under it because it was rotten and falling apart, or I could indulge my dream and build a studio.

I really wanted to be a printmaker. I'd worked hard, taking classes at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, and it was just my dream to be a printmaker. So I hired a carpenter, had the foundation poured, and built the studio. It turned out that it was not sustainable for me because I was poor—I had no money! I had put all my eggs in this basket, and I was under-employed 'cause you know, it's hard to find jobs in Maine. Anyway, long story, but I never actually got to create in that studio. I had to sell the place and move. I got a job in Lewiston and then in Portland, so now I'm here. I still kind of, in my imagination, make things in that studio. It's like my imaginary workspace, so wherever I am I kind of envision that I'm working in that studio. It was 2 stories—the upstairs was for painting and the downstairs was for printmaking and you know, it's crazy, but I work in my imaginary space.

CF: But in this way, it exists.

EG: Yes. It totally exists.

CF: Was it a creative process in itself to make the studio?

EG: Oh, totally. Designing it, choosing materials, figuring out how it was going to work. It was a beautiful space. Unfinished in the end, but wonderful.

CF: Now you are here in Portland and you make in your condo space. Are you engaged with others in making at all?

EG: I seem to be drawn to people who make things. I work for the Portland Public Library and I always say I'm sort of a right-brain person in a left-brain world. I work with words and I'm an organizer. I was a systems analyst at one point in my career in the computer industry, in a library setting—that's been sort of the practical way I've supported myself and raised my family as a single mom. But I'm a right brain person, so I'm always looking for ways to indulge that—ways to go into that space, that patterning dimension. I love people who are making things—I gravitate towards other people who are making things. I, probably like all creators, regret that I don't do more. There's only so much time in the day. But whenever I have a chance, you know, I'm always looking for a way to make something.

CF: You mentioned you're a mom. Are your children creative too?

EG: I have two daughters. They're both grown and have young families. One of them is a radio producer in Boston and the other one's an English teacher in France. They both have an interest in making. I would say the younger of the two, in Boston, hews a little closer to

some of my ways of doing things, but they're both operating in a more practical realm, know what I mean? They make food, but they're not really making things the way that I do. But you know, I think they probably will at some point. It's just so much a part of who we are. I'm going down to North Carolina to visit my mom who's elderly and my family who all lives there. My sister is an occupation therapist. I have a brother who's an occupational therapist too. Part of the reason they do that is because they use their hands—they teach people how to rehabilitate their physical selves so they can do the activities of daily living. It's a perfect thing for a maker.

It's very creative. They have to be creative in coming up with solutions to help people manage their worlds. My sister just created a pottery studio for herself and I'm dying to see it. I'm really excited. She was sending me text messages and photographs, constantly. We do this with each other all the time. This is what I'm doing. This is what I'm making. This is what I'm working on.

CF: So you're in conversation—creative conversation—with her.

EG: Pretty much all the time, yeah.

CF: Do you find that that feeds you?

EG: It totally feeds me. A number of years ago, I was a single mom trying to keep body and soul together and raise my kids and again, the practical aspects of living took up so much time. But I started taking a painting class, a watercolor class, and I was really frustrated in the beginning because I felt stumped—I couldn't make a mark. The teacher helped to open that up a little bit. The first thing that I wanted to paint was a little Japanese court doll that my sister had sent me. I guess it's a traditional thing in Japan that they model little figures after the members of the imperial court, and one day a year all the girls would play with their court dolls. My sister found one at an antique sale and I just loved that little doll, in her kimono, her white make-up, and I painted her. It was the first thing I did that I was proud of. I sent it to my sister and was kind of shy about it, thinking, I'm not the artist in the family; everyone else is an artist in this family. I'm just a schlump who works for a living. Not that they don't work, but their lives are built more around making than mine. She wrote me back and said, "Don't be ridiculous. You are the wind beneath my wings. You're the person that inspired me to do the stuff that I do." I feel sort of weepy just talking about it! It felt really good to know that even during that time when I couldn't be hands-on, I had a role in encouraging her, and in encouraging my brother who was also a ceramic artist. It just felt good to realize, okay, it's part of my DNA, too; we're all doing this. She and I continue that back and forth.

CF: It does matter when people really see you as a creative person, as an artist, when you can't see yourself that way sometimes.

EG: Well, what it's done for me is to allow me to see that everybody is a maker and that the barriers we all have around us are self-created. We don't believe in our abilities. All you have to do is make a mark. Everybody makes their own mark. Nobody's mark is identical to anybody else's mark and therefore we are, by definition, creators. That's been hugely liberating for me as I've gotten older, and I've been able to help other people understand that, too. You can do it.

CF: Thank you! It's so hopeful, so fun. That's what this day is about.

EG: I love it. The best thing in the world is to see kids jumping in and doing their thing.

CF: And that's happening here today.

EG: That's happening here. Absolutely.

CF: Thank you so much, Ellen.

EG: You're welcome.