

KENTUCKY FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN

INTERVIEW WITH: Wren Smith

CONDUCTED BY: Joan Brannon

ASSISTANTS: Carol Bolton, Ian Weber

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JOAN BRANNON: Alright, so if you'll do that whole long speech.

WREN SMITH: I'm Wren Smith and I'm at Hopscotch House, which is 8221 Wolfpen Branch Road, in Prospect, Kentucky, and I'm being interviewed today by Joan Brannon, and with assistance from Carol Bruner?

CAROL BOLTON: Bolton

WS: Bolton! Carol Bolton, and Eric?

JB: Ian Weber.

WS: Ian Weber! Oh, boy.

JB: That was great! And, let's say also the date and time.

WS: Okay, and it is April the 6th and I think its about 3:45, something like that.

JB: Okay. Alright! Well, first of all, Wren, thank you so much for doing this. We're very excited.

WS: It's my pleasure! I'm delighted to be asked.

JB: So I have a series of questions, sort of in different categories or time periods of your life. We want to know primarily about your work with Kentucky Foundation and the impact of

that work and community. But we want a little bit about who you are. So, will you first say your full name, and then where did you grow up?

WS: Well, my full name is Patricia Annette Smith, but I never felt like a Patricia or an Annette. <laughter> So, Wren is a nickname and everyone calls me Wren. And I grew up in Shelbyville, a small town not far from here, and feel lucky to have had small town, rural experiences, I think lent themselves well to me being comfortable, and enjoying sort of reconnecting with that life.

JB: Alright, what were your parents names, and what did they do?

WS: My parents were Mary and Morris Smith, and they, you they were just, they did all kinds of things. They worked very hard, so I saw people who were really working hard to take care of a family of four, and juggling different jobs. My mom at one time worked at the drive-in theater, and my dad worked at Kroger's, and later on they became — my mom became an offset camera technician and my dad became an offset pressman. But I have memories of them just always working, and always working hard. But somehow or another finding time to take us camping. And that was hugely important, the opportunity to get out and be out in the woods and on the lakes and so forth when I was young. And I'm very grateful for those opportunities. I was my dad's fishing buddy, so being out with him and just watching all the things happening around me was a huge influence. So, I feel very grateful.

JB: Alright! So, I was asking, my next question is what role did art-making play in your development? But also, along with that, will you talk a little bit more about what you were just saying? How did just being nature with your family play a role in your development?

WS: I think, as far as any kind of artistic expression, it would have come from the fact that, even though I had two sisters and a brother, I liked to hang out, just take walks and explore by myself a lot. So, I think the natural world just sort of inspired a desire to create and play and, you know I was always making little dens and houses and nests in the woods. And noticing things, being inspired to put things together in odd ways and, so I played lot, I mean I played with my hands a lot as a child, and wondered and experienced and made lots of messes and got dirty, and all that. So I did a lot of that when I was a kid. And I think that influenced my desire to continue to create things, even though I didn't have formal art training. In fact, I would say I was rather discouraged in high school, and even in grade school. You know if you can't draw, if you don't consider yourself someone who has artistic ability to draw then a lot of times you're just sort of dismissed as, "probably no talent there." So, I didn't get a lot of encouragement from that end of things, other than, fourth grade teacher, fourth and fifth grade teachers, I think, kind of appreciated creativity and seemed to always allow me opportunities to experience and play with new media and stuff. So, fourth and fifth grade was a little exception to that.

JB: And so what's your artwork now?

WS: Well now, I still dabble. I am a committed dabbler, and I'm primarily with natural materials. I like dabbling with making little small figurines, which I started making when I was at Hopscotch House, out of seed pods and things. Some people call them fairies. Sometimes I worry a little bit that that makes me seem more fey than I actually am, but, maybe that's a good thing too. So I still like making those little small creatures out of natural materials, because I think they speak to the child part in me, and I think they speak to the child part in other people. They sort of come alive in the shadows, which is kind of a nice thing. Lately I've taken a real

interest in fabric arts, though I'm not good at it at all, 'cause they last a little than things made of natural materials. I'm probably somewhat inspired by the work of Lafta, and people that I met here at Hopscotch House. You know, some of the stuff that's still surrounding us, that were made by people who work with fabric.

JB: Did you say "fey" a minute ago?

WS: Yes, I did.

JB: What's that mean?

WS: That's kind of a word for, like overly mystical and airy fairy. That's kind of it. I think I have enough scientist in me to kind of be a little balanced there.

JB: Okay. So, how, when did you become involved with Hopscotch House, and how did you become involved with Hopscotch House?

WS: Well that's a long story. I don't know if you want to hear all that, but basically, I'll try to make it not as long as it could be. I had been invited to come and do a hike for a group that was staying at Hopscotch House. It would have been probably 1987 or '88 probably. The Unitarian Church was having a retreat here, and at that time I was a naturalist at Otter Creek Park, and they had heard that I did some really interesting programs. I did a program called a "soft walk," which is a quiet, listening kind of hike. And they had invited me to come and do that program for them, so I got to come up to the place and scout out the site ahead of time, and fell in love with it. There were more wildflowers in the woods here than I'd seen in just about any place in Kentucky. So, then I had the chance to do this program for this group that was on retreat, and what a special opportunity that was. You know, there was just a wonderful atmosphere for learning and sharing and exploring. And even though the program wasn't so

focused on art — it was more of a, I mean it wouldn't be considered a visual art, it was a little bit more performance art in the sense of the way the group came together in storytelling and sharing. And it just made a huge impact. So I decided I needed to get out here more, I needed an excuse. So I wrote my first grant ever. I wrote a grant to do a series of workshops called — gosh, I don't remember what it was called. But it was series of workshops on native and naturalized plants, and I actually got that grant. I didn't ask for much money, I just wanted an excuse to be out here doing what I loved. So, I got the grant and that put me out here doing workshops, and fell further in love with the place. And there weren't any gardens here, and I could see that little house across the way and nobody was living in it, and its like “yeah, I'll live right there, I'll get some gardens started.” I could just feel it. It just felt like something that ought to happen. So I started volunteering, actually, after my grant was over, and pretty soon they were asking me if I'd be interested. So I left my job at Otter Creek and said yes. So, I don't know whether it was creative visualization or just kind of sensing a rightness to things or a little bit of both, but, I just felt that it would be a good fit.

JB: So the Foundation was established, and then you saw yourself being here, and who exactly asked you to become a part? What was your title?

WS: At the time it was Manager-Naturalist. And at the time, there had been one writer's — book and writer's retreat had happened, one year before that. And it was run pretty much by people in the downtown office, Pat Buster, I think, Fred Smuck, and Sallie were all the staff at the Foundation at that time. And I probably worked most closely with Pat Buster, because she was the one who was scheduling retreats out here for people from the downtown office. So, there really was obviously a need for somebody to be here who was comfortable living here and

working with the groups as they got here. And so, and then Sallie came to one of the workshops that I did, so I got a chance to — she got a chance to see the work that I did, and I got a chance to talk with her a little bit. So I think we built up a nice rapport, and that allowed for exchanges of ideas and vision and so forth. But, the fact that this place was here and providing space for women to be creative was just a — a rather astounding find. And to feel like I had something to contribute to it was quite awesome.

JB: Okay lets talk about some more of those particulars, of your employment.

WS: Okay.

JB: Were you full-time or part-time?

WS: They hired me for a full-time position, because in order for me to leave Otter Creek, where I was, I would have to — I mean I couldn't leave a full-time position to come and take something part-time, as much as I would have liked to. I knew I had to be able to make a living and pay for whatever — pay bills and things like that. But, one of the things as a Manager-Naturalist that I remember finding incredibly wonderfully rewarding was that Sallie said that she wanted me to continue to be a naturalist here. She wanted me to get to know the place well, which — I mean, what a kind offer to be told, “we don't want you to be doing busywork. We want you to get to know the place, and create opportunities to share it with others.” And that suited my learning style, it suited my way of sharing with others to a tee. And it was an incredible gift. I mean, I was doing a lot with wild foods, and paper making, and so forth, so I was able to actually use some of my time for that. But when you're in a place like this, and you're given this incredible opportunity, you feel — or at least I felt — a lot of internal pressure, to do and be worthy of the opportunity. You know, to make it better. To do whatever I could. So

it was easy to just really give your whole being to being here, doing what you needed to do. But, still trying to maintain a little bit of the creative spirit within myself. And the fact that Sallie told me that, gave me that instruction. Every now and then I would remind myself that, “yes, it is okay to take a walk in the woods today on this beautiful day to see what is here. You don’t have to feel like you have to be at your desk the whole time, to be working.”

JB: Yeah, when you were at your desk, what were you doing?

WS: Sometimes it was just — I’m trying to think — I learned how to do email here. <laughter> Responding to applications for people to come and stay; thinking about gardens and ordering things for the garden; and drawing up little plans, and what needed to be in the studios, things like that. A lot of gardening. It felt really important to me at that time to establish gardens, and get people involved and a sense of ownership by maintaining those gardens. I felt like we could have people who used the place volunteer time to maintain it. So we had — I established “Weekly Weeders” so some volunteers who would come out every week and help weed the gardens. When we created the big moon garden that was a big bunch of people coming out to help make that happen and kind of redraw the plans. A lot of things kind of came up organically like that. It just felt important during my stay here. I think that there are so many ways to offer a retreat and space for people, but during my stay here it felt important to kind of let the land do some things I knew it could do, in ways that I felt like it could speak to people, when I was here, like gardens. The beautiful woods are here as well, so I think that that is a garden in itself.

JB: Talk us through something that we — you just mentioned, but we wouldn't really know if we didn't experience. For instance, the moon garden. Talk us through that process of developing and what was that day like? Who came? How many people?

WS: Well, in February — I believe it was in February — we had a garden warming celebration. Again, this is fifteen years ago, this is my memory. And we formed a big circle out there, right outside, and it happened to be that there were about forty people that showed up for this. I think there was people who'd gotten grants from the Foundation and so forty — and it was a kind of a chilly day, I remember that — and we all formed a big circle and we did some sort of celebration — I can't remember — I mean some sort of little simple ritual that I came up with — I don't remember what it was — in which collectively people put good intention on creating a garden there. The idea of a moon garden was the fact that we knew that there would be people spending the nights out here, and we wanted it to reflect that kind of experience so that at night you would have the white flowers blooming, the silverness, and then of course the moon is obviously a wonderful feminine, female symbol. There was a group at the time that was meeting out here regularly — Minerva — and they often had full moon celebrations. A lot of that stuff was happening at that time — back in the eighties — there was a lot of the ecofeminism movement was very strong and we were kind of in the middle of all of that, all those kinds of things that were happening. You know, people kind of stretching out of the more patriarchal religions and looking and trying to find something a little different, a different kind of message. So, we weren't trying to establish any religion, but were trying to give people the space to have some freedom to explore whatever their spirituality was. And tried to that safely, in a way that would not be off putting to people who might be a little more traditional in their values. It was a



kind of a careful balancing. But the moon garden kind of allowed that, I think it kind of helped facilitate that because regardless of what your religious or spiritual beliefs are, I think it provided beauty both night and day. In the daytime there were pink and white and more colorful flowers.

JB: Why was important for <unclear> KFW to facilitate such an experience, or those experiences?

WS: I think it was because of the time, where people were at that time. I think that there was just a lot of people looking — especially women — looking for something that spoke to them in ways — allowed them to express and question — in ways that weren't being done outside. It was safe place to do it. It was being done, but I think it allowed some of that safety. And I think that there was quite a bit of art, it was more performance art in some of that. I think that that sense of safety and community, I think it was a real strong community builder, more than anything. It was also an experience with nature. Planting is an experience with nature. And I feel like Kentucky Foundation for Women — what's the word I'm looking for? It was just another doorway, another path, of the many that I think the Foundation is so good at offering.

JB: Do you think the Foundation offers paths that others don't?

WS: Yes, I do. And again, part of it is the sense of community and camaraderie, of taking care of each other, looking out for how to build each other up and help each other, to listen during troubled times. I mean, I'm sure you've experienced this a lot — I know I did — is that one of the reasons that I liked being able to take people on hikes and so forth, is that I think the natural world allows people, when people — they drive, and they drive out here, and they've had to work really hard to get that time and space away from maybe their families, and jobs, and all the demands of everyday life. And they're stressed, and they're tense and they come out here

and they're just like — they just barely got here, and you just start watching them relax and their shoulders softening. And pretty soon they're laying in the grass, and then they're talking, and they're being real, you know, they're being their authentic selves, and that's just a beautiful thing to watch. And I think people, when they're being their most authentic — and I personally believe the natural world is one way, those kinds of opportunities in the outdoors really promote that — those stories, the stories of who we are, they come out, and they provide a deep connection. So, I forget exactly the question you were asking, but part of it is these kinds of experience allow for the authentic self to give voice, and therefore people sharing their stories I think is empowering and helpful. And it was a beautiful part of my experience here, watching that, as I know it is for you. People would sometimes — I remember, people laughing, they were telling something really horrific that had happened to them, a couple of women were telling some really horrific childhood trauma stories, and next thing you know we've got a group of women lying in the floor laughing, holding their bellies and crying and laughing and rolling around on the floor because they had an opportunity to share together, and the kind of release that happens when the truth comes out. This had happened right after a really nice walk. You don't forget things like that.

JB: Who was coming out to the house then? And how often was it used?

WS: It was used quite a bit. We did the Wolfpen Writers Residency, I think the first couple of years maybe, and then we began to do these ecofeminist writers retreats. But it was also — I think that the vision expanded a little bit from being primarily a writers' retreat and primarily people who identified as strongly feminist or strongly artist and strong writers, I think that loosened up just a little bit perhaps to include — we have some people that worked in social

services, with the Center for Women and Families, I believe. One time, we had a group of women who were — I guess maybe that was the Center for Women and Families — and they came out here, and that was one of the groups I'll never forget because they ran from room to room, and were so excited because I'd put fresh flowers in all of the rooms, and they later, I got a letter talking about how they pretended were a family all living here together. So, it was used by lots of different groups, mostly artist groups, mostly writers, mostly women's groups, but sometimes groups that definitely did not necessarily call themselves feminist or artists, but really needed the space and the opportunity to share their stories. And usually there was a writer or someone invited to come and do some work so that they could explore their stories together. So it was used often. I did hikes on a regular basis and things, but it seems like it was used, it seems like I was, most every weekend there was something, or every other weekend, or three or four days. Then we began to do, it got where groups wanted to use the house, or people wanted to use the house that weren't a part of any group. So that's when we developed the — it was sort of — independent women could apply to use the space that was sort of shared space. And I would do a, like an orientation to the house, so a group of people who didn't know each other could co-habitate the house together for three or four days, or sometimes longer. I — what were these called? Individual retreats, or something like that. Maybe they're still, I think they might still be going on in some sense of the word. But, you know, try to give as much space as possible. Again, I think the primary function was to give women a chance to do their art, to write, but you have to kind of loosen those borders a little bit sometimes, because sometimes people don't know what they're capable of, don't know that they've got stories to write, and art to do. But if

you give them a space like this sometimes its uncovered. And that's a beautiful thing. So, I don't know if I answered your question very well, but —

JB: Yes, you did!

WS: Okay.

JB: Just a follow up on that, can you think of any names of groups? You mentioned one, but can you think of any more names of groups?

WS: Center for Women and Families, the Archdiocese had a program that did a lot with women. Hospice did some work out here, the hospice workers did some work out here. You know, they did retreat. Art groups — like, even I remember your girlfriend, it was a rock band, back in the late eighties and nineties. <unclear name?> was a part of that. They met out here. I've got, actually I have list, in that bag, of some of the groups I met the first year and the second year. Let's see, what else? Minerva met out here. We had a group called — there was a group — we did some special retreats on women and the land, which brought people from all over Kentucky to discuss and explore the relationship with the land. Its where I met people like Judy Sizemore, who I think was doing some work with New Opportunity School for Women. That became a connection for me to do some programs for New Opportunity School for Women, in Berea, representing Hopscotch House. So there was a quilting group called the Stitch Witchers, there was, I can't remember.

JB: That's great! Can you — do you remember more about the program where you met Judy?

WS: Judy would have been, I think she was in a program that involved some rural, you know, Redbird Mission maybe, they may have stayed here. I think it was called the Redbird

Mission. Does that ring a bell to you? I think that's — I just remember this awesome group from eastern Kentucky, and Judy Sizemore was in that group, and I think it was the Redbird Mission.

JB: Okay. So were you saying a minute ago that KFW sponsors a statewide thing that brought people together? Or it just happened and you were there?

WS: No, I proposed that we do it, because there were so many people out in the state, and it seemed like we got a lot of people from right in this area, Louisville, because they're close. But, you know, to try to expand out a little bit and knowing that there were rural Kentuckians that had strong connections with the land and strong stories to share. So we did a, I forget exactly, but I think it was called Women and the Land retreat. And Diane Cameron Lawrence was there, I think Crystal Wilkinson was there for that. I'm trying to remember who all else, but you know we ended up with a nice big, you know, thirty some-odd people for a daylong exploration of our connection with the land. And again I met some really awesome people out in the state that I — Barbara Napier. She's the one who has the bed and breakfast now, and a retreat, in Berea. I met her through all that.

JB: Okay. What can you tell us about the writers' colony?

WS: Well, let's see. The first one, the first one, in fact you have picture in the other room with some of the first — that was the first, it was my first big responsibility here. You know I arrived here I think in, I forget when I actually arrived here, it was in the spring of '90, or 1989, or the fall, or — I don't remember, I should remember that. But they were the first writers group that I — the first big responsibility I had. And it was a wonderful group. There was Sia McClanahan, now known as Sia White. And Christina McGrath, and Terry Jewel, and Barbara

Jones, and Marie Shepherd Williams. Those five people. And you know they are amazing people. I became friends with all of them, probably closer, I became closer and long term friends with Sia, Christina, and Marie Shepherd Williams. We became — Marie Shepherd Williams is a wonderful writer from Minnesota. And we became very good friends when she walked outside where I had a big water garden that I was digging out, and it was all full of mud, and she took off her shoes and stuck her feet in the mud and said “Oooh, great mud.” And I knew we would be friends. And we have. And she’s a wonderful writer. And I’ve kind of lost touch with Sia. Unfortunately Terry Jewel died, I think two years after her stay here at the house. So I never got to know her all that well. But really what a remarkable person she was. And Barbara Jones, up in New York, I’ve kind of lost touch with her, and Christina moved to Pennsylvania and I lost touch with her, but just watching people have the opportunity to work, and share their work, was just a remarkable thing, you know. They would invite me over for readings and to have the privilege of hearing new work, right off the press, people sharing it with each other, was just incredible. And there were some beautiful, beautiful sharing. I think they did, most of them did a public reading, as well. Which is something that I think was highly recommended that we do. They had great food catered, so they didn’t have to worry about food. Yes.

JB: What was the actual name of that? And how long did it last? What was the timing of that like?

WS: It had gone one year before I got here. So the first one would have been 1988. It would have been called the Wolfpen Writers’ Colony. And I think that was even before Hopscotch had the name Hopscotch. So I think the names may have gotten changed as Hopscotch became more the feature, besides the fact it was out here on the farm. But I believe it

was three years, I think. I did one more writers — you know, Wolfpen or whatever we called it — and I don't remember who those women were. But I remember the first, all the people in the first one. And then, actually it might have been that we changed it over to doing ecofeminist retreats after that, because that was such a big part of the dialogues, and it was just one of those things that was bubbling up to the surface a lot. So we had writers coming from, from all over, across the country, coming and participating in these ecofeminist — you know they would stay here and write. I actually initiated that, and I did that with a lot of naiveté. But it turned out to be a good thing, but it was also a high learning curve for me, or I guess that's the words I'm looking for, is that, you know, I think that I felt that having different women who think about ecofeminism in very different ways come together could be a really wonderful thing, and it was, but I think I was a little naive at how well they would all necessarily get along. I thought they would all just kind of sit around and talk and come to understandings, but it was intense. Even from across the field there, sometimes I could — if I wasn't over here when the evening discussions would begin, I could feel the energy, the current, radiating from Hopscotch House like I'd put my finger into a three-prong outlet. Because the conversations would be so intense. I think everyone always managed to be respectful in their disagreement, but sometimes they had to work through, bulks of reactionary responses to things. So, you know, if you've got someone like Lena Gupta, who was Hindu, and an African American — I think her name was Rebecca Soned, maybe? And you have Beth Brant, a Native American, and you have all these different voices coming together, and they're — and this New York woman who wrote *Eve* — I forget what that stood for, but she was a little pistol, and just a lot of interesting discussions. And they would share, you know, they would do a community event — one of them was down at the

Unitarian Church, where people would come in and hear what these people, who'd been invited from all over, would have to say. But I learned a lot, so I probably got more out of it than just about anybody, because I was trying to understand everybody, and I guess they all were too in their own way. Is that making sense?

JB: Yes! Absolutely. So, now the house is always used for women in Kentucky, people in Kentucky. But back then it was people from wherever?

WS: For awhile, yes. And I think later, that's part of the reason we stopped doing the other, was to focus more on giving Kentucky women that time and that space. That seemed to be really more in line with the Foundation's purpose anyway. I mean they, one of the reasons that the ecofeminists, when they came here, they were really requested to do part of a public program. Something in which the public — one here, usually it was two, one here and one in town — so that it would have a chance for a lot of people to participate in what these discussions were. But really, the need for time and space is just so great, that I think that is a really good move, to make it available to Kentucky women.

JB: Just one more question about the retreats with the ecofeminists. How long, what was the time period of the retreats?

WS: They were, I think that the minimum was probably maybe a week, maybe two. But they were big chunks of time, and probably the longest was a month. So that was — anywhere from a week to a month — and it might have been longer than that, but we blocked out several weeks for that. It wasn't just we blocked off a week, we blocked off several, and then some of them could come. There was a little overlap between some of the groups, which was also challenging. You know, you have a group that gets well-established and gets sort of a rhythm,



and then you get someone else coming in, I don't think that worked as well as asking people to come and be a part of an experience. I think we may have modified it after that, for the next one.

JB: What kind of budget conversations came up around that kind of programming?

WS: You know the good news was, is that we did not have a big budget. We managed to do the — mostly because when we stopped doing the big Wolfpen Writers' — that's when it was the *most* expensive, when all the foods were catered and things like that — that was a lot of expense there, and it seems like we did some modifications of that, and I don't remember how that went. We didn't pay them for being here, they were invited to stay and we must have — we must have taken care of their food, and made it good, decent food, but I think I do remember that that was the biggest expense, was the food, when you're having people coming in. The rest, I mean, we didn't — I don't know. I felt like we seemed to have managed really well. I've actually got — I do have some copies I made of some of those budgets back then. I should have taken at it look for you, because — yeah, I felt like we made a little money go a long way.

JB: Do you need to stop and have a break or anything?

WS: I'm good, thank you.

JB: Alright. This is all such good information. Can I ask you some more, like, specific questions about the grounds and the houses and that kind of thing?

WS: Uh-huh.

JB: So I want to talk about Hopscotch House, but before that, what about that manager's cottage? That's what we call it now.

WS: Uh-huh.

JB: What did it look like, and how did it become — how did it come to look the way it looks now?

WS: Okay, that — I'll have to show you some pictures. I'll have to show you pictures of what it looked like when I first moved into it, or first looked at it from across the field. It had, like, office furniture in it. It didn't look like — it was a little farmhouse that had its own appeal, a little metal roof. And then — so that was provided to me because they actually preferred to have somebody living on the farm. It had a lot of — you know physically it wasn't — structurally it had a lot of structural integrity issues over time, little things like plumbing, going south, falling down below. Things like that. I remember it had one bedroom. It was small, but it was just me, so I was not needing a whole lot. They had to paint the roof. I put my own stuff in there, furnished it, but didn't want the office furniture which seemed to be made of more laminated plastic, sticky kinds of stuff. So I furnished it, with probably secondhand stuff, but it at least felt warmer and real. And then the house began to have other issues, more structural issues. And then I fell in love, and had a partner, and the house was going to be too small as it was, to have — you couldn't cohabit there — so I was beginning to have to look at maybe moving offsite, because the house — as much as I loved it I loved it as it was, even with all of its sags and things like that. And Sally, very graciously, signed off for having it really — having it totally redone. And really more so than I would have needed, but I think she was making investments for the long future of the place. And it was a really generous thing, an incredible gift. I think she paid for it. The Foundation didn't pay for it, that I'm sure of. At that time I think it was still considered Sally's property over there. And paid for all the renovation for it. She had contracted — I'm trying to remember who it was — David Lauer was one of her

contractors that she had who did some of the oversight, and the builder was Mark — Hawkins I believe? Who wanted, who I think he was the one who suggested that it be black like the rest of the outbuildings here. Let's see what else. He — they discovered that there was a log house inside that, underneath, that was not visible behind all the plasterboards and the more artificial stuff, that there was a log house there. And I think that spurred them to do additional work and things like that. I — it wasn't too long after Sally did that nice renovation and everything when I decided to leave, so I'm glad that she did it for the next person coming in and it certainly made my time, my last time here at the house, it was more comfortable in some ways but the old house I was also extremely attached to in its own way. You just get used to certain things. But it was done with a generous spirit on Sally's part.

JB: Do you know how old the original house was?

WS: They made guesses that some of those logs might have been in the late 1700s, early 1800s, that log structure. So its *very* — that's some of the chatter about it that I overheard.

JB: Did they replace logs or restore them?

WS: They just — I think that they just restored the chinking in it. I don't think that they had to do a lot of replacing of the logs. They might've, I don't remember that. Does that help? That's my memory, as fuzzy as it might be.

JB: It does help. I've seen pictures of an old house on this farm that isn't here, and I thought it was that house, but now you've confirmed.

WS: I will show you pictures of it, and you'll see that its changed a lot. Its a lovely space, it really — it was a nice space to deal with, to be in during a time of transition. In fact, had the old place been it would have been harder for me to have left.

JB: Yeah. What about this house?

WS: Ah! I think it feels remarkably the same, and I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that it just has so much good energy in it, that that's really evident here. I was glad to see the ramp, the permanent ramp, built for the front. That's really nice. Big changes, I don't remember. We had to do some work in the studios, re-tweaking them a bit. The roof had to be — meeting with contractors was not one of my stronger suits. I never liked doing that, but it had to be done. The roof had to be repaired once — at least once — when I was here. Exterior painting had to be done once, at least, while I was here. I think interior, I think once. Its contract stuff. The outbuildings, sometimes the outbuildings were painted by myself and whoever volunteered to help. Insides — the inside stuff that you could get done.

JB: What do you know about the history of Hopscotch House?

WS: The history of this house?

JB: Uh-huh, how long has it been here?

WS: I don't know, but I think that they — what did they call it — a saltbox house originally? The two up, two — I really don't know much about it. I think it was a style that was — I'm going to be afraid to guess, but I think it was a style that was built a lot in the 1860s and so forth. And added on, like the sunroom was an add-on for sure.

JB: And then when you started working here, it was all here.

WS: It was all here, it was all — I didn't have to do anything, really. I mean, the house was pretty well furnished, it was in good shape. The studios needed some work, maybe, the following year they began to show wear and tear, and I think we took one building that had not

been a studio and we turned that into a studio, but other than that. Its nice that its obviously still loved and cared for.

JB: Do you think those tables and chairs were here when you were?

<Laughter>

WS: Yes! I was glad to see new couches, 'cause the other couches were really, really getting — the wear and tear was really bad on those. But yeah, we had the same table, the same chairs, and that shows a certain frugality, which I think is appreciated. The house, it makes it all just so comfortable and livable. People don't feel like they have to be so careful. You want people to be able to feel like its a home, not a showpiece.

JB: Okay. We've talked a lot about writers being here, and you mentioned performance artists, but will you tell us some more artists who came, or mention different art forms that people worked on?

WS: A lot of photographers did work here, came here and photographed all around. Kirsten Martin was one of them. I think she actually did some photography for Sally, documenting some of the early work, so that should be in the archives — Sally's archives, that should be there. A lot of clay work. We had a kiln there for awhile. But I know a lot of people who did — even primitive clay work — we did some pit firing. Jan Graves from Frankfort did some pit firing. And we did some of that with a group — we did an Elder Hostel, we did two Elder Hostel programs here. You remember the Elder Hostel programs? They were for senior citizens. They used to be all over the country. Elder Hostel programs were opportunities for senior citizens to basically get short courses, like going back to school. Only they weren't enrolled in a college, but they had this giant catalog full of classes that were these really

intensive learning opportunities. And so we did *Women and the Web of Life* here, one of the first Elder Hostels, it was an all women's Elder Hostel. And I remember Jan Graves came, and we did a pit firing of little clay figurines, these little goddesses in the pit fire. Phyllis Free brought her drums, and there was some drumming. So these women from all over the country who just came to this *Women and the Web of Life*. It seemed like most of the leaders of that were — I guess they were all Kentucky leaders, leading that. But it was kind of an experiment. We did it twice, and it was a good thing to be involved with on a — to kind of reach out a little bit, again, that broader circle of things. So performance art would have been a lot of — *Ars Femina*, there was a group that was doing very ancient music on ancient instruments, and I don't remember much about it, but it was a women's group of musicians that would come out here. Mostly writers, because the space was best for writers. We didn't have great big spaces for a lot of painting, but there were people that would use the barn studio sometimes for painting, and I'm trying to remember who some of those visual artists were. I guess visual artists who used fabric were here a lot. A lot of different quilting groups, *Stitch Witches* being one of them. Rebecca Siegel and Penny Sisto did work out here. I know there was lots more. I'll kick myself later 'cause I'll remember, I'll start remembering all kinds of things.

JB: That's a good list. Do you want to talk about some of the art that's hanging around the house?

WS: Well I like seeing some of the new pieces. I like seeing a lot of the paintings of *Hopscotch* by our local artists. And I like seeing some of the quilts that were here, still here, because I think they're a strong part of the history. People, without seeing Rebecca Siegel's — how does she pronounce her last name? — Rebecca Siegel's piece, the room would feel not like

the same room. Or Penny Sisto's work hanging in the other room. You just would expect to see that piece hanging here. Its part of the story of the house.

JB: Were these pieces here when you got here or did you —

WS: Yes, these were all here.

JB: And did you bring any in when you were here?

WS: Other than the little fairies that I left hanging all over the place, and the few photos that I think other people took of, like, the first writers colony — that's in the kitchen area — and so forth.

JB: Okay. Can we talk a little bit more about the administrative part of your work? I'm curious about how often you went downtown. Or did you go down there at all?

WS: Yes. At that time — I don't know if this is still the case, but people on staff were part of the board, which I think is unusual in a lot of situations. I don't know if that's still the case or not. But at that time were actually allowed a place on the board, which made sense, because you have certain insights that people who — if you're out here on the farm and experiencing the groups really directly, you can contribute a lot to those discussions about funding and what happens, or direction and things like that. And they included us — which was a wonderful opportunity for me, to be even in the grant selection process. They would have people who knew a lot more about visual arts than I did, and the performance arts, and all kinds of art. They were consultants that were hired to review the grants, and they would pull out a section, and bring them back, and show them to board, and talk about their favorites and why. And then we could ask questions. And I usually didn't make — even though we were allowed to kind of vote, in a sense, its like most of the questions that I would ask would be more about how

it fit in with the mission of the Foundation, more than about whether it was really great art or not, because I didn't feel like I was necessarily a person who could judge visual art in a fair way, but was trusting their judgement on that, but would ask questions about mission, and community, and encouragement, and things like that. So as far as how often I would go to the office, I would say, sometimes it might be every week, maybe once a week for awhile, and then maybe not be for a couple of months, for a special meeting. It may not be anything — if there was something that was going on that seemed to need meetings, you would meet and then — every now and then there would just be a meeting out here, which was nice.

JB: Who were on the staff and board at that time?

WS: At that time, it was Sally — when I first started working here Sally Bingham was still here, and still a physical presence here. She later was, even when she moved to Santa Fe, would come back for board meetings. But it was Pat Buster and Fred Smuck, and then later Ann Stewart Anderson, when she became the director. And then later Judy Jennings. But it was always a real small staff. But then it was a board that was always changing.

JB: So the staff was part of the board. Do you remember any other board members during that time?

WS: Uh-huh. Let's see. Mariah Cruz was a board member that I recall. Chris Havis, from Lexington. Mike White, from Louisville. Let's see, who else? Board members. Just drawing a blank there. But those are the ones that just popped into my mind, right now.

JB: Me!

WS: Oh, yeah, you! That's right! Sorry! Crystal, at one point in time. Thank you. Yes, Judy Jennings at one time was on the board, before she was director, and Nancy — Nancy, who's



the — oh, a wonderful visual artist from Cincinnati. I cannot think of her last name. You know who I'm talking about?

JB: I don't.

WS: Okay. Well, anyway.

JB: Nancy from Cincinnati. Okay.

WS: A visual artist from Cincinnati. Beautiful drawing.

JB: Hm, okay. And, let's see, what else shall we ask you? More about, just doing the work itself. We think a lot, and wonder a lot around the office, about the impact that's happening with KFW.

WS: Uh-huh.

JB: From the 1980s to now, what do you think about that?

WS: I think it had a huge impact. Like you, I was in the — had the wonderful fortune of witnessing that. I think — I've liked the fact that the Foundation, basically had three venues for helping people, women artists and writers. Primarily aimed at women making change through the arts. And that was grants — the money to do it — Hopscotch was the space to do it, and the Voice was the place that would publish your work. So those three were important, I think made a real strong presence. And I think sometimes people really underestimate the value of space. If you've got a little extra funding but you can't get away and have the space to actually be productive — a place that nurtures your spirit — then all the money in the world isn't going to help, much, unless it's enough money to buy you the space someplace. But witnessing everything from people who were coming out here to do serious art, to people who just begun to maybe experience a little bit of their own artistic self, watching huge changes — I think that this

place saves lives. I know that sounds like hyperbole, but I think if you've got people who are desperate enough to want to produce something of value for the community and all they keep hitting is their head up against the wall, then I think that's a really sad state for people to be in. And I think this place really rescued a lot of people who were in that space. And others, it just gave them the push to push through barriers. They may not have been so depressed or down spirited, but it gave them the extra oomph they needed to take it to a new level. And I watched that. People are always telling stories. We've all have our stacks of thank you's and emails, but — now at least its emails, I don't think we had much of that back then. A little bit. Just the stories, the things that people would tell you, about what it meant. You don't forget that. You feel really incredibly honored to be a part of that. So I think the value is huge. And not just Hopscotch House, but the whole work of the Foundation. Sometimes its also just affirmation. Getting a grant from the Foundation, to continue your work, is a huge affirmation of your efforts and your commitment. Again, if you were published in the *American Voice*, that's an

WSaffirmation, so anything that affirms. When people are awarded a space here, that is affirming to their story, and their value. So, I think its huge, and I'm incredibly grateful that Sally allowed me to be a part of the journey.

JB: So then by extension of all that, what do you think of impact that women have made throughout Kentucky?

WS: I think that they are stronger because of their time here at Hopscotch House, or with the grants that they've gotten, and I think they're more visible. I think they have more of a stage, more of a voice, more of a platform to share their work. I think they're empowered. And

empowered women are a dangerous lot. So I think its a good thing. And I think Sally would be proud of the work that gets done because she put her money where her mouth was.

JB: What are you proud of, from your time at KFW?

WS: I'm proud of the — I think I provided a unique vision for the time that I was here, that was right for my personal gifts. So I'm proud that I was here at the time that I was here. I felt like I had a chance to be a good listener for a lot of stories, and I'm very proud of that. I'm proud of my foolishness. I'm proud that I was foolish enough to do things that were outside my comfort zone, trying things that might or might not work, but that's the only way you learn, is by trying. So I'm proud of that. I'm proud that I had moments of absolute magic, that I had at least some small part in. Whether it be the candlelight dancing fairy kinds of things, or just — we had a lot of events right under this wonderful black maple tree out front in which people's stories were just absolutely amazing. Just being part of that, just being a catalyst in that. Its one of those things in which you know its not about you, you're just lucky enough to be a part of it. You get to be one of the catalysts because you're graced with the opportunity to be here at that time. And I think my gifts at that time were right on for where we were at that time. I don't know if I answered that completely.

JB: Yeah. Were there any disappointments?

WS: Yes. I think anytime that you put your heart into something you're going to have some disappointments, some things that don't come to fruition quite as much as you would like. Some of that — I probably was more disappointed with some of the things, after I turned in my notice, as opposed to things that happened prior to that. Some of the things that happened in my last couple of years. But I don't spend a lot of time dwelling on that. I think it was just different

ways of looking at the future of Hopscotch House and the Foundation. In some ways, it disappointed me how things were handled, but not necessarily in the direction that things went, if that makes sense. But that's more of a personal thing than it is something that would be a huge help to the Foundation or its historians. We can have that off the record.

JB: <laughter> Okay, well, can it be on the record why you decided to leave?

WS: Okay, I will tell you that — well, I don't know. I will say — the part that can be on the record is, whenever you feel like you're swimming upstream, and that your best work is behind you and not ahead of you, its time to leave. And I definitely felt that I was swimming up against a very strong current. When you're swimming against a strong current, its best to look for new opportunities. Because for me, I always want to be doing work that is better than what I've done, and that wasn't going to happen if I stayed here. My best stuff was behind me. I needed to still have the best stuff ahead of me. So the simple truth is I needed have the good stuff still ahead of me, I needed to leave. That's the simple answer.

JB: And what'd you get into?

WS: I'm working at Bernheim Arboretum, and training volunteer naturalists. And I have this awesome community of people who show up all the time, really often, because they want to be there. And then I get the absolute pleasure of watching them grow, watching them connect with our visitors. I get to be the guide on the side, and that's a very cool place to be. And I get to work with people who I don't have — have politically totally different views on, and all that kind of stuff. Its just the general public, and all their different views. Hopscotch House and the groups that came here, its kind of a microclimate, in a way, and you can almost forget that the real world out there is full of all kinds of people, with all kinds of agendas, and all kinds of stuff.

Not that it wasn't true here, to an extent. Certainly I think its been good for me to be working with kids again, and their families, and the volunteers. I don't work directly with the kids, but I do some. But mostly I get to train the people who work with them. Its just a real — its incredible. And I take a bit of the exposure to art and what art can do. I feel like that has definitely influenced the work that I do today. So I just take that of Hopscotch, and the Foundation, with me wherever I go. And I meet people all the time who've gotten grants from the Foundation, or who've had residencies here. Both when I was there and since I've left. And I'm just so glad that its still going strong and doing beautiful work, beautiful things for people.

JB: Well you left quite a legacy. We hear your name every day. <laughter> “When Wren was here, when Wren was here — “

WS: And they are doing the same thing for you now. I am positive of that, Joan.

JB: Let's pause for just a second. And so I guess we're just about finished, but I didn't ask you, was there anything else you wanted to just share?

WS: Other than just the absolute gratitude, which I guess I've already shared. The absolute gift that this was in my life. I was here for eleven years. The people that I've met, the insights that I've gained, the lessons learned, just all of that. And this beautiful place. This land has nurtured some really deep parts of me. So I'm very grateful, again, to all the people who volunteered their time on the Board, and the people that I worked with. They were all good people to work with, and just great to be a part of it. And particularly grateful to Sallie Bingham, because without her, we wouldn't be sitting here telling these stories.

JB: And we're grateful for everything you did here, so thank you. And thank you for sitting and doing this interview.

WS: You're very welcome! It was definitely my pleasure.