

Transcript for Conversations @ KAFM CMUnow: April 2020

Katlin Birdsall: Remarkable accomplishments are happening every day on the Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College campuses. From faculty instruction and research, to student projects and community involvement. CMUnow is a new monthly segment of the KAFM Community Affairs hour, where we interview faculty, athletic coaches, and students to keep you up to date on all things CMU and WCCC. I'm Katlin Birdsall, along with my co-host David Ludlam, and we'll have three guests on the show today, and our first guest is Vice President for Student Services, John Marshall. So welcome to the show, John! Thanks so much for joining us today!

John Marshall: Glad to be here, thanks for inviting me on!

David Ludlam: Yeah, thanks for joining us. I want to just jump right into it with a question for you about something that President Foster has said. And I think a lot of folks were maybe taken by surprise when he tied higher education as kind of being the core to, I think he said is "humanity's response to COVID-19", I think that surprised a lot of people, because when people think about or talk about the response, they typically think about the brave doctors and nurses and first responders that we're thinking about. But as he went on to explain that, I think people kind of understood what he meant. You know, and I think he said things like, "Now is not the time to back away from education, it's time to double down." Can you talk a little bit about what the President is getting at here, and kind of what it means from your perspective?

John Marshall: Yeah, I think there's a natural human response to crises like this. And make no mistake, these are difficult times for people. At best, your world has been upended economically. At worst, you, or someone you know, or someone you love, is sick, and in some cases have passed away. I mean, this is a significant impact to people's day to day lives and to our world. So, from that standpoint, I think you just have to start by recognizing this is a rare moment, a watershed moment. So from that standpoint, the question is, ok, well, so we are in that moment, we're in our generation's trying moment. The question becomes, well how do we respond to that? And I think there is this reflexive desire for people, in some regards, to look around and hunker down. And I think what the President was getting at, that I really appreciated, is, boy now more than ever, we need you to be showing leadership. And for a young person who's in college, they might ask themselves, "well I'm just a college student, what could I be doing, really, to make a difference?" And the reality is that in this particular crisis, yeah we can all do our part, but look around at who it is that's helping us navigate and be able to withstand and weather this storm. And it is those first responders, those doctors, those nurses, those paramedics, the public health officials, the epidemiologists, all these folks who, at their time, wouldn't have been able to partake in this. But they did the hard work in preparing themselves well in advance by getting an education, by becoming experts in their field, by

honing their craft, so that when the time came, when their moment arrived, they were ready. And I think really, what we're telling students, and what the President's words, more articulately than what I'm saying, obviously, was, now is that time. Now is the time to double down on that commitment to prepare yourself, in a whole variety of areas. That's researchers, law enforcement, and even all across the liberal arts, and biologists, and chemists, and physicists, to be able to withstand the challenges of our world that we don't yet foresee today. So, what a great reminder. Very, very, difficult and trying circumstances, no question, but a great reminder of why it is we exist in the first place. So, to me, that's really what the President was getting at.

Katlin Birdsall: I think that's a really, really important message, and a nice one to keep reminding our community about, too.

You are listening to CMU now on KAFM Community Affairs and our first guest today is Vice President for Student Services, John Marshall. And so, John, I know you were appointed by the President to chair the CMU COVID-19 task force. Since then, students and faculty in the community have received a lot of communications from you and your team. And it's not every day that you're told you're going to lead a response team to a once in a century global pandemic, so I'm curious from more of the personal side of you, where were you, and kind of, what was your response when the President told you that you were going to be leading this team?

John Marshall: Uh, well, I was probably at my desk, as I was for about four weeks straight. Yeah, you know, I think these are those moments where you are reminded in the most humble terms possible, how limited any one person is in their ability to affect change. The reality is, the only way you withstand and weather storms like this, is with a really strong team. And so, as you look around, my role really has been more of an air traffic controller. The reality is that all of the hard work that's being done, you know, by literally hundreds of faculty members taking course online, all of the hard work that's been done in Resident's Life, and Dining Services, and, you know, the list just goes on and on. Facilities, the custodians, for heaven's sakes, I mean those guys have been heroes, really going through all of the folks that are required to take, frankly a small city that is CMU, and prepare ourselves for, you know, what was really unforeseeable in many ways. I think that effort is really a humbling one, because you do appreciate, holy buckets we have some incredibly talented colleagues, and we have a wonderful campus. The students, the faculty, really, really humbling to watch everybody rally around one another as we've tried to navigate this. Imperfectly as it has been, for that matter. I mean I'm sure we've made our share of mistakes, but I think it has gone as well as it has based on the fact that we just had a lot of smart, committed, capable people helping to ensure that was the case.

David Ludlam: John, as far as I can tell, I don't think you were joking about being at your desk for four weeks straight. That was pretty intense there for a while, but as things have kind of, you know, I don't want to say normalized, but as we've sort of gotten our legs here at CMU, we were hit with news that we had suffered the loss of a student. And I know that was shocking to you, and for the whole campus community. And I think it was sort of contradictory in the face of the wisdom that it wasn't affecting young people, and now we're having to rethink that. What has that loss sort of meant to you as a campus leader, and has it changed anything in terms of our approach here and how we're responding?

John Marshall: Um, yeah, I think, maybe the most accurate thing to start with, is, reflecting on what an awful loss it is. I mean, Cody was such a good kid. And, um, you almost can't fathom, as a parent, what it must be like to lose a child, and so your heart aches for the Lyster family, as strong and gracious as they have been. Cody was just a really sweet and wonderful kid. And so, there's no good way, ever, to lose a young person. They've got their whole lives ahead of them, and in some ways, they kind of embody what's bright and optimistic, and the future of the human race, and to lose someone like that, is, it's just, you know.... Feels very unfair. In this particular context, it was also jarring, because, you know, I know, we're learning daily, more about this COVID-19 Corona Virus, and I, like a probably a lot of folks, believed what I'd read, and our best understanding was that it wasn't really particularly lethal to young people. Especially young healthy people. I mean, for heaven's sakes, Cody was on our club baseball team; a big strong healthy kid. So that's just jarring, and it's a sober reminder that we don't entirely understand what we're dealing with here. And I know we have a lot of smart researchers, and doctors, and others trying to catch up, and figure out where exactly we are, but it's, you know I used the term humility before and I'll use it again, this is one of those moments where I think, in a very deep humility, you've got to recognize we don't totally know what we're dealing with. So that, that just means, you know, operating out of an abundance of caution, and continuing to think really carefully about every decision we make.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, I think that, that's all we kind of can do with moving forward, is to continue to learn, and then adapt what we're doing here at the University to make sure that we continue to ensure that our faculty and staff and students stay as safe and healthy as possible.

You are listening to CMU now on KAFM Community Affairs and our first guest today is Vice President for Student Services, John Marshall.

John Marshall: Yeah, and Katlin, I think that maybe that's as important of a reflection as any. I don't think it's that any given decision that we've made to this point has been one hundred percent right or one hundred percent wrong, it was based on the best information we had at the time, and that has been changing so quickly. I think part of the reflection on this leadership team has been, you really need to be prepared to pivot and pivot quickly based on new information. I think the Governor and others have done a good job of saying that out loud;

“Yeah, you’re right, we told you ‘x’ two weeks ago, but things have changed, and so now we’re telling you ‘y’, and this is the reason for that.” So being willing to change course, and change course quickly based on new information, I think, again, just recognizing humility; we do not totally know what we’re dealing with so we’re going to deal with the best information we have and make the best choices at the time.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, and I think kind of building on that, that’s been really interesting for me to see, as a team member on that COVID task force, is, to see how quickly we have been able to pivot. And I think one of the more positive things that have come out of it is to see how CMU and Western Colorado Community College, how they’ve been able to help our community in response to the virus. So I was wondering if you could just maybe talk to us a little about the areas where we’ve used, whether it’s our size, our scale, or our expertise to support Mesa County’s efforts.

John Marshall: Yeah, um, one of the, I think frankly one of the great joys of being in this difficult situation has been watching the, frankly, considerable talent and resources of the University go to support the community. And, you know, it starts with simple things, right? Just making sure we’re in close communication with people like the Head of Public Health, and the hospitals, and others. But right out of the gate, the CEO of St. Mary’s Hospital reached out to us and said, “Hey, it’s pretty obvious pretty quick we’re going to need all of the PPE we can get.” And so our Health Sciences Department and Nursing Program gave them everything we had. And, you know, you watch the volunteer work that came about. All these students who said, “Well, I may be sidelined in my classes for right now but I can certainly help lend a hand and volunteer in other places.” And David, I think, credit to you and the team that you’ve been helping coordinate, of ensuring that those messages to people who are healthy and able to step in... You know, you reflect on all the volunteers in this community, and the lion’s share of it is done by those sixty years up and older, and that happens to be folks who we think are at greater danger of this thing, and so it was important for young healthy people to step in and try and support them as those in higher risk populations stepped back. So watching that volunteer effort, watching various actions; you know, Western Colorado Community College stepping up, producing masks and shields with their 3D printers, and all the various work that has happened, it’s fun to see that, and kind of reminds you that there’s a lot going on, on the University campus from one day to the next, and to have all those resources all rolling in the same direction in a community effort, that’s encouraging to see.

David Ludlam: Well John, as we kind of move towards wrapping up this segment, I wanted to thank you for the leadership that you’ve exhibited on this task force, it’s been great to be a part of it. And I want to kind of put you on the spot for a second. And, you know, for a long time, I think, for most people, and everyone can be excused for this, we thought that this was pretty abstract, and it was happening in other places. You know, as this moved closer, and we’ve realized that it really is a tragedy that’s now touched us in the most intimate way and tragically

here on campus, I mean, you've seen this transition and along the way, probably a lot of inspiring moments maybe? Or, can you think of an example, as you've been leading this response, a moment, a human moment of courage, or someone going the extra mile maybe? Of a faculty or student or staff member who's really done something that kind of gave you pause, and really kind of touched you, or you found to be inspiring?

John Marshall: Yeah, yeah that's a pretty long list to be honest with you. I will say this, years ago, I went to a training that was offered by the FBI, about sort of critical incidences, and how to prepare for them. And I'm not going to get the verbatim correct, but the special agent in charge, leading this training, said something to the effect of, "A crisis is no time to be trading business cards." And, and my goodness, how true that is. So the fact that all these relationships were built across the community, and, you know, Grand Junction is pretty special that way. The head of Community Hospital, the head of Colorado Canyons, the head of St. Mary's, the head of Public Health Department, the publisher of the paper, the head of the Chambers, and the economic development, and the city and the county and emergency managers, law enforcement, first responders, these are all folks, I mean, we all are on a texting basis with one another. So those relationships were all built, and so there wasn't this long, getting acquainted phase, so, part of what was really gratifying was to watch how seamlessly everybody is communicating. Saying, you know, Hilltop, what do you guys need? County, what do you need? Public Health, what do you need? And people just communicating in real time, no problem, I can help you there, we can help you here. To me, that kind of selfless, it doesn't matter whose name is on the letterhead or whose organization is getting credit. When the chips are down, and all those organizations and those leaders are all stepping in to support one another, that's when you know you're part of a pretty special community. The same is true on a micro level. And, I mean, I would just watch so many of our staff step up and figure out how to channel their considerable talents and abilities to help others. It's a pretty fun thing to watch!

Katlin Birdsall: Well great, well John, we are already at the end of our time, I feel like these fifteen minute segments always go really quickly, but we just want to thank you again for taking the time out of your busy schedule to not only talk to David and I, but to fill in the KAFM listeners on everything that's happening here at Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College.

David Ludlam: Yeah thank you so much!

John Marshall: Thank you guys!

Katlin Birdsall: You're welcome! So don't go anywhere, because after a short break, we'll be right back with Department Head of Music, Darin Kamstra, and Assistant Professor of Animation and Digital Filmmaking, Evan Curtis.

SEGMENT BREAK

Katlin Birdsall: Welcome back to CMUnow, a monthly show where we talk about the remarkable work happening at Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College. We'd like to welcome our next guests, Department Head of Music, Darin Kamstra, and Assistant Professor of Animation and Digital Filmmaking, Evan Curtis. Well welcome to the show, both Darin and Evan! We want to say thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to chat with David and I, and fill in the KAFM listeners on what's been going on in your worlds, so welcome.

David Ludlam: Yeah thanks for joining us, we appreciate it.

Evan Curtis: Thank you!

Darin Kamstra: You're welcome!

Katlin Birdsall: Great! Well, shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic kind of upended everyone's sense of normalcy, President Foster put out a call to faculty, staff, and students, to participate in what we're calling the Open Studio. And the goal of the Open Studio video sessions were to reinforce the roll of the University, and I think, to also spread some positivity, uplifting thoughts, and remind everyone that, you know, we will in fact get through this crisis together. So Darin, why don't we start off with you today, and I'm just curious, why, you thought it was important to participate in the Open Studio session?

Darin Kamstra: Well, you know, when we read our news and news feeds, there's just so much negative news out there, it's great to have some positive outlets, and not only for our audience and friends and family of the University, to see, but also for us as performers. Uh, so we're not just, uh, like, I'm stuck in my bedroom right now, doing work and talking to you, but what I'm not able to do is get out there and perform for the public, which is a big part of what we do as musicians. So, it was a great outlet and venue for us to be able to reach out and still connect with our audience and community.

Katlin Birdsall: I love hearing that, that it's, you know, not only been, I think, a benefit for the CMU community, because we're, you know, pushing these videos on our social media channels, but to hear that it's been a nice outlet and release for you too. I feel, I like hearing that dual positive purpose!

Darin Kamstra: Yeah absolutely.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, and so, Evan, I think I'll also ask you kind of the same question. So, you know, you were one of our faculty members that stepped forward and decided to participate in the Open Studio, so why did you think it was important to participate?

Evan Curtis: Yeah, I agree with Darin that it gets really exhausting seeing all of the negative news reported every day. That sometimes, what we do as artists can help us sort of escape that. It doesn't mean that we're ignoring what's going on in the world, it just means that we're not all collapsing at the same time and giving up. And specifically for CMU's Open Studio, I thought it was a great opportunity to help boost the morale of the students, because I think for many of them, this could be incredibly overwhelming since their entire life has been changed, whether they had to move out of the dorms or move back in with their parents, so I saw it as an opportunity to help encourage students to keep creating what they're doing.

Katlin Birdsall: You are listening to CMU now on KAFM Community Affairs, and our guests today are Department Head of Music, Darin Kamstra, and Assistant Professor of Animation and Digital Filmmaking, Evan Curtis.

David Ludlam: Darin, I have a question for you, as far as I can tell, you are a percussionist by discipline or by training, and that was on full display during your performance, but you also added some melody to that percussion in the form of someone that joined you, you had a duet. Who was it that joined you, and kind of what, what made the two of you decide to team up for the Open Studio session?

Darin Kamstra: Yeah so it was a duet for guitar and bongo, um, it's actually a Brazilian piece that Javier de Los Santos chose, he was the guitarist, and he's one of our instructors in the Music Department. And, uh, we had recently done a performance for the Fruita Chamber of Commerce back in February, and performed some guitar and percussion duets, and so he's actually the one who reached out to me and thought it would be a great idea to include that in the Open Studio series.

David Ludlam: Oh ok, yeah we should reach out to him. It was a beautiful song, and it made me wonder, do you know why Javier picked that song? I mean, I think it did really well on social media, it was very popular, what was special about that song, do you know?

Darin Kamstra: You know, I can't speak for him. I mean for me, one, it just works really beautifully on the guitar, I mean that's probably the most important thing. Honestly I just came in and added color to that, and so, it really, a lot came down to him and his choices. But it's also kind of a cool intercultural piece, since it is by a Brazilian composer and in a Samba Style, it's kind of nice to connect us in humanity in that way across national borders.

David Ludlam: Well, I'm going to recommend that you come down to the studio and play that for the listeners, I think they deserve it. It's a really, really great piece, so thanks for sharing that with us.

Katlin Birdsall: You are listening to CMUnow on KAFM community affairs and our guests today are Department Head of Music, Darin Kamstra, and Assistant Professor of Animation and Digital Filmmaking, Evan Curtis. Yeah, and so, Evan I also really enjoyed the Open Studio session that you helped work on and it was interesting, because it was a little bit different than some of our other Open Studio sessions in that we did feature student work. So, can you talk to me a little bit about what was included in that video since obviously our listeners can't see it right now? And what made you decide to go that route.

Evan Curtis: Sure! So, my specialty is stop motion animation. I work with action figures and miniature sets. And so, that would have been a little difficult to bring that kind of work to the Open Studio under the current circumstances, and I thought, if I can't showcase what I'm doing, why don't I showcase the student work? And again just thinking that students seeing their peers work would be really encouraging and motivating for them. So the two short animations that I chose were made last semester, Fall 2019, that were somewhat relevant to what we were seeing a lot of online public service announcements about washing your hands, and we were just getting into the stay-at-home order. So, one of the films was called "Day Off" that a student made just about what she does on her day off. So it was a lot of hanging out with your pets, enjoying a cup of coffee, very mundane actions that I think all of us are now taking part of every day, since we're in our homes, and we're not coming to campus or we're not going to our usual workplaces anymore. And in the second animation, it was called "The Shower" and that was about a character who just comes home from a long day and wants to cleanse themselves of all of the stress that they've accumulated throughout the day. And it's visually depicted as kind of this green sewage-like character who then washes all of that off to reveal themselves as one of us. And so again, just the PSA is about washing your hands constantly and proper hygiene. I thought these were positive depictions of what we're now all going through.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah and I was going to say that I could really relate to that first video of being stuck in my home.

David Ludlam: Yeah for sure. Me too, me too.

Katlin Birdsall: And, you know, I've been there for about 3 weeks now and I've made one trip to a doctor for, I'm actually, um, pregnant right now, since listeners can't see me. So I made one trip to the doctor and that's the only time I've left my house in the last three weeks. So I could definitely relate to that animation.

David Ludlam: Well, Darin, I know one person that wasn't stuck in the house is one of your faculty members who, I think, went out to the Colorado National Monument and played a trumpet piece for the Open Studio sessions. And I think, you were a first-mover and after that just so many faculty have joined the ranks in the Open Studio and continue to produce content. I mean, you're an artist and a musician, but you're also the Department Head. How does it make you feel to see just so many of your colleagues and fellow professors and students rising to the occasion and submitting some really creative, great performances for the Open Studio?

Darin Kamstra: Obviously, it makes me proud as a Department Head to see our faculty trying to reach out and connect with the community, especially in this time when we're completely rewriting our entire play book of how we're teaching music via distance delivery. But yeah, just really proud, and glad that we can connect with everybody out there through all that.

Katlin Birdsall: You are listening to CMUnow on KAFM Community Affairs, and our guests today are Department Head of Music, Darin Kamstra, and Assistant Professor of Animation and Digital Filmmaking, Evan Curtis.

David Ludlam: And you know, I think, going back to you when the President sort of announced this project, this idea that, you know, the humanities have always in the past helped people transcend all kinds of tragedies in their lives. And, ranging from pandemics and war, to just the unexpected. And sometimes we don't think of ourselves as being part of that history, but we are living in history now. We are going through one of those times. Can you, I guess, expand on what you see the role of being art and humanities, stories, poetry, music, what role do these things play in this pandemic and helping people get through it? And I think that question's to both of you, and let's start, Darin, with you.

Darin Kamstra: Yeah. I mean, you're right. We're living through history right now and it's kind of strange how the time elapses. It seems like it's, we've been doing this for a long time now, but it's only been a couple of weeks. And I think only time will tell, you know, how this impacts, at least, the Performing Arts, in the short and long-term. Obviously, right now, there's no live performing going on, in terms of, for a real audience in person. It's all virtual, but I'm hopeful that we'll learn some new things. I've certainly learned a lot in terms of just teaching and connecting with students and audience just in the last couple of weeks. And, I think, through all of these trials we'll actually come out the other end with a lot of new tools and new ways to engage our audiences, and perhaps new ways to express ourselves.

Evan Curtis: Yeah! So, as a filmmaker, and a storyteller, one of my favorite memories and favorite experiences is just sitting around the campfire with my family and friends and telling stories. And it just, it is a way to connect with others and experience what you potentially never experienced firsthand, but through this story you're able to understand someone else's perspective because of that. Um, and so me this whole change has I think demonstrated how important face-to-face interaction with other humans is because we are social beings that need to be around each other in these communities. So I think with the technology changes, it's helping us interact through, whether that's Skype or Zoom, where we can at least see each other, but it's still not quite as fulfilling as being in the same space as another person, and just feeling that kind of energy.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, I would, I would definitely agree with you. I've been on a lot of Microsoft Team video conference calls and a lot of Zoom calls over the last, you know, three weeks, and I'm thankful that we have that technology, so we at least are able to see each other and have that connection, but it is, it's just very different than when we are in a room together and I'm interacting with my co-workers. And, you know, getting dinner out with friends and family, you know, it's just me and my husband and our pup right now, so, I definitely miss that –

David Ludlam: Are you saying you miss us, Katlin?

Katlin Birdsall: I do. I miss you guys!

David Ludlam: Aw, we miss you too.

Katlin Birdsall: Yeah, so I would definitely agree with those sentiments. So we're already at the end of our time today with both of you. So I just want to thank both of you again for taking the time out of your day and coming on to talk to not only David and I, but also the KAFM listeners. We really appreciate it!

Darin Kamstra: My pleasure!

Evan Curtis: Thank you!

Katlin Birdsall: Well, this segment airs on the second Tuesday of each month on KAFM Community Radio. You can also listen to a podcast of today's show at KAFMRadio.org. I'm your host Katlin Birdsall, along with my co-host David Ludlum, and we will be back next month for another edition of CMUnow on the Community Affairs Hour.

FIN