Interview with Stephan Dragisic
-- Director of Events at the Reynolda House Museum of Modern Art
By John Reid Sidebotham

John Reid Sidebotham: If you’re ready, we can get started. First of all, do you have any questions about the point of the interview?

Stephan Dragisic: No.

JRS: Ok, so we’re going to people around campus and just seeing how people view their jobs, what they do... really we just [aim to] make a connection between students and faculty. We want to show that all faculty [members] are important and valued. First off, I don’t really know a whole lot about the museum, would you mind talking about what the museum does and specifically what you do?

SD: Ok, well, we’re Reynolda House Museum of American Art; quite a bit of it is in the name… Reynolda House is renowned for its collection of American art, and [it] preserves and interprets the home of Katharine Smith and RJ Reynolds. We look at the home and the estate in the time period of importance from 1917, when the Reynolds family moved into the house, until the mid-1930s when their daughter and grandchildren were living here in the house. Our collection of American art is displayed primarily in the house, but we also have traveling exhibits and galleries where we display our pieces with other pieces from throughout the nation. So, we became an affiliate with the university [Wake Forest University] in 2005, but obviously the house has been here for over a hundred years, and the university sits on land that was part of the original estate. The home was unique in that it was built in a period that was known as the “American country home movement”; this is when wealthy entrepreneurs built homes primarily that were used for what we call “vacation homes” now. The Reynolds were unique in that they moved here into this home.

Winston-Salem--although it is very different today as the industry has mostly left…in the turn of the last century, Winston Salem was a very vibrant manufacturing hub, driven mostly by Reynolds. And from the time they were married in 1905 until 1917, when they moved out here, Catherine and R.J. lived on Fourth Street, obviously a very different lifestyle than this home. At the time, Catherine was reading books and magazines about healthier living, and so this idea of living close to the earth, surrounded by nature in a very sustainable fashion (which is something we often talk about today) [appealed to her]. So this really spurred on her vision to build this estate. She collected, with her husband’s means, over one thousand acres. Parts of the estate that you might be familiar with now include the church across the street, Reynolda Road, the gardens, and what we now know as Reynolda Village, which was then a farm--a working farm. All the buildings were designed with Catherine’s direction, her influence; it was really her vision for creating this idea of a model farm and an estate, but also a family home. It is all very interesting. So we interpret that, but we also partner with the gardens and the university and the Village.

JRS: So, was the goal of the museum to take her thoughts?
**SD:** Yes. In fact, that is a large part of what we do. But addition to that we have a collection of American art that is, by most art historians and curators, considered to be the most important collection of American art south of Washington, DC. [The art] is hand-chosen by RJ Reynolds’ granddaughter, and [with] her vision, we really see and interpret the vision and ideas of these three women. We have Katharine Reynolds, her daughter, who turned it over to her daughter, who began this collection of American art in the 60’s.

**JRS:** So moving specifically to your job, what do you do at the museum?

**SD:** I work here at the museum, and my job has a very small slice of the pie. When you look at museums overall, we are institutions that primarily preserve and protect. We are these big arms that are wrapped around, whether it be art or historical artifacts or anything along those lines. Of course a big part of that is helping the public to interpret these items, and that’s what my job is involved with. I work with programming and events, so planning and coordinating special events here in the museum, and also working on programming that is developed in bringing the public to the museum, so they can get a better idea of what is here.

**JRS:** Is that what you like most about your job? Because that sounds really interesting to me-- trying to get people in the door that would not normally come in.

**SD:** Well, I think that is the most interesting because it is the biggest challenge. You know, when you look statistically at museums, they--although the country has changed demographically-- museum’s demographics have not changed over the past one hundred years. It is still really the same audience that is coming to museums. I really feel that because my background is more general, in history, I bring sort of the everyday person’s thought process to the museum, not [that of an] art historian. I look at what is going to bring the general public to the museum and help them understand what we are doing here.

**JRS:** One of my big questions is: do you think that the museum is connected well with the greater Wake Forest community? Do you think that the students utilize it? And if not, what do you think could improve?

**SD:** I’ll tell you, because I am a week away from having my first year anniversary at the museum, so in that first year there is a lot of learning and getting an understanding of where [the museum] is in the Wake Forest family. One of the events we worked on this year was Freshman Orientation, where all the freshman came over the museum for one day. That was a great event, and it was remarkable to see the amount of connection we were able to make with students on that day. But in advance of that, it is great to come across students that have a strong connection with the museum; it really is your museum when you are here for four years at Wake Forest. We hope students understand that; there are incredible assets to become involved with. Are we as connected as we could be? We’re definitely not, but we are moving in that direction. We are finding that there are departments that we have [better] connections with than others, but there are more faculty that understand the connections to the museum, even if their respective department does not have a direct connection. That has been really interesting. I think the Provost has a keen sense about interdisciplinary actions, which will bring students to the
museum. Clearly the particular business school student is going to feel a connection to the museum, but there are ways that we can get them involved.

**JRS:** I want to go back to when you were speaking about your background. I’d love to hear the whole story all the way from the beginning.

**SD:** Ok, I’m from Texas, west Texas. When I graduated from high school, I made the selection of college and was looking at a very small institution, where I thought I would do my best, my father was an advocate for a large university setting, so he said that if he’s footing the bill, I would attend the University of Texas at Austin. So, that set the stage for me. UT was definitely not known for its history program at that point, more for its business program, so I went into the business program, found it wasn’t for me, and then ended up graduating with a degree in history from High Point University.

**JRS:** Did you have an idea where you wanted to go with that history degree?

**SD:** No, I really didn’t. I did jobs throughout my time at the university, but started off as the Social Chairman for my fraternity. It was kind of funny, because I looked and realized that I could turn this into a business. So I turned that into a business on the side where I was doing events for all of the fraternities and sororities on campus. It was pretty cool working on social events. I would execute contracts for bands and sorority formals that would operate in the hotels. That introduced me and set the pattern for my work. I was in the hotel business for about ten years and then from there, they moved me all around the country, and I ended up in Winston Salem. From there, I’ve been involved in marketing for the last twelve years. Being the marketing director for a company called “Visit Winston Salem” brought me to Wake Forest. I worked on the 2000 Presidential Debate that was hosted here. It was incredible and really introduced me to all members of the Wake Forest community. That was my interest in coming here.

**JRS:** Was there a big draw to the museum? Or did it just happen by chance?

**SD:** Actually, I would say that it was a greater draw to the museum and the university--just looking at my next opportunity. I was tapped out of where I was and was looking for something new. And that is a very political environment, as it is a hybrid between city and state governments and I chose to make a change.

**JRS:** So knowing that you were going to leave, would any museum have attracted you? Or was it specifically an art museum….or the whole story of the Reynolda House?

**SD:** I think that Reynolda is a very special place for me coming here as a visitor and representing Reynolda from a public relations point of view. Reynolda, and an understanding for what makes Reynolda unique…that’s what really drew me here. Would it have been an art museum in general? Probably not; it’s the combination of a historic site and an art museum.
**JRS:** I want to ask you if you have goals in your profession. My little work experience has shown me that people either want to take something away from their job or give something back to their job. Have you had that same experience? If so, what might they be?

**SD:** I think you’re right on target with the way things are with professions. I think that there is a dividing line between people. When people want to bring something to their job… I would say that’s the type of person we have at Reynolda. In the not-for-profit world, you have to be ready to make those sacrifices because it is not going to be as financially rewarding as some other professions. When you’re ready to bring something to your job, it’s really special. Here we work in a system where we have an annual work plan in each department. We look at the goals of each department and see how they fit into the goals of the Reynolda House as a whole. We have a long-range plan that we work from, and when we’re making decisions we’re always looking back to that long-range plan.

**JRS:** So, having been here for just a year, have any of those goals or personal goals changed? Or are you still getting your foot in the door and figuring out what the mission is?

**SD:** I wouldn’t say that they have changed. That’s a very insightful question on your part. I would say that you come to understand that you cannot execute them the way you thought when you walked in the door. Because you come with a peddlers pack on your back about all of these experiences that you’ve had working and at school…and you believe you can implement them all. Yet, when you get here, you realize that there are systems and ways of enrolling your co-workers into your philosophy that take a little bit of time. You have to learn how to work through those challenges. However, I don’t think you ever really change your goals.

**JRS:** You just alter them?

**SD:** Yeah, you alter your path to them. But, if you come with this philosophy that you are bringing something to your work and you are going to make a positive impact, you see that your ideas start to sprout up along the way in ways you never knew they could. And if you’re open to that, it is an amazing experience.

**JRS:** Growing up, this clearly wasn’t your dream job…what was your dream job or any of your siblings’ dream jobs?

**SD:** I am the youngest of eight kids; with the exception of maybe one of my siblings, we’re all involved in architecture, renovation, and construction.

**JRS:** Is that something your father did?

**SD:** No, absolutely not. He was a CPA, Certified Public Accountant. So all of us ask: how did this happen? I would say that my dream job was to be a part of an amazing place like this. You probably didn’t have to take this, but in the ancient world, we took a test to tell you what you were going to be and mine said that my path would not be towards traditional business but working more in not-for-profit and doing something that involved history.
JRS: So, that’s pretty close.

SD: Yeah, it was pretty close and I am a person--I know this about myself--I am really into the special event or event related management because I really like that things build up to a crescendo. There are some people who like the more constant flow of activity, but I like a great end result and then starting all over. This job is more of a roller coaster, which I like.

JRS: Jumping around a little bit, tell me about your home life. Are you married? Do you have kids?

SD: I have been in a relationship for almost 15 years now and we have two kids. They’re seventeen now. It’s an adventure. We’re not a traditional family, but a family none-the-less. My partner works here at Wake Forest.

JRS: That must be great having him right here?

SD: Yeah, he’s right here. So, we have a lot of vested interest in Wake Forest.

JRS: Being an outsider to the immediate Wake Forest community, what do you think of Wake Forest?

SD: Wake Forest is, at its core, working to be the best that it can be. It’s really looking to excel in every area. It’s really cool to be a part of an institution like that. The support that they give to Reynolda House is very valuable in our ability to move forward. It’s interesting, I went to a lecture earlier this week taught by a new faculty member; she came to the university, but she was surprised by the work ethic at Wake Forest. She said “Even on the part of the staff, everyone is so dedicated to his or her work and driven, which is something that I have heard, but never known to be the truth.” I’ve heard it be called “work forest”. It certainly makes sense that if that value of hard work is engrained in the students, then that should also be going on with the staff. We are all working for a great quality experience for you: the student, the public and the faculty. It’s not the kind of laid-back setting that you might find at Chapel Hill or the University of Texas. So it is different. Do I like it? Yeah, it’s pretty cool; it is working out well for me. However, if someone was not willing to buy into it, it might be difficult.

JRS: I agree. If you’re not willing to give one hundred percent to you studies, your work, your XYZ, it is a very hard place to flourish. Wake Forest is also a unique, special place. I assume you have experienced that too.

SD: I’m sure that the number of alumni that stay connected to Wake Forest is much greater than other comparable institutions. I think that Wake Forest makes that kind of impact of people’s lives. People working here, going to school here--which [by the way], is something I hope to be doing soon. I am going to enter into the program of Masters in Liberal Studies...I’ll do that in the evening, just to get my feet wet again.

JRS: What is the final goal with that? Is it to get a doctorate and teach? Or just to get back to school because of the love of learning?
SD: I think it’s the love of learning, the pleasure of moving along. It is not necessarily with a goal in mind. That would be a lot of pressure to stand in front of you students and teach.

JRS: One of the biggest aspects of our course, America at Work, is discussing the American Dream. And there is a lot of discussion on what it is. Does it still exist? Has it diminished? Has it improved? First of all, I’d like to know what you think the American Dream is—if you need a starting point I can give you our definition—then based off of that how has it changed in your lifetime?

SD: For me, the American Dream manifests itself in all of the traditional ways that most Americans would say. It’s that desire to have things better for your children than they were for you. It’s that desire to live in an environment where you can—for example, say I want to go back to school and study and be safe—to do that. So, I think my thoughts on the American Dream are in sync with what most people think. You want to have a home and great environment and opportunity. As I reflect on that, which I do often, I think that often times there are people outside of America that believe more in the American Dream than people inside of America. Do we see that? Yes, we see it manifest daily with people willing to risk their lives to come to this country. That is a fascinating tale, while bringing up many political issues, as it shows how strongly the American Dream is still alive.

JRS: So reflecting on the growing gap between the extremely wealthy and the very poor along with the diminishing middle class…do you think that hurts the American Dream?

SD: Overall, the one thing that America has not been able to do is give huge opportunities to the lower middle class and those who are very poor. They have not received all of the opportunities of the upper class. I find it almost difficult to talk about because I believe that it could be something that could cause very big problems for the country in the future. It is not who we are. I feel as if, having been a witness to the growth of technology, that that would have been the great equalizer and it’s interesting how it isn’t yet. It has sort of made the gap bigger. Unless we are able to get something to level the playing field, we are going to have some problems. It is certainly not the direction we want to be going.

JRS: I agree and I think that it is distinctly different from our history, as a country.

SD: It is very interesting to think about. However, on the flip side, when you are in a country that has opportunity…I remember a guy who was living in a dorm with me at Texas making these personal computers and we thought that was the dumbest thing we’d ever seen and then he starts his own company. So, I think there is opportunity out there, we just haven’t fostered that opportunity yet. It is really going to be your generation that pushes for opportunity. However, we need to create an environment to do so, and that is where were not excelling. I also think that the philosophy needs to change. There are a lot of old people, like me, that are in the way still, and need to get the heck out of the way. Look at our government…our president is only a year older than I am, which made me feel good, but then I thought that he is actually pretty old. Especially in an age when things change so quickly. So it will be really interesting when the president is 36.
Maybe we need to get those roadblocks out of the way. We need to tap into that younger generation.

**JRS**: Going off on a tangent, I feel that there is disconnect between the town [of Winston-Salem] and the school. Do you see that or do you see a greater connection?

**SD**: I think that there is a disconnect; yet the university is making great strides to change that disconnect. Downtown is becoming a cooler place. But there is not a complete integration between “the town and gown” as some people call it. I think a greater effort needs to be put towards that. But I don’t really know how to go about that change.

**JRS**: I’d like to wrap up with one final question, and that is: where do you see yourself and the museum in ten to fifteen years from now?

**SD**: The next ten years will be very interesting. As a museum, we will pass our centennial as a historic house. Those will be momentous undertakings for us as an organization and we hope to share that with the great community. For me personally, this is an exponible growth period, leading up to 2017, which is pretty interesting for someone my age. You’re catching me at a period right before things begin to change. I was given a quote earlier that says, “What brings you here will not carry you forward.” And for me, that says a lot about what is going to happen in the next ten years because it means those things that I have relied on are not going to carry me on. The person you met today will probably be pretty different. And I think Wake Forest will be different in fifteen years also. One of the most interesting discussions I hear coming out of the university centers around you, the student. Wake Forest is at its core a liberal arts institution so what does that mean for the liberal arts graduate? I think that is a question that is important to ask. Now, more than ever, a liberal arts degree can take you wherever you want to go. There is an understanding, now more than ever, that the whole person is taken into consideration. I think Wake Forest succeeds at that.