

Meet Our Docents: Dr. Les Crawford

by Luke Ashmore

As the YAM looks ahead to our Docent on Demand Program, we're excited to highlight the work and stories of the museum's biggest supporters and ever-helpful volunteers.

I hope you enjoy reading about Dr. Les Crawford as much as I enjoyed getting to know him.

On a chilly morning in November, I hurried back to the YAM office with two coffees in hand. One was for me, and the other was for someone I couldn't wait to meet: Dr. Les Crawford.

Les has volunteered as a docent for three years at the Yellowstone Art Museum. Les wears his career as an educator and his passion for the arts on his sleeve, and his experience evidently contributes to his talent as a docent.

Our conversation covered a variety of topics. His personal history, travel stories, and thoughts about Montanan artists led into a discussion about his time at the YAM.

Luke: When did you start volunteering as a docent?

Les: I've been a docent for a while. I started when I was in Atlanta at the High Museum. When I came back [to Billings], we were still in the pandemic, and I thought about the things I could do. "I'll be a docent again," I thought.

Do you have any favorite stories or memories from your time at the YAM?

Yeah. [The museum] was still the jail though. I was in college. I was about 19. And every Christmas, we'd go to the jail to sing Christmas carols to the people there. And so, I'm in the jail, walking along, singing, and here's an old classmate of mine behind bars. I asked him, "What are you doing here?" He hadn't paid his child support, so he ended up here. I walked away thinking, "What a dumb thing to ask!" [laughing]

Do you have any memories of enjoying art during your childhood?

When I was a child, I would get permission to go down to the Northern Hotel. There were two [Charlie] Russell's that hung in their lobby, and I used to ask my mother if I could go down and see the [paintings].

She'd say, "Don't get into trouble, and don't bother anybody."

But even from that age—I was nine years old—I wanted to go see them. They were two magnificent, large works. They might have been the first pieces of art I'd ever seen.



Do you have any recent favorites? Exhibits or works you've seen at the YAM?

Of course! Anything that comes up with Isabelle Johnson's [work]. But really, I don't have a favorite, other than her work. I can usually pick out her work immediately.

When I did my master's, I had Isabelle Johnson as my teacher, and I had Helene Northcutt and Ben Steele.

Oh my goodness. [laughing]

Yeah. So basically, I had classes from all these artists. Helene [Northcutt] was my advisor, and we did all this research on children's work and the relationship

between art and curriculum and that kind of thing.

It was interesting [to attend] Eastern at the time!

What qualities do you need to be a successful docent?

I think you have to realize that the people that are coming to the museum, many of them have no [art] background at all. There are even adults that are almost frightened to be here with no [art] knowledge. Sometimes they don't know what to do, or what to look for, or where to go. We have to make them feel at ease and that they're welcome and that we want them here.

That's a heartwarming answer. I'm sure your love for the museum helps them feel welcome, too. So, what keeps you coming back to the YAM?

The people. This is a fantastic group of people here. The docents are wonderful, too. They're really neat people to be with. They want to laugh and talk, you know? It's a really great place to be.

That's great to hear. Alright, we're going to do something different for the last handful of questions. It'll be a lightning round, so just answer quickly with what comes to mind.

What's your favorite movie?

Gone with the Wind.

Who's your favorite artist?

I think it's Van Gogh. I've always liked his work very much.

I've got one more question, and I promise it's a fun one.

I'm sure.

Is the YAM haunted?

No. I'll walk you though here at night by myself. [laughs]