

Frederick Factor Season 2, Episode 3: The Arts Factor with Kathryn Vicere

Ashleigh: Welcome to the Frederick Factor. My name is Ashleigh Kiggans, and I'm the host of Season 2. Everyone who's lived in, worked in, or visited Frederick, Maryland knows there's just something special about this place. One of those things is the incredible diverse community that continues to grow. Here on this podcast, we bring you Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs, and community leaders into the spotlight, share their stories with you, and find out: what's their Frederick Factor?

I'm here with Kathryn Vicere. So Kathryn, welcome. She's the managing director of The MET.

Kathryn: Hi. Thank you for having me.

Ashleigh: Absolutely. We just met this morning and we're about an hour into conversation and just now starting our podcast, if that tells you how good of a conversation we've been having. So tell me a little bit more about your background.

Kathryn: I am a Frederick girl, born and bred. I grew up here. I went to Linganore High School and I also went there back when it was the Visual Performing Arts program. I got to split my day in half through high school. I've just always been an arts girl in this wonderful world of Frederick since I was born. And I love it.

Ashleigh: So you've always been involved in the arts. Was there something that sparked you, that made you want to get into the [arts]? Was there a movie that you saw or a play?

Kathryn: No, it was Lucky Charms Cereal.

Ashleigh: <laughs>

Kathryn: Lucky Charms Cereal got me into acting and got me into the arts. My mom loves me telling this story... She would not let us have heavy sugar cereals. We sometimes got to have Lucky Charms or the Rainbow Brite Cereal (if I have to date myself) when we went on vacation as a special treat. But I was really convinced that I needed to have this as an everyday breakfast food. I don't recall this, but she says that I would climb up into her bathroom sink with her mirror above and I would practice making sad faces and practice scripts on how to secure Lucky Charms cereal from my mother. And she said that I was either going to be a politician or I was going to be an actor. And she put me in a community production of *The King and I* with the Fredericktowne Players that performed at the Weinberg Center and I was all of five years old and I was one of the King's children. So it started from there and she just wanted to curb my dramatic tendencies. And I fell in love with it and I've never done anything but the arts.

Ashleigh: So do you still eat Lucky Charms cereal?

Kathryn: I don't, but I told one of my former board members that story at some point and she bought me a mason jar of just the marshmallows. So I have that sitting on my desk. It's a constant reminder of my roots.

Ashleigh: That's actually a really good roots story. <laughs>

Kathryn: <laughs> Well, I used to work at Adventure Theatre in Montgomery County, and when I'd go for a career day, I'd tell that story as to how I got into it.

Ashleigh: I feel like you should reach out to General Mills and share the story with them of how inspiring Lucky Charms can truly be. <laughs> Because I highly doubt any parents are "rah-rahing" for Lucky Charms these days. <laughs>

Kathryn: No... They're like my mom. My mom was ahead of her time. It's just Kix and Cheerios and Special K. <laughs>

Ashleigh: Well, Cheerios, you just pour a little sugar on top and then that works. Makes it fine. Scrape it from the bottom. So how did you end up at Maryland Ensemble?

Kathryn: So, oddly enough, I was just coming out of undergrad in -- I'm going to have to date myself -- the mid to late nineties. And I was a company member at the MET, so I was an actor on their stage for a little bit. And I taught a couple classes and I assistant directed there in between the time I left undergrad and went to New York to become a famous actress. We all know how that worked out! But I was a company member in between that time, so I knew the organization from that side of it for years and always stayed in close contact. I donated to their first capital campaign, and I would see shows there because I lived in Frederick but commuted to Montgomery County for many years. So the MET was always a part of my life. And the Managing Director position came open and I said, I think this could be a good thing. And luckily, they agreed with me. So, that's how I ended up at the MET as the Managing Director, but I spent a ton of time getting experience to lead up to that point. But they've been around since I was just starting out.

Ashleigh: That's great. That's a pretty cool story too.

Kathryn: It's like coming full circle.

Ashleigh: Yeah. You started here and then worked, went to become famous in New York, and then came back -- the whole shebang. With our podcast, we talk a lot about underrepresented groups and the community in Frederick and how that all connects. Can you speak to what the MET has done within itself to support and maybe even encourage underrepresented groups and diversity within the community?

Kathryn: Absolutely. The MET has been a community partner with the community for [25 years]. We are going into our 25th season in September. And we're going to have a brand new

renovated theater to have everybody come and visit us starting in September as well. We've been around for that many decades now and it's always been a part of our fabric. We have in-school programming so that we are bringing the arts to young kids with a specific focus on kids who might not otherwise be able to experience the arts. Because being a part of theater, watching theater, anything that you do with the live performing arts, it builds empathy. And if you have young people that are developing that part of their brain and they're building empathy, they're going to become adults who are philanthropists and who give back to their community and appreciate all of that.

So we try and build that from a very young age with all of our in-school programming, but also with what you see on stage. We have our Fun Company arm, which is theater for young audiences. We have our main stage. And our ensemble is a group of 31 to 32 artists at this point [who will come to a consensus to] pick our season with a lot of different things in mind. One of them being: you need to be able to see yourself represented on the stage in order to connect with a piece in some way. So with that in mind, we're always choosing pieces that are going to speak to everybody in our community. They're very inclusive of everything that makes up the fabric of Frederick and our community.

Ashleigh: When people watch movies, they like to be able to relate to a character. When you watch a show, you like to be able to relate. I think by having shows that are keenly targeted, it's a way of saying, "Hey, you know what, this is pride month. We're going to make sure we have a pride show." And maybe that will also inspire some [people in the audience]. You never know that little kid in the audience who may be dealing with that or struggling, [and will see the show and be inspired to] be involved and do something like that. That gives them that opportunity to say, "Hey, maybe I can express myself [and do] something I'm not able to do in my day-to-day." Watching these shows gives them that opportunity. And if there's something going on at home, being involved [in the arts] gives an opportunity to get away from that.

Kathryn: Absolutely. It is an escape in some ways. And we are very diverse in terms of the pieces that we will pick to show. We also focus on playwrights of color and female playwrights so that those stories are seen and understood by our community. I'd like to think that we are doing our part in that way to make it a more inclusive space in general. Bringing diversity and including all sorts of different people sometimes can be challenging because you have all different types of audience members coming in. So we make sure that we're always trying to be that space that is inclusive and that is diverse and that is welcoming. I think that that is super important because we fancy ourselves as a theater for our community. We are not a community theater, but a theater for our community.

Ashleigh: One of the things we've talked about on a couple of these different episodes is how much diversity has changed and how we've evolved so much -- not just in Frederick County, but really, in Frederick City. It's causing other things to start to evolve. So I think it's great to have that opportunity to have a push on diversity and on being welcoming and equality. It leads to having plays where they are going to require actors of different backgrounds and casting calls

for different backgrounds. It sounds like one of the ways that you guys are really helping to push that forward.

Kathryn: This past summer we did Bob Marley's *Three Little Birds* and there was an article in *The Post*, [and] I don't know that it's necessarily [true] -- it must be true -- [it said that] it was the first all person-of-color cast that Frederick has seen. Bringing that is important. It's important work. Theater is a reflection of who we are as a community. And so it needs to be showing that. And I think that MET does a really noble and good job of trying to diversify.

Ashleigh: Yeah. Getting in there too with the kids when they're younger and giving them that opportunity because it's not like a sport, that it just shows up at school. So it's nice to have that. Since we've touched on this a little bit too -- connecting Maryland Ensemble to the Frederick community -- what do you feel like you guys are continuing to do not just for diversity, but also [for] connecting fully to the community. I think that the theater is a reflection of the community.

Kathryn: Sure. So we are going to be announcing our 25th anniversary season at the end of this month. However, I can give a little spoiler because I think it's important to the conversation that we're having. One of the pieces in our 25th season is going to be a devised piece, which is very typical of the ensemble model. Maryland Ensemble Theater -- we are an ensemble model. We will be working on a devised piece and we are working in partnership with AARCH. We are going to be building a piece, and I'm not able to really say what it's going to be because that is the beauty of it being devised, but it is going to be reflective of the stories of people that came before us that built up our community that are specifically people of color. I think that is a story that is known but not told to all audiences. Or you think you know.

But MET is working very hard and always has -- this is not the first piece of its kind. Several years ago we did a piece on homelessness in Frederick to kind of bring light to that. I don't want to call it "theater for social change," or "social justice," or anything like that, but [we work towards] highlighting the contributions of everyone in our community and educating in a fun way and in an enjoyable way. So that is super important work that MET does. I want to say that we do that every three or four seasons at least. It's a big part of who we are: telling those stories and being really grounded in the stories of our community. So that's a teaser for our 25th season.

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episodes, so your business organization can be featured in a message like this, email us at info@frederickfactor.com to find out more. Happy listening.

Ashleigh:

I really love the two groups working together. I helped AARCH with getting their space and got to know the great David Key -- one of the most incredible people I've ever met in this community, hands down. And, he taught me a little bit of history. When I first moved to Frederick, I lived on West All Saints Street and I did not know the history of West All Saints Street. It was funny -- I would always say walking down the street, the ladies always reminded me of my grandmother because there were all these sweet ladies. And when I was pregnant, and while I was there with my youngest when she was born, they were all so excited. Of course they were taking pictures and it reminded me so much of being in the neighborhoods of Philadelphia where my parents live.

But I slowly started to learn the history of All Saints Street. And actually, I was at a museum in Baltimore and ended up learning even more, because there is an African American history museum in Baltimore, and they actually have an area that is an exhibit [about] Frederick. It talks about how prosperous Frederick was for the African-American community during certain times and how All Saints Street and South Street were streets that were dedicated to being these prospering African-American [communities that were] trying to have that middle class feeling there. If anybody ever gets out to that museum, it's right in downtown Baltimore, not far from the harbor.

Kathryn: I'll have to look that up so that we can go there and use that as part of our research. We're a year out from this project and so right now, we're in that gathering information phase where we're putting pieces together and becoming as knowledgeable as we can. So I will make sure that we include that on our list. But there's a fantastic walking tour that AARCH gives that I would encourage anybody to go on, and everyone to go on, because it is so rich with history and stories and things like that. So I can't wait for that piece to come to our stage because it's a pathway, an entryway, for the community. A different one than going to a museum, but still educating, respecting our history, showing the diversity that we have in our community in a positive way. I'm thrilled about that project. It's one of my favorites that we're going to be doing next season.

Ashleigh: I look forward to seeing that project. I'm super excited for [the AARCH] museum to come to understand so much of the history of Frederick. A lot of people don't know about the creek divide, which is something in real estate they kind of lightly touch on, but no one really dives into it. I learned about it very quickly. It's funny because people always ask, "Well, why are the houses on this side cheaper than the houses on that side?" And when AARCH opens the museum, they'll really be able to explain and talk about things that people don't necessarily want to talk about. Because we're a really diverse community now, but there's a history there and it's a history that I think is important for us all to know. Obviously the MET is going to do a great job with them to bring that history to life. Keep me in the loop on that!

Kathryn: Yeah. It'll be the end of our 25th season, so it'll be around this time next year. Okay. And you can expect to see it. It'll be at the MET in our newly renovated theater. We just completed a capital campaign, so our theater is getting a renovation after, I want to say, 18 or so years.

Ashleigh: Oh, wow.

Kathryn: We've had the same seats, but we're getting all brand-new seating and some new lights and a new sound booth and all sorts of stuff.

Ashleigh:

Oh yeah. It's exciting. Very exciting. So now when is everything done with that? Oh, we

Kathryn:

Will be, well knock on wood, uh, because there's always delays in construction, but we will, we will be ready by the time we open in September. Okay. Um, so we have, we'll have a ribbon cutting, I think September 17th. Is that date Perfect. So needs to be done by then. Perfect. We're gonna have egg on our face. Perfect.

Ashleigh:

Well, so, and I will push to get this podcast out by then. We've talked a lot about diversity and inclusion. And we had a long conversation prior to us starting recording about the diversity and inclusion in Frederick County in general. So, even outside of the MET -- just you personally -- how do you feel like [we can continue to promote diversity in Frederick]?

Kathryn: I think by continuing to keep in the front of our minds that we come from many, many different diverse backgrounds in Frederick and how fortunate we are to live in a community that is overall by and large, very inclusive. And that, at least from my perspective, is welcoming. You look around, particularly downtown, and you see all of the beautiful artwork and the murals that are coming up from a very diverse set of artists. I think more things like that, different perspectives always coming in and being welcomed into the community, will go a tremendously long way for continuing to make Frederick a place where you want to live, you want to thrive in you, you want to raise your children in, and that you want to come back to or stay in for many, many years. I think that that welcoming vibe, and making sure, as leaders in the community (if we can be so brash to call ourselves that), are constantly working on to make sure that it is all of the things that we say we want it to be.

Ashleigh: Absolutely. Then wrapping up... The one question that I always ask each one of the guests -- which, when I was a guest, was the one question that I did not prepare for, so it stumped me just slightly -- [So the question is,] what is your Frederick Factor? What, to you, makes Frederick Frederick?

Kathryn: I have to say, and I'll admit I'm biased, but it's the arts. Frederick has done an incredibly great job of integrating the arts into the core of its economic stability. And I think we

really pride ourselves on that. And I think when you look around our community, you see that everywhere. From the artwork that's on the creek to [the art] on our buildings to the beautiful structures that we have at Baker Park -- the fountain. All of these things, the art I think, begs to welcome you in and just enjoy and see beauty and everything. So for me, it will always be the arts, having been to New York and having lived in other places in my wanderings and my journeys. There's no place like Frederick for that. It's this perfect little mix of small town, but urban, but forward thinking. And I think the arts has a lot to do with that. So I would say the arts.

Ashleigh: And I wouldn't argue with you, because I will say when I go downtown, the main thing I see people doing is everyone wants to take a picture with the murals that we have. If you live in Frederick and you don't have an angel picture yet, then do you really live in Frederick?

Kathryn: That's right.

Ashleigh: You have to have at least one. But it's something that people get so shocked by. And when I bring family from out of town, they're all mesmerized. My favorite one is: "Is that a real window or was that just a painted window?" I mean, all of those things. And the bricks on the creek!

Kathryn: [William] Cochran. He is an amazing artist. And if you're ever so fortunate to hear him speak, he's responsible for a lot of that early mural work that happened and has become synonymous with Frederick.

Ashleigh: Actually, [he's another] Leadership Frederick County graduate. He came and spoke to us on the creek about it. And it's funny because they look so realistic.

Kathryn: He talks about perspective and how he paints in every direction.

Ashleigh: I've walked this probably a thousand times and never realized they were painted until he started talking about it. And it's one of the coolest things in Frederick. So, to listen to him and his passion about it and how he did all of that. And I am by far the furthest from an artist in the entire world, I can promise you that. Other than playing my flute, which I played for years -- first chair, you know.

Kathryn: Oh, well! "I'm not an artist though." No, no. <laughs>

Ashleigh: <laughs> But my stick figures -- now, they are... actually really lopsided. I get very fascinated though, by people in the arts and by learning more just because it's a part of me that I don't really express much. And my nine-year-old daughter has become an incredible artist.

Kathryn: Yay! We need more of them!

Ashleigh: [She's got that whole artist thing!] So sports will not be [her] thing. She'll not be playing volleyball like me, but I will let that slide because her artwork is gorgeous. I think the arts

are so important. To have obviously Marilyn Ensemble, the Weinberg, and these places that are like an "arts street" --

Kathryn: We have a theater district!

Ashleigh: Yes! A theater district. You even have a wine store. Absolutely. And just so for those who don't know where you guys are located, could you tell the address?

Kathryn: Sure. We're located at 31 West Patrick Street. We are in the lower level, aka the basement, which is awesome. We are a cool funky basement theater in the FSK apartment building. We are right across the street from the Weinberg Center and next door to New Spire Arts.

Ashleigh: I will say, when you go down there, you feel like you're going into a secret club. It does have that vibe of like, you're going someplace that's like nobody really knows (which everyone does know), but it's like an underground sort of spot --

Kathryn: It has a speakeasy kind of feel to it.

Ashleigh: Yes, yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, Kathryn, I want to thank you so much for being here. This has been a great conversation -- before the podcast, during the podcast. I told her we would only be here for probably 30 minutes and I think I've kept her for almost an hour and a half.

Kathryn: That's totally okay. I've enjoyed it. Thank you so much for having me.

Ashleigh: Yes, yes. I truly appreciate it. And that's a wrap on Frederick Factor. I will see you guys soon.

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