

Chris Wilcox Interview

Interviewer: Emily Martin

Interviewee: Chris Wilcox

Interview Date: May 31, 2018

Interview Location: Cullowhee, NC

Length: 58:45

Emily Martin: Alright. First, I'd just like to confirm for the recording that you are aware and consent to being recorded.

Chris Wilcox: Yes. I am.

EM: All right. Awesome.

CW: I'm listening.

EM: OK. Can I just get you to state your name for me real quick?

CW: Yeah. It's Chris Wilcox.

EM: And your date of birth?

CW: January 20th, 1973.

EM: You were born in Sylva correct?

CW: I was.

EM: How long has your family lived in the area?

CW: They got here just in time for me to be born so there's... I can share a story I heard about what it takes to be local. I think it came out of New England. There was a physician that transplanted to Vermont from New York and he was talking to a local and he said, "Well, I'm not from here but my kids were born here so my kids are local." And the old timer, farmer said, "my cat crawled in the oven and had kittens. I didn't call those kittens biscuits," (laughter) but anyway.

EM: So do you have any siblings?

CW: I do. I have two older brothers.

EM: Do you have any fun stories involving them?

CW: Oh gosh. Well they haven't signed off on this. Oh, my goodness. Um... fun stories of siblings. Well, um... sorry to draw a blank.

EM: Yeah. Is that too broad?

CW: No, let's see. They were six and eight years older than me, so I don't know they... I thought they were pretty cool. They had big influence on my taste of music. Fun stories. I don't know. I can remember...gosh this is not fair to my middle brother. I was going to say one time my middle brother

and his buddies like tied me to a tree and my oldest brother came to my rescue. (laughter) Let my middle brother have it. That's probably a common sort of story of birth order.

EM: Getting tied to trees. Yeah.

CW: Yeah. Or, you know... the birth order...the poor middle brother but... I don't know. That's not a very good story.

EM: That's a great story.

CW: Anyway. If we can circle back to that if something else occurs to me.

EM: Yeah. Of course. So, were you close with your parents?

CW: Yeah. I remain close to them. They live right next door to me in Tuckasegee. Both my brothers are out west now and I after briefly living out west I came back here and lived. My parents gave me some property and my partner, and I built a house right next door. So, got the family compound.

EM: Nice. Did you and your brothers decide to go out west together or did that just happen.

CW: Well, you know... I mentioned that they were influential on me. When my oldest brother went out to Utah and was talking about... he had this sort of reverent look on his face when he was talking about skiing powder. That sounded pretty cool, so I went out there and tried it a little bit.

EM: Yeah.

CW: Before being pulled back this way.

EM: (Laughing) I have a bunch of questions about that later.

CW: OK.

EM: How do you think your relationship with your parents and your grandparents shaped your love of books?

CW: Oh gosh. Oh, it was huge. I don't remember a time when we didn't have books. My dad's mom had been a librarian and she had sort of a book of the month club where she would send us, all three of us would get books every month and they were always, you know good things, age appropriate, interesting. And then my parents always had us come to the Jackson County Library and we could take out five books at a time and get another five as soon as we read those.

EM: What did your parents do for a living?

CW: My dad taught at Western. He was a geology professor and, my mom worked for the, used to be called the Farmers Home Administration. I guess it's rural economic development is what they call it now. Add some syllables and words being the government.

EM: Of course. Well, was reading and education valued in your family?

CW: Oh yeah. Big time. Yeah.

EM: Did your dad being a college professor have anything to do with that?

CW: Yeah. I think so. They both, my mom, his masters. And, you know, yeah I think that was... yeah, they put a premium on schooling.

EM: How about high school? Did you have any teachers that helped with your love of reading?

CW: Yeah. Probably several that... The first one that pops into my mind was my, uh, sophomore English teacher. That was the, what year would that have been? That was the first year that Smoky Mountain was consolidated. I think there were still some high school classes being offered up at Camp Lab. Anyway, it was a kind of a... I'm sure for a lot of students particularly the ones coming from Cullowhee it was... it was unsettling a little bit maybe. It was like "Oh!" here we are in the big town of Sylva, a relatively large school it seemed like. Anyway, I'm sure I was withdrawn that year but, uh, Marion Harrison... well Dee Grantham and Marion Harrison were both English teachers that year. Dee Grantham put me into an honors section which I wasn't... no other classes where I was even close to being qualified for that probably. The Marion Harrison's honors English section. And, then she was instrumental. I guess about a year later I went to the School of the Arts after that. Got booted out of the School of the Arts and then Marion Harrison wrote a letter that allowed me to go to Western for my senior year. This was before they had early college. So, it was sort of like a... there's that early college option. So anyway, I was grateful to her for that.

EM: What was the school of the arts?

CW: North Carolina School of the Arts. Down there for visual arts and I just goofed off. I was not mature enough to probably go to a boarding school in Winston Salem as a junior in high school. I didn't perform to the expectations. (laughter)

EM: So, you went to Western for your senior year in high school?

CW: Yeah.

EM: So, it would be like an early college.

CW: A lot like early college. Probably a lot like senior year in early college. I was getting kind of getting double credit I guess in a way. At the end of that year, Smoky Mountain signed off on a diploma and I had a year of college credit. So that worked out pretty well.

EM: So, you were in the first Smoky Mountain class?

CW: Well let's see... As a... I guess there were some people that graduated that year. I'm the class of '91 so that wasn't the first, but it was... so my sophomore year was the first year that they were, the two student bodies were thrown together.

EM: Yeah. My mom was class of '88. So she was the last Sylva Webster class.

CW: Oh, yeah yeah yeah.

EM: Ok. Let's see. So, I actually found out this is pretty cool. Whenever I was doing my research on you. Your partner Herb? He's actually my dog groomer.

CW: Oh cool.

EM: And my dad gets a long with him really well. So, whenever I come with him sometimes...

CW: Oh good!

EM: I was like... And I read that... and was like Herb Potts. Where have I heard that?

CW: There can only be one Herb Potts. Right.

EM: Exactly. And I love the name Herb Potts.

CW: Yeah.

EM: Like herbs and pots.

CW: Yeah. (laughter). Absolutely.

EM: So, just a little on that. How did you two meet?

CW: Oh gosh. Our student friend. We had a mutual friend that introduced us way back. We were buddies for seven years before it became romantic. So, we were...we knew each other pretty well before things changed. (laughter)

EM: How long have you two been together for?

CW: Oh gosh. Well, we've been together for... let's see this summer will be twenty-four years.

EM: Can you tell me more about the hobby farm?

CW: Oh. Where is that from? Hey Robert. Well we have, these days goats and sheep. That's it. At various times... we started with horses. Big hay burners and not really productive (laughter) and so we switched to goats and sheep and at various times we've had chickens and ducks and quail. I guess that's about it.

EM: So, you used it for like food and stuff?

CW: Yeah. Primarily for food. Yeah. And they do a nice job of maintaining my parents pasture. Together the goats browsing and the sheep grazing keep the pasture looking pretty good.

EM: Ok, um, let's see... Do you write as well as read?

CW: Not really. Not much. Gosh. I've got too much reading to do. (laughter) I feel like I would need to read more before I could write much. There was a creative writing club at Smoky Mountain and that was probably the last time I really did much just straight creative writing. Yeah. There was a fair bit of writing just in life. You know... Being a business owner.

EM: But not fun writing (laughter)

CW: Not fun writing. No.

EM: Do you still do art?

CW: No. I've let that... I've let that go. (laughter)

EM: When you got kicked out you were kind of like “Ah”. (laughter)

CW: Ah. It’s not for me. No, I... no that would be... It was a little... You know, I was glad they let me in. I guess I did some things I was pretty proud of but once you’re down there, it was like... always... what was it, maybe eighteen kids in the class around the state. They were all so good. I was like, “I don’t belong here.” (laughter)

EM: No. Yeah. I was going to do the art school for like college. Like to apply there. And I was going to go into musical theater.

CW: Yeah. It’s a good program.

EM: But then the more I thought about it I was like...musical theater is such an intensive major. And I don’t...you know. You want to have a back up plan so I wanted to do a double major and I was talking to our student intern for show choir at the high school and she... she’s in like the music education program but she knows lots of people in the MT program and she was asking us if we had any questions about it and I was like, “Is a double major feasible?” Because I wanted to do musical theater and then environmental studies. And she looks at me and goes, “No”.

CW: You’re in rehearsal all the time.

EM: Oh God. And like, if you do a double major you would graduate in five, six years maybe and it would be bogged down the entire time.

CW: And... Forget about having a job while you’re...it’s all consuming. Theater, I think, is all consuming.

EM: For sure. Okay... Let’s see. Alright. So, let’s talk about Utah now.

CW: Ok.

EM: Ok, um... How long were you over there?

CW: Oh, couple years all told. There were sort of two stints. But...

EM: Mm hmm. Um... Why did you decide to leave?

CW: Well, my partner... we’d sort of... my partner and I when I head out that way, I was like well so long I’m going off on adventures but, you know, we kept talking on the phone and occasional visits so, that was sort of being rekindled and my parents were here. I was sort of by that point starting to have second thoughts about what I majored in and kind of starting a career in... So, came back here.

EM: What were you majoring in?

CW: I majored in Emergency Medical Care. I worked as a paramedic out there.

EM: So, I know you mentioned earlier you went over there for skiing.

CW: Yeah. (laughter)

EM: How long have you been skiing for? Like was it something you did before?

CW: I learned to ski out there. (Laughter) I had exactly one day at Cataloochee as a, I don’t know, middle schooler. It was miserable. (laughing). Absolutely miserable.

EM: So, something and you just went “Oh!” let’s try it again?

CW: It was really my oldest brother. He was like, “You wouldn’t believe this. It’s so amazing skiing bottomless powder.” He seems really taken on this. I should check it out. So...

EM: Mm hmm. Um... Did you ever compete while you were in Utah?

CW: Skiing?

EM: Yes.

CW: Oh, no. no. I mean other... Now I was just trying to keep up... which is a good way to learn. I think I was about the only one learning to ski out there. They were mostly phenomenal skiers. Well, I better go fast to keep up. Don’t fall down. (laughter)

EM: Kind of the same way at art school?

CW: Yeah. Exactly. Yeah. I don’t really belong, but I should try and keep up. (laughter)

EM: I mean that’s the way to do things. Just kind of jump in and see how it goes.

CW: Throw yourself into it.

EM: (Laughter) Um... So, you worked at a ski lodge, right?

CW: Yep.

EM: What was it like? Like what did you have to do?

CW: That was... that was a neat place. Alta Lodge. I was... I started out as a handyman which ... So it was built kind of down on the side of this canyon down from the road and there was no elevator and all these people would show up for a week with all their stuff... ski gear, ski clothing and we would carry it to their rooms, sort of like a bell hop. And then anything else that needed to be carried up and down. It was the most fit I’ve ever been. (laughter) I was young and dumb, I guess. And then anyway I wound up working in reservations, front desk and reservations a little later on. But it was neat. That lodge was really a neat place. It had been built in the ‘30s. As I think a lot of western lodges where the railroads put them in to attract tourists or to be a tourist attraction on their train line. It had actually been...well there was a publishing... an important publishing connection there that but, that’s probably too much of a side story.

EM: A side story is welcome.

CW: It was a... James Laughlin was an important... He sort of got the ski area going. I think he had a hand in the Alta Lodge too. And he had New Directions Publishing in New York which published Ezra Pound and Tennessee Williams and on and on and on... had a pretty dynamic time in the literary arts. The 1930s and 40s, he was publishing some early kind of avant-garde folks. Anyway, so the ski lodge was still very rustic place. No fancy amenities but, some really famous people stayed there when I was working there. Soros... who’s demonized by a lot of folks on the right. He’s a multibillionaire... likes tinkering with world and financial markets. And then at the same time William F. Buckley who was a big conservative commentator, editor of National Review and Milton Freedman was a big University of

Chicago free market economist, you know. So, these titans on the left and titans on the right sort of show up there to ski. I don't think they ever overlapped but, anyway it was an interesting place.

EM: Did you ever get good at skiing while you were out there?

CW: Yeah, I got pretty good.

EM: Do you still ski now?

CW: Uh, yeah. I didn't get out a single day this last year but yeah try to get up to... If I don't get out much to see my brother who is still out there, I try to get up to Cataloochee or Snowshoe or some place.

EM: Is it the older brother who is still out there?

CW: Yeah.

EM: Do you try and visit him a lot?

CW: Try to.

EM: I mean...

CW: But reality doesn't always happen.

EM: Jobs and life.

CW: Jobs, yep. The hobby farm kind of keeps us tied down. Take off and say hey neighbor will you feed the cat, but would you feed a dozen sheep and ten goats. Yeah. Harder to take off.

EM: I'm sure there are goats that are somewhere out there.

CW: They've got to be out there. Yeah.

EM: OK. So, you were talking about the emergency medical classes. Why did you decide to start taking them?

CW: Well I did my basic EMT... my first stint out in Utah and that was after I'd gotten booted out of the School of the Arts. I was trying to decide what to major in in college. Oh, and Western Carolina back home. The place I couldn't wait to get away from... was looking better and they had at that time one of the few bachelor degree programs in emergency medical care. I think they were the original. So maybe this could work as a career.

EM: So EMT. That's like paramedic?

CW: Well there is EMT basic and intermediate, paramedic. They all have EMT and a different letter tacked on the end depending on. But paramedics are the, I guess the top end of the prehospital care. That... that actually got... Some of the very first paramedics in this country were in Haywood County. The Haywood County Rescue Squad was the... outside of Los Angeles I think was the first advanced life support. They were doing physician level care under the direction of a physician but delivered out of the back of an ambulance.

EM: Mm hmm. My mom was a registered nurse at Harris Regional and at Angel, but she calls the paramedics "paragods."

CW: Well... yeah you know. They... That's probably... Yeah.

EM: Fitting?

CW: Well, you know... I'm sure there are paramedics that have an overinflated sense of their worth. Yeah. There's always little rivalries between nurses and medics, I guess. Nurses generally have a... probably the whole idea of paramedics is there's just a few essential skills that aren't that difficult to train. You could... It doesn't take quite the clinical grounding that nurses typically get, you know, nutrition and extended care of patient.

EM: There's probably a bit more like physical requirements though. Like the lifting.

CW: Well, whether you're in nursing or working out of an ambulance it's all physically taxing moving bodies around. I mean there are back injuries throughout healthcare, but um... Yeah so, I think if paramedics say the nurses, "Well can you intubate?" or, you know, can a lowly LPN start an IV? Well big deal dude. There's just a few skills that they throw paramedics in, but they don't have... tend to not have. It's a faster course of training than. Yeah.

EM: So, when you were done with the EMT classes what did you do with it?

CW: Well I worked initially for the Alta fire department in Utah and then for Gold Cross Ambulance, which is a private ambulance company, that had the contract for most of the ambulance service in the Salt Lake City area.

EM: Oh, in Utah. I was like I'd never heard of a private ambulance here.

CW: Yeah. Well Moody's Funeral Home they were a private ambulance provider. They had a contract through the county and really so is West Care. I mean that's... Through all the changes that Harris has been through since Moody's lost the contract, the hospital which has always been a private entity has had the contract for the county so while the rescue squad is, I guess funded directly and operated by volunteers and county employees the EMS has always been a contract arrangement.

EM: Did you do any EMT work here?

CW: Just ride alongs in school. Well and then Western had - I guess they still do, I don't know what they call it these days but student emergency care team. Ambulance, show up at football games and the like.

EM: That's an on-campus thing?

CW: Yeah.

EM: I've skipped around a lot.

CW: Well I'm jumping around myself.

EM: No. Ok. So, back to Utah. Do you feel like going over there taught you anything in particular?

CW: I think it's important to, even if you wind up living in the little community you grew up, its important to get out at some point. And so, it was maybe not the most worldly experience there in the

mountain west but it was different from western North Carolina so it served that purpose for me to put some distance between me and home for a little while.

EM: I mean it's pretty much the other side of the country. I wouldn't call it globally worldly but in terms of the U.S. yeah.

CW: It's a different... It's certainly a very different landscape. Yeah. Salt Lake City... that metro area is an actual city and the LDS church through their mission work I guess is... they've attracted people from all over the world. You have some... even though it's a pretty... pretty homogenous culture out there in Utah, they have, there were pockets of Pacific Islanders, folks from all over the world there.

EM: All right we talked about Western. So why did you decide to stop, like, working with the EMT department? Or working in EMT stuff?

CW: Oh, it wasn't for me as it turns out. I think I liked... I liked the studying of it. I mean I really excelled at school. I was good at the book learning part of it. It's hard, back breaking work. If you didn't want to stay in the trucks the career path was either what... in what... the rest of my bachelor's degree at Western was really in being an administrator. There were business classes and financial management and healthcare classes. That didn't really appeal. Although that was the... hindsight. Those classes I sort of chafed at was more interested in the medical part of the schooling but the part... sort of... not as attuned to wound up being more important to my life as a small business owner. I go back and review my notes from some of those classes.

EM: So, City Lights now. You started working here in 1997?

CW: Yep.

EM: Okay.

CW: As soon as I got back from Utah. I'd been thinking about library school as a nice change of pace from EMS and sort of in keeping with the acquisition of knowledge. Learning about stuff seemed to like where I was being drawn to and anyway Joyce Moore who really built City Lights into what it is today was looking for a book seller about the time I was thinking about applying to library school so I just kind of diverted to being a book seller instead of a librarian.

EM: Mm hmm. So, um... How did you come across the job? Like was it just, like, an ad?

CW: Well, no. No, I... The Moore's were family friends. They live on up the road from us in Tuckasegee. Their daughters were about my age. I'd been a customer at City Lights actually before Joyce had it. About a year and a half Gary Carden had it. So, from the very beginning a customer, and, so I think it was just a conversation with Joyce. Somebody was leaving and she had an opening.

EM: Mm hmm. Okay. Um... What were your initial responsibilities? Like, what were you... Book seller?

CW: Yeah, so um... Yeah, I don't have much specialization here. Over the years usually have a bookkeeper. The rest of are trying to move the books the bookkeeper is trying to keep the books. And then sometimes a publicity person but otherwise all of us book sellers are doing everything from scooping the cat box and taking out trash bags to, that's on the other end of the spectrum. Choosing

books to put on the shelves to try and sale. Just being a buyer for any retail shop is kind of one of the key goals. And everything in between.

EM: Yeah. Um... Did your responsibilities, like, change as you worked your way up in the store?

CW: Oh Yeah. Joyce didn't immediately say, "Here's a Random House catalogue create an order for the fall list." No initially it was just shelving books, helping customers.

EM: Do you have like a specific genre that you like to put on the book list or that you liked to put on it then?

CW: I've always read a fair variety of stuff. Both nonfiction and fiction. I do enjoy literary fiction and I guess usually I'm reading genre fiction. It's either mystery or sci-fi fantasy. I don't, or I haven't read much romance or, I've read some westerns when I was a teenager. No particular genre and as a book seller you try and have something for everybody not just what you enjoy to read.

EM: Well I guess the variety makes you suited for the job?

CW: Yeah. I hope so.

EM: Can you tell me more about how you came to own the business?

CW: Yeah. Joyce, I guess in 2009 started thinking it was time to retire and, so she worked with an accountant to come up with a reasonable value for the business and offered it to me. Offered to finance the sale.

EM: Is there any particular reason that you bought it like why you wanted to buy?

CW: Because in 2010 when the kindle was first introduced it seemed like a sure-fire bet, right? (laughter) That was two years into the recession. Yeah it wasn't the best timing, but she had structured the deal and she's still our landlord. Kept the rent low but, we've just made it work. I mean I sort of thought it might be a good option on down the road. I was a little surprised that she was ready to retire when she did, but she made it work.

EM: Yeah! Okay. What has owning a business taught you?

CW: Oh gosh. A lot of little things. I can't think of a grand takeaway from it except that being a small business owner is hard. There's a lot of little details. Lot of little details. For a sole proprietorship... necessarily spread yourself a little thin to cover all those things.

EM: Any other little details from that time?

CW: What else? There are a million ways that dollars can trickle away. (laughter)

EM: Don't we know.

CW: Apparently human enterprise with all those imperfections and customers, employees are human. They get sick and can't come in or they break up with their sweetie. You know I don't want that to be the takeaway. That just popped into my head. I'm not sure what else to say about it.

EM: Gotcha. What's your favorite part about being a business owner?

CW: You're the master of your own destiny, I guess. That's appealing. Sort of the other edge of the sword, I guess. Try kicking your own butt sometimes. If it's not working out, then well, do something. But, it's nice to be in that position that you don't have to come to a consensus with a committee or hope that the higher ups approve what want to do. Let's try this.

EM: Sort of like. Who's in charge here? Oh, It's me.

CW: Oh no. It's me. Runaway (laughter)

EM: Where's an adult? I'm an adult.

CW: Exactly. That's the scary part.

EM: I think that's the scariest part about being an adult.

CW: Yes.

EM: Not yet. Not yet.

CW: Yep. Enjoy it while you can.

EM: I need an adult here. An adult is what I need. So, do you own the café as well as the bookstore.

CW: No, it's a separate business. But Joyce ran it as a part of the same business until maybe around 2000 or so. I think it was Springstreet café down there for about ten years. Yeah. Since about 2000 its been a separate business.

EM: Have you made any changes to the business model since you took over?

CW: The model? No. We're pretty much still general trade bookstore, selling new and used. Just little, very small changes. Upping the rebate, a little bit on the frequent buyers club. I guess the big thing was about three years ago now we really had to change software and the new software has let us get more out of the used book room. Control that inventory a little bit more. But, no big changes. She had a good model.

EM: Let's see. Have you seen any changes in the clientele over the years?

CW: Yeah. We're trying to be a community bookstore that is all things to everybody. Whatever kind of book they're looking for. I don't know. We see people move in and out of the community, and so other than just that constant turnover as folks... I guess the hospital and the university sort of create maybe a bit more turnover than other communities in the region. But the character of the customer base I don't think has really changed. We still have the best customers in town. Yep.

EM: Do you think that like the influx of tourists coming in because, you know, Sylva is a little Asheville now. Do you think that's helped at all?

CW: Yeah... Well, you know, I think Sylva is more of a seasonal town than it used to be. We always used to say well Dillsboro is very seasonal but Sylva's not but we... I think we... Yeah, we do more business in the summer than we used to. It drops off more dramatically in January, February and March then it used to. So maybe some of our eBooks have plateaued around 30% or so, unit sales nationally I think

maybe. We've felt that bite. Even though it's slowed down. Yeah, we don't, some of our local folks don't come in as much as they used to.

EM: Let's see. I got lost. Do you think that people are still involved in reading?

CW: Yeah. Yep. And uh... There's certainly more... these things competing for everybody's attention. But no, I think folks still enjoy reading for pleasure. And in terms of people that buy actual print books for recreational reading. You know when eBooks first started coming out, the pundits, anyway, said in a generation there will be no more print books, but we haven't really seen that. In fact, we see maybe more seniors gravitating toward eBooks because they can punch up the font and kids your generation maybe at least when reading something book length maybe aren't moving away from the print books. Still enjoy a bound copy. I don't know if that's sort of the same appeal of the tangible that has seen a revival in vinyl and the record industry. I don't know. Just speculating.

EM: Yeah!

CW: It hasn't been the generational split that some people anticipated.

EM: Mm hmm. It's like people getting Polaroids now.

CW: Right. It's got a little retro chic.

EM: I've got one myself, but, I definitely agree it's probably... I think a lot of it is like its old even though its not that old. A lot of that is just the appeal of it. "Oh books. Yeah." And I think I never really saw the appeal of eBooks so I'm guessing apparently a fair amount of people feel the same way because books are still doing all right.

CW: And there's, I mean there's recreational reading. We're not really a textbook book seller but I think most people if they're reading, they want to...whatever they're reading they want to retain it and its been pretty well documented that reading in print, you retain things better that you read in print than what you read on a screen.

EM: Do you get a lot of your sales from like the Western students coming and for summer reading or the high school students?

CW: High School summer reading... Western's... what business we get from Western students is more September through April. We do some business with the University and the schools and Southwestern Community College so we do have some institutional customers that are important to us. And yeah, I guess Western they've got the textbook rental for undergrads so it's really not textbooks, but some of the supplemental reads that are suggested, we end up selling some of those.

EM: Okay. Why do you think... do you think that Sylva is like a good location for readers?

CW: Apparently. We're a bookish little town. We've got that beautiful library up there, and four bookshops that have made a pretty good run at it. Other folks selling some books on the side, but Harry Alter is a proper antiquarian bookseller, and then the Friends of the Library does a lot of trade and used books and we have new, and used and then there's River Jordan the Christian shop. So, there's are sort of... kind of the major... If you look at the book selling industry globally that's kind of the... sort of the niches of book retailing. Certainly, in this country... Christian, general new. Well, trade publishing can

kind of be divided into trade and academic. So, if you include the bookstores at SCC and Western the textbook stores, Jackson county has it all. Represents each facet of the industry.

EM: Are you in contact with the other bookstore owners? Is there like a secret book owner club?

CW: A cabal. Uh, yeah... We're a collegial bunch. I can't honestly say that I, I'm not sure I'd even recognize the owners of River Jordan if I passed them on the street. Occasionally, we have some of the same vendors and at least on one occasion we got a shipment that was intended for them. I ran it over to them but no. Harry Alter's a good friend and of course the Friend of the Library's crew of volunteers they are all nice folks. Folks that work at both those shops on Main Street are very nice too, very neighborly to direct out of town visitors up here. Well we don't have it, but you might check at City Lights. Which is great because we're kind of tucked away up here out of sight.

EM: Do you think that like impacts the business a little?

CW: Oh yeah. It's a huge help.

EM: The fact that you're like tucked away do you think that hurts it any?

CW: Well I'd be paying more in rent if we were down on Main Street.

EM: That's true.

CW: So, yeah sometimes people say I'm concerned that you're hidden up there. It's spread out a little bit. Yeah it might. I don't know. It's a tradeoff.

EM: What kind of impact do you think City Lights has had on the community of Sylva?

CW: Well, I think its been a very positive impact over the years. Both bringing the whole world that you can get between the covers of books to our little rural community and then hopefully highlighting the works of some of our local writers. And, well inspiring them first as readers and connecting them with other writers and then taking what they publish, hopefully giving them a good springboard out into the wider world.

EM: Do you have any regulars in the bookstore, and do you get to hear interesting stories from them?

CW: Yeah. We have a great bunch of regulars. They share wonderful stories with us.

EM: Do you have any favorite stories you'd like to share?

CW: Oh my, there's so many. Somebody like Bill Crawford comes in, and in his mind, he has all the connections of every family and this and all the surrounding counties. Some of the connections he's able to make. That's not a specific story Chris. Having had Gary Carden, I mentioned he was the founding owner of this shop. He's been a customer over the years and pretty darn good storyteller. Just getting to hear a world class storyteller just one-on-one over the counter is a treat and retelling them without the skills of a storyteller is not, doesn't begin to capture it so I guess I don't have any that I can share. (laughter)

EM: Do you think that talking to people like that have helped you to get to know more people around the community?

CW: Oh yeah. It's my main social interaction. (laughter)

EM: Alright. Let's start about MadStone Café for a minute. How did you come across the opportunity to co-own it?

CW: Well, so Western, after the fire in 2014 or so, that kind of spelled the end of that little business strip of shops there, practically in the middle of campus they redeveloped it with a mixed use. Big buzz word in real estate development, I guess. Residential above and commercial down below. I think over the years the university had... When they first talked about down at the old lab school sort of a mixed-use development, that might include a bookstore like Barnes and Noble, some faculty at Western piped up and said what about - that sounds like a chain. What about, what's that going to do to our local independent bookstore. These are good advocates to have. And at that time the different administration came in and said well whatever developer we work with would probably set the rents such that a local business couldn't afford to occupy the space. They've been right about that, because when this developer of Noble Hall first started talking, I know Jeanette that had the Mad Batter - has the Mad Batter - and I, we both went to a meeting and "oh you're wanting that kind of rent. Well forget about it." We won't be in there. But certain folks in the administration were I think determined to try to both have a good mix of shops and including something like a maybe a bookstore/coffee shop. Seems like a natural thing to have on a college campus and if possible, to have it be an independent even already established business from the area. So, they came to us and said what do you think about doing this and we said well I don't think we can afford the rent and they said well if we can't help with the rent maybe we can help form the business which is what they did. So, it's really Suzanne Stone the head of Rolling Stone Burrito and Jeannette Evans that had Mad Batter there in Cullowhee before she came to Sylva... and then me. Well, we are managing partners basically. The endowment fund of the University really created that business... engaged us to manage it for them.

EM: Is it stressful to be involved in owning two businesses?

CW: Well, its just more in demands on a finite amount of time. But it's been... earlier I spoke of the pros and cons of being a sole proprietor. Having a little management team of three has been an interesting contrast in that we can bounce ideas off one another hopefully come up with a better more considered approach than we might make on our own.

EM: Do you have a lot of competition from like online stores when it comes from online stores when it comes to City Lights and MadStone?

CW: Yeah. Well food isn't the... retail is very subject to what we call showrooming. Where you know you see somebody... "Oh that looks good and even..." So, you're hiring people to staff the place, pay rent, keeping the lights on, buying the very expensive merchandise and then somebody's just using it as a showroom to then buy it from Amazon or some place. That's frustrating.

EM: Do you think that that's like drastically affected the business? Or is it kind of just a...

CW: No, I would say it's drastic. And it's not unique to bookstores. I think that's happening worldwide to brick and mortar shops. Alibaba or Amazon or what have you. There's no real point in gnashing ones teeth about it. It's just, it's just happening.

EM: Do you think there are any other challenges to owning a small business? I think around here we have a pretty good buy local kind of environment especially with like the "Shop Small Saturdays" but do you think there are any other challenges to it, or do you think all in all Sylva is a pretty good place to be?

CW: It's a great community. It's a community that's supported us. Well supported City Lights for thirty-two years now. So, It's humbling and I'm very grateful for that.

EM: Is there anything else you'd like to add before we conclude?

CW: I don't think so. Can't think of anything. It was a good list of questions. Covered a lot of ground I hope I haven't meandered too much through.

EM: Meandering is always welcome. Most of the interviews I've done are meandering but that's where you get the best stuff.

CW: I hope that when they sit down to transcribe it, they can make some sense of it, make a coherent narrative out of it.

EM: They do a pretty good job of it.

CW: Well, thank you so much.

EM: Thank you.

CW: All right. Best of luck with your upcoming senior year.