

Q&A with nonprofit founder Craig Brauner

BY DAVID JASPER

The Bulletin

Craig Brauner is the vice president and co-founder of Ellipse Theatre Community, a new performing arts nonprofit in Bend. Born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky, Brauner moved to Bend in 2018 and immediately became involved in the arts community. After he collaborated with Angelina Anello-Dennee to produce the summer 2020 production "Songs for a New World," the two began working on Ellipse. It aims to begin staging productions later in the year, but is already making its presence felt on social media. On Monday, Ellipse will launch "In Conversation With . . . a Listening Project," featuring Brauner interviewing an array of creatives both Central Oregon and farther afield.

The unifying thread: a desire to answer the single question "What happens when we allow ourselves to listen and create a space for someone to be heard?"

The first episode of "In Conversation With . . . a Listening Project" will be released Monday on YouTube (youtube.com/etcbend), with one of the 12 episodes releasing each week through late June and shared on ETC's Facebook (facebook.com/etcbend) and Instagram (@etcbend).

Q. Can you take me to the beginning of this project, and how it came to be?

A. Ellipse Theatre Community, one of our missions is to build a supportive and artistically aware community through the performing

arts and education. Before we even dove into productions and creating a season of shows, we really wanted to listen to our community, and especially the artistic community. We were trying to figure out what's the best way to go about this. It evolved into this listening project, where my intention was to interview diverse artists and diverse art forms, and to have an understanding of what their experience is, and also just to know them as a person and an artist. It was really surprising, because, you know, the project, we had this expectation, of, "Oh, we'll just listen," but what came through are these pretty dynamic and sincere moments of connection. I bonded with people who have lost their parents, like I just lost my mother in November, and I had these other moments of relating — just relating. We're doing different, yet we found these moments of common ground. We thought that this venture, this Listening Project, is important to achieving our mission of creating community one stage at a time. That's kind of our tagline. We thought that this Listening Project was a great foundation for us as a new nonprofit arts organization.

Q. And the eventual goal is to start staging shows too?

A. Yeah, the goal is to definitely start staging shows. We're in the process of developing educational programming, outreach initiatives, and of course theatrical productions, which everybody's really excited about. We've actually decided, just from the response to this Listening



Submitted photo

Voiceover artist Barbara Rich, top, talks with Craig Brauner, co-founder of Ellipse Theatre Community.

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Project, this is going to be an ongoing series we'll continue to do. We're already planning on a season two.

Q. Have you started shooting those?

A. No, we haven't. We're kind of pitching ideas. Right now, the focus for season one was diverse artists and diverse artforms. At the moment with season two, I'm kind of curious about other perspectives. I have this thought, what if we focus on the essential workers. I'd love to hear stories from those like nurses that have worked in the COVID unit, a firefighter who's battling wildfires, the police officers, just really, really tapping into the different avenues and perspectives.

Q. I liked in the press release how you asked everyone in season one what inspires them, and, well, maybe I can let you talk about it.

A. Yeah, we embraced just the uniqueness of the 12 people we interviewed. We did link the conversations with one question I asked throughout, and that was the question "What inspires you?" That was my favorite question to ask because more often than not, it was people. That led to this really great conversation with (co-

median and actor) Jamal Thomas, who was the last person I interviewed. . . . I was just amazed by how many people said "People inspired me." I asked him, "Do you ever tell the people that inspire you that they inspire you?" And he said, "Actually, no." It just led to this bigger thing of, wow, we as people and as a community should really start to talk more and to really offer our appreciation, and when we're inspired by someone, to voice it. Because a lot of people don't even know that they're inspiring.

Q. It seems like a timely project, too. We're all in a kind of tough spot here, hopefully, at the end of the pandemic. There's a lot of political and cultural division. Don't you feel like these community conversations need to happen?

A. Yeah, I do. And I think what was key in our conversations, is that while I interviewed 12 very, very different people who are very different from myself, and they shared their different perspectives, and yet we were always able to come to a point where we were in agreement or we were in alignment and we were just connected. And it wasn't politics, and it wasn't religion. It came down to the most core, authentic human connection.

■ David Jasper: 541-383-0349, djasper@bendbulletin.com