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Interview with Karen McClellan

Kelly McPharlin

Karen McClellan

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Interviewer: Kelly McPharlin

Interviewee: Karen McClellan

Place: Custom Bridal Creations, Public Square, Mount Vernon

Duration: 00:17:44, 17 minutes, 44 seconds.

Co-workers present: none

Karen McClellan: Am I going?

Kelly McPharlin: Yes, we're going.

Karen: Okay.

Kelly: So could you please state your name and occupation?

Karen: Karen McClellan. What's my occupation... Well, I own a shop on the square right now. So, seamstress, dress designer.

Kelly: And the name of the shop is...?

Karen: Is, Custom Bridal Creations. Karen's Sewing Services found inside Custom Bridal Creations.

Kelly: So how did you come up with the store?

Karen: Well, actually when we moved up to Mount Vernon from Hawking Hills area... (laughs) I'm actually a musician, and I wanted to start a studio and teach lessons up here, but I couldn't get my foot in the door. So, I do sewing and, I put an ad in the paper, and it just took off.

Kelly: So, um, how did you find this space on the public square?

Karen: Well, you know, I quickly outgrew my home, cause we downsized to a smaller home when we moved up here and I'm like, "I have no room to do the sewing." Um, I have been wandering around because places don't open up... a nice place doesn't open up very often. On the Square, especially. And, uh, I just drove around and lo and behold, one day... I'm like... yeah, it just came available.

Kelly: So...so, it was a vacant space.

Karen: Yeah, uh-uh.

Kelly: And when did you move in here?

Karen: I... Um, February, about February 1st. Yeah.

Kelly: So very recent, just two weeks ago... yeah.

Karen: Um...oh good (laughs). Yeah, it's scary good. Yeah good in the way that I'm like... Um, you want to be able to do the work well, and you want to not be overwhelmed, but you want the business. So, I did hire, somebody comes in and I'm kinda teaching them a little bit so they can do a lot of the hemming and zippers and things like that. Because I actually make bridal dresses and bridesmaid dresses and design things like that. The gowns over there, that originally was like, lace all up in here and in the back all buttoned. And she wanted to redo it so she could wear it. So I have to, like, cut all of that off, cut the back down, and you know... That's kinda what I do.

Kelly: So what other services do you offer here?

Karen: Well, general alterations. You know, putting in zippers, hemming things, um... I used to work at a shoe repair, but I don't want to get into that, but... (laughs). But we also do purse repair, you know if you want to repair a purse, or the lining, or the straps. Um, and then like I said, I actually make bridesmaids dresses, and formals, and alter them, and... and, um yeah.

Kelly: So why do you think your business has been so good so far?

Karen: There's not many people doing what I do.

Kelly: Hmhm. Do you think the location has...

Karen: Oh, the location is tremendous. Because there is so much traffic that goes around the square. And, you know, when you have the dresses in the window and they're bright colors, and you've got alterations and sewing on the window, people just notice it. So yeah, the location can't be beat.

Kelly: Yeah. Do you like having your business on the square then?

Karen: Mmmhmm. Yeah.

Kelly: Do you get to walk around the square?

Karen: I cannot wait until they have, like, I know they have like, First Fridays, they have the Farmers Market, they have Dan Emmett festival... I mean, all of that stuff goes on in the square. And I'm right in the middle of it.

Kelly: That's really exciting. So what kind of activities do you see happening on the square on a daily basis?

Karen: Well... Mount Vernon in general is active. I mean, it's not like a dead little town. I see people walking. Um, lots of drivers. There's people that come and just sit at the park across the street.

Kelly: Have you been to First Fridays and Farmers Markets?

Karen: Oh yes.

Kelly: Yes. What do you think of them?

Karen: I love them. Well, Farmers Market this year, because we have a little farm, we're gonna be a part of the Farmers Market.

Kelly: Oh wow. What do you sell?

Karen: Oh my. Well, vegetables. (laughs). Well, I make lip balms too. I make salves and lip balms. So I'd like to do that. But also just, you know, general vegetables, to have those. Um, you know, get our feet wet and see what happens. First Fridays, I love it. Because, you know, there's a lot of people and they usually have music on the square. It's, it's nice.

Kelly: What do you like about it?

Karen: Well, I like going down to see Nazarene College usually has art exhibits. And those are usually pretty interesting installations or art exhibits. Um, I like going in the little shops, I like listening to the music and sitting out and watching people.

Kelly: How would you describe, like the mood or the vibe of the place? Of the square during the events?

Karen: Fun, easygoing, relaxed. I enjoy it. It's good energy. Yeah.

Kelly: Do you use the square at other times when there aren't planned events?

Karen: Well, we don't live right in Mount Vernon. We're kind of out, so, no.

Kelly: Do you have children?

Karen: They're all grown. I have six grandchildren.

Kelly: Six grandchildren! Do they live in the area?

Karen: Um... no. I have one daughter who actually lives with us. We built a little apartment for her because she's an artist. See the tiger back there... that's her stuff. So she lives there. But my other kids, no. They live about an hour to two hours away.

Kelly: Do you wish you could use the square more if there were more events?

Karen: Well, I mean I haven't been here long enough to really find out, but I mean they could always use more stuff going on. I think they would get response. People seem to want to do things.

Kelly: Why do you think people are really excited about going to events on the public square?

Karen: Well, something to do. I don't know... why do people... I don't know that depends on the person, why they're doing it.

Kelly: Why do you go?

Karen: Well, because we're new here, I just like finding out about the area. And it's a very friendly area. I mean, everyone I have come in contact with, they've been very friendly, very hospitable and welcoming. So...

Kelly: So the people who come into your store, are they local mostly, from Mount Vernon?

Karen: I think so, yeah.

Kelly: Had they heard about your business from advertisements, or do they just see it?

Karen: Well, I do have an ad in the paper, so that always brings in customers. I have another seamstress who sometimes refers people to me. Referrals.

Kelly: Do you have a lot of people just walking by?

Karen: Yeah, I think people just see the sign, just driving around.

Kelly: So it's a big advantage for you.

Karen: Hmm hmm.

Kelly: Do you think if you had your business in another place you would get as much traffic?

Karen: Nope. Well, personally if I'm driving down Main Street, I'm, I'm concentrating on driving and watching the lights, I'm not looking at what businesses are there. Unless I stop and look around or if I'm walking. Here, I mean, it's just, it's there and you can see it and still be driving and it pounces out at you.

Kelly: So have you noticed any changes in the square since you've been here? I guess you've only been here...

Karen: I've only been here a year (laughs). No, cause I have no idea what it was like a couple years ago.

Kelly: How does the, where you used to live was there a place like a square in your town?

Karen: Well, not really. Yeah, we were out in the boonies. And the little town we were in... Um...I don't know, it just didn't seem, people didn't do much. We would actually travel down to Athens, Ohio and go to the farmers market there and do things down there.

Kelly: Do you go to the Farmers Market every week when its here?

Karen: When it's here, oh yes. One of the reasons we wanted to get involved with the Farmers Market was we kept hearing people go, "Oh is this organic?" or "Do you use sprays?" or "How is it grown?" People are being a lot more aware about what's being grown and where it's being grown. Um, and we don't use any pesticides or sprays. We're organic, so we're like, oh we might as well. People are looking for it. And the other thing this shop does is we have a list of charities and you can actually take some of that money that you put into here, like if you have a hemmed pant, like \$6 or \$8, a portion of that you can send to a charity. A local charity.

Kelly: Oh... Did you start that?

Karen: Yeah... Well I'm very pro-local economy, eating locally, and trying to do as much as you can within your local economy. So if it benefits the charities in the area, I want to help out.

Kelly: That's great. So do you think, um, having events like First Fridays and the Farmers Market are a good way of sustaining the local community?

Karen: Oh sure, sure.

Kelly: Do you have any hopes for, um, more events or changes that will occur around the square?

Karen: Well, I think eventually I would like to be a part of the association, either the merchants association, or something downtown. You know, I'm sure there's some kind of business association and see what their ideas are. I'm always in for new things and attracting people. So...

Kelly: Do you have any expectations or hopes for your shop in the future?

Karen: Yeah.

Kelly: What are they?

Karen: (laughs) Well, I want to get busier (laughs). Um, you know, right now, just starting I don't have a lot of dresses in here, I don't have a lot made. But I just want to get the word spread out. I think my biggest, um, concern for people that are shopping is that with bridal especially, all the clothes are made in another country. And I like people to start to buy and spend their money, you know, here, in Mount Vernon. Keep it here. Um, I would like to really be a service to people. And that's my, that's my big thing. Make sure that the customer, whatever they need, if I need to refer them to someplace else to fulfill their needs, then I'll do that. But customers first.

Kelly: Have you noticed any other, more informal gatherings? I know they sometimes have political rallies. Have you seen any...?

Karen: I haven't seen any since I've been here. Of course, like I said too, before I started the business... I might now that I'm downtown, but before I started this business I was outside of the city, and didn't come in, you know, just went through but didn't really stop. So, now that I'm here I might see more of that, I don't know.

Kelly: Do you have a relationship with the other shop owners on the square?

Karen: Um, I've met a few people that also want to network and do things.

Kelly: What do you like to do in downtown Mount Vernon?

Karen: (laughs) Well, there's some neat little shops. What is there to do in Mount Vernon? (laughs)

Kelly: Well you mentioned First Fridays...

Karen: It's tiny, it's a tiny community.

Kelly: Yeah, right. Especially in the winter.

Karen: Yeah. If there are events going on then yeah, I'll go to them. But, um, you know, I don't know.

Kelly: Tell me about the Dan Emmett Festival. I've never been to it.

Karen: Well that's, uh, Dan Emmett was a musician way back when. You'll have to find out the history of Dan Emmett, cause there's like a Dan Emmett school and all kinds of stuff. I don't know, they have, oh gosh, find out about it because I... It was our first year, last year when we went. They just have different, you know, venues goin' on that you can go to.

Kelly: What was your experience like, going?

Karen: Well, I don't know it's... It was okay. I mean... (laughs)

Kelly: Did you go with your family?

Karen: No, just me and my husband.

Kelly: What did you do when you were there?

Karen: Oh, we just walked around. I mean, we didn't actually attend anything, I'm sure there's a lot of stuff, we'll probably look into it more next year. But, um, I don't know. You'll have to find someone else to talk to about it.

Kelly: Yeah, I'm interviewing the, one of the managers of the festival.

Karen: Oh, really? Yeah.

Kelly: But I just wanted a more local, a more regular person perspective.

Karen: Yeah... Yeah, I'm not the right person to talk to you about it (laughs).

Kelly: But you went, and you enjoyed it.

Karen: Oh yeah, I enjoy anything I go to, you know. And like I said, everyone seems very, you know, maybe our RFD (?) Everyone's very nice here.

Kelly: Do you think that, you mentioned, I mean, you moved into this space just a couple weeks ago...

Karen: I moved in, well I actually signed the lease in the middle of January, but it took a lot of work to get it ready.

Kelly: So are there a lot of vacancies on the square, or are a lot of the shops filled?

Karen: I don't think there's any vacancies.

Kelly: How would you say business is going generally in the town?

Karen: In the downtown? Um, I think they're doin well. Yeah.

Kelly: You've been successful so far, definitely.

Karen: I think so, yeah.

Kelly: Do you think there, um, business is kind of picking up for people? Or have you noticed any changes since you've been here?

Karen: Well, you know it depends on what kind of business it is. I mean, you've got a service business, we've have banks, but service businesses like AAA, or... people are a part of that and they come and do that. You've got the business forms next door to me. And then you've got, like, the vacuum cleaners. Anything that's a service, you know, you're gonna have some success because people fix things and they get things repaired. They're still traveling evidently, cause AAA seems to do pretty good (laughs). Um, what else is there in the square? I don't know... the restaurants seem to be doing pretty good.

Kelly: On an average day, how many people come into your shop, do you think?

Karen: Oh, that's hard to gear, I haven't been open that long. Um, well, I don't gear it by how many people come in as much as what types of orders I'm getting, you know. So, yeah, I'd say every day we get several people coming in that I've never seen before.

Kelly: Just walking in.

Karen: Yeah, and then you've got the repeat people. So, um...

Kelly: So would you have your business anywhere else, or is this your preferred location?

Karen: In Mount Vernon?

Kelly: Yeah.

Karen: I think this is a really good location.

Kelly: Great. Do you have any other information for me?

Karen: I watch people, you know, when we change the window. Cause I like to do windows, they're kinda like "Ahhh..." And you can watch people, and they'll kinda be looking as they drive.

Kelly: Yeah, I mean that's the thing, whenever I come into the square it just seems like everyone's racing around the circle, just looking where they're going.

Karen: Yeah, but, but... They, I think they notice. And I have a lighted sign which kind of helps at nighttime. And my hours are customer friendly. I didn't want to be just a 9 to 5 shop, because people work, and it's like, where do you go after 5 o'clock, you're not even home from work yet. So the 12-7 three days a week seems to work out.

Kelly: So when are you open?

Karen: Wednesday through Friday, 12-7. I'm here other days of the week (laughs). And that's the thing, if the lights are on, and the doors are open, people come in whether or not I'm open or not officially, but that's okay.

Kelly: Well, do you have anything else left to say, or anything we haven't talked about?

Karen: I don't know, other than... You know, Mount Vernon's a nice little place.

Kelly: That's great.