



- Kelly Scanlon: Joining us on this episode of Banking on Kansas City is Pete Cowdin, the co-founder and co-director along with Deb Pettid of the Rabbit Hole, a museum for children's literature. Welcome Pete.
- Pete Cowdin: Hey, thanks for having me.
- Kelly Scanlon: The Rabbit Hole, it's an innovative one of a kind museum that you're building to create an experience around literature. So walk us through that. When it opens if I am a guest at the Rabbit Hole, what will I experience, see, feel, hear? Tell us about the whole thing.
- Pete Cowdin: Well, so the idea we've been percolating for a long time. My wife Deb and I had the Reading Reptile for 30 years, children's bookstore here in Kansas City and over time in that experience, our love was for the art of the book, our passion was for the literature and the art of the book and the business was just sort of a necessary evil and we had to sell things and to be around literature all the time. But during those years we met many, many authors, some of the greatest authors in the country and illustrators and befriended them as well. And so, I'd say 15 or so years ago we started thinking about the Rabbit Hole.
- Kelly Scanlon: So you were inspired decades ago?
- Pete Cowdin: Yeah, we were pretty insurgent as a book seller. We did a lot of crazy things. Part of the reputation of the Reading Reptile within the publishing industry was no one knew what to expect when they got here like for an author tour or a visit, because we'd put on big productions and surprised the creators with a play and we'd put them into it, we would make things and began to sculpt and create objects based on their work, sculptures, characters from their books. And I think in that sense we became beloved within the industry on the creator side. Maybe not so much with the corporate side.
- Kelly Scanlon: No, but certainly among your customers as well. I mean, it was a very popular bookstore.

Pete Cowdin: Yeah, and so, the bookstore is very organic that way and it just sort of grew into this forest of things to look at. So the Rabbit Hole was percolating in our minds for many years and it changed shape a lot of different ways. It's a big project. It's a \$12 to \$14 million dollar project now.

Kelly Scanlon: Definitely, yeah.

Pete Cowdin: And so, in 2015 we decided to go ahead and throw ourselves into the project and begin that process, which really is a process. It feels like forever but we've been working on this, pretty much full on for four years now.

Kelly Scanlon: Give us a sense of again, when I come once it launches, which is what? March, 2020? Is that still the projected date?

Pete Cowdin: Ah well, we'll just say and be more liberal and say spring.

Kelly Scanlon: Okay, spring 2020 it is. So if I come and I bring some kids along with me, what can I expect?

Pete Cowdin: So it is, first and foremost, the home to the world's first Explor-a-storium, so that's within the Rabbit Hole. But the Rabbit Hole has many parts. The Explor-a-storium is a space where you will be able to engage, interact, immerse yourself, and in some cases, permanent exhibits, large and small. For instance, a full-scale exhibit of Marianne The Steam Shovel from Mike Mulligan, but also small things like the Little Fare Family Under a Tree Trunk.

Kelly Scanlon: And it sounds like, if I'm understanding you correctly, it sounds like that visitors actually become participants in these stories.

Pete Cowdin: Absolutely, yeah. To different extents. So there will be some things that are just there, like a good friend you can go give Katy No-Pocket a hug or whatever and do very simple things. And also being very cognizant of multiple ages and generations. And so, for young kids one of the problems families have navigating spaces is some of the kids like it, some of them are like, ugh, I don't want to deal with that. So we're creating a kind of scaffolded experience where if you're three or if you're 12 or if you're 15, there'll be interesting things to do, pathways you can take. It's a discoverable environment really. And so, that's part of the new museum culture is creating a less didactic space in a more experiential space. So that's the Explor-a-storium. It's two floors, it's 25,000 square feet. There'll be a grand staircase you can take upstairs, which will take you to the second floor of the Explor-a-storium and on the top of that staircase is a hundred-year Panorama of the American children's books.

Pete Cowdin: So that's like a natural history museum exhibit where you can see the scenery and the characters sort of interacting through a hundred years of creation. And that's the place where you can kind of get your bearings. That's more didactic, you'll find more information. So some of the things you see in the Explor-a-

storium. And it'll be growing over time. It's not like we're opening spring 2020 and we're done. We have just finished construction of our fabrication shops and our design studio where we'll be creating all of the exhibits for the Rabbit Hole and we'll be employing between 25 and 30 artists, fabricators and designers. There are all these contact points in the Rabbit Hole that go beyond just the experience with the Explor-a-storium, which is always changing. So our evil plan is to create a place that's so sort of incomprehensible in your first visit you have to come back.

Kelly Scanlon: Exactly, exactly. We've talked about what inspired the concept and that it's been more than a few years in the making, definitely. You talked about going back 15, 20 years even thinking about this idea, but then you had to decide we're going to move forward with this. So what has gone into making it a reality? I mean you got some great relationships I know you've built, so how has it gotten this far?

Pete Cowdin: Yeah, so the whole experience was a huge eye-opening experience for myself and Deb. Coming up with the concept is still not easy, but it's probably the more fun part for sure and putting those pieces together. I think we brought to bear a pretty fully conceived notion of what we thought the Rabbit Hole could and should be. So we went about, first, of course, creating a nonprofit, which was a new ...

Kelly Scanlon: It's different from the for profit, you were running, definitely, yeah.

Pete Cowdin: So we didn't know anything about that. So we went ahead and found some friends and put together a board and incorporated and started that process. Needless to say and anybody who's worked in nonprofits, it's a space for volunteers, first of all, so that has to be kept in mind. It's a space of big ideas. It's a place that involves money. And so, you're trying to raise money, use other people's money to build something. You need to be inclusive in that process, which was different for us because we ran a bookstore just by ourselves and we liked it and we did whatever we wanted, but we kind of knew that going in but yeah, it was really complicated and it took us a couple of years to kind of come to grips with this landscape of what a nonprofit is, what it can be. We have a great board.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah, you have some really big names in children's literature on that board.

Pete Cowdin: And that's on the advisory board. So we also developed in parallel with our governing board and advisory board, totally a hit list of some of the greatest American writers and illustrators in the country. We've recently added two of the greatest children's literature scholars, including Michelle Martin. She's in Washington university, university of Washington rather, one of the predominant African-American scholars, children's literature scholars and just general children's literature scholar, she's amazing. She's been working with Deb a lot. One of their goals, of course, is to make sure kids see themselves in

the Rabbit Hole. And so, Debbie's been doing a lot of work and a lot of it with Michelle's counsel to rediscover books by people of color ...

Kelly Scanlon: Yes.

Pete Cowdin: ... throughout history because publishing has been a predominantly white industry as many industries are, but very in the publishing case, egregious. I mean there has been a dearth of books featuring African Americans, Latinos over the last hundred years. It's changing now and Rabbit Hole wants to be a part of that change. And we're going to be affiliating ourselves with organizations, like We Need Diverse Books, which is a national organization and other local organizations to make sure that not only can we get kids into the museum, but also have a museum that again, represents beyond the mainstream, right?

Kelly Scanlon: Lots of diverse cultures. And you're not talking about just focusing on current authors either, you're talking about going back a hundred years and introducing children of today to people maybe they never heard of before, had never experienced their books.

Pete Cowdin: Super exciting because there were a lot of really terrific contributions made, books by people of color and they were cast aside or not marketed or promoted and it sort of died on the vine. So bringing back those creators who were very influential within their communities and beyond and inserting them into this vision. That's the cool thing about the Rabbit Hole, I was just talking to somebody this morning about we are creating a sort of Vanguard experience that's akin to Meow Wolf in the city museum, but we also have this preservation aspect of a traditional museum. So it's got a lot more tooth in it and depth in terms of what our mission is and what we can bring to bear. It's national in scope. We haven't really discussed that.

Kelly Scanlon: But you decided to stay here. Why did you think that Kansas City could support this one of a kind type of venture and what will it bring to Kansas City?

Pete Cowdin: Well, we didn't know to be honest, but we live in Kansas City and there's no reason for it not to be in Kansas City. I think publishing's a very coastal enterprise, so if the universe was running accordingly we would build this museum in Brooklyn because about 70% of the creators live within a hundred miles of Brooklyn or in Brooklyn. But obviously money is an issue, so the standard of living means that we can build it for cheaper, like if we were to build this in New York city or a larger city, it could be a \$25 million dollar project or \$50 million. I mean just because of real estate.

Kelly Scanlon: Oh yeah, exponentially the cost would rise, definitely.

Pete Cowdin: So that's one thing. Another thing is we knew that if we can build it and we can get Kansas City to buy into it, the Rabbit Hole's going to become an antenna. It's

going to become an epicenter of the publishing in the Midwest. And so, that'll give the publishers who love this project but are still trying to wrap their head around it, and they're very supportive but this is sort of an a-ha, show and tell project. So when they walk in, we've been in New York a million times and talked to publishers, but once they walk into that building and they understand what the heck we're making, everything's going to change. They're going to understand how they can leverage, and we want them to leverage the Rabbit Hole to elevate their own business and promote their own business but also coming to this place that is divorced from all of those sort of things we were discussing before, like the marketing forces and the things that aren't really about the creativity of the book. So there'll be able to participate in that, which they want to, desperately. You walk into any corporate office in New York, publishing office and sure everybody's worried about their job and talking bottom line, but in their hearts they know what the value of literature is and what it was and what it can be.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah. I see this as not something that not only embraces the existing artists and so forth, but as something that actually spawns a lot of spinoffs perhaps. That actually perpetuates or builds up an industry here in Kansas City. As you gain more and more success that there will be ancillary businesses that maybe grow off of this and are able to ...

Pete Cowdin: Yeah. I mean the opportunities here are kind of endless. I mean, when we started thinking about the Rabbit Hole, we didn't really think about that much in terms of what a unique idea it is. It was just what we loved, to think about and do. But now when we think about it, it's like one of those duh things, it's so obvious in a weird way, like why hasn't this already happened? And now we're like hurry, hurry, hurry. But yeah, there'll be a lot of economic development impact too from the Rabbit Hole.

Kelly Scanlon: I have to ask you, you've mentioned the Reading Reptile and now you're doing the Rabbit Hole, all around children's literacy, what attracted you and Deb to children's books to begin with?

Pete Cowdin: I have to blame that on Debbie. So I met Debbie in New York city, 1987. We were both from Omaha, but I did not know her there, but we had a common friend who lived on the corner of Christopher and Bleeker street, if you must know, that's where we met. And I was just in New York for a day or two and we totally hit it off and I went off to art school. I was doing a masters in printmaking up at Cranbrook that fall, which I eventually got expelled from but hey.

Kelly Scanlon: Oh no. Typical entrepreneur though.

Pete Cowdin: In the fates, it had to be. So anyway, Debbie was working at that time in the early 80s on a very high level in children's books selling, she worked at a store called Eeyore's that at the time was very famous and very, very good. Working in New York in a bookstore is really hard because you have a space about the size of this room, which for our listeners is about, I'd say 10 by 12 feet maybe.

And most of their stock was downstairs, so they're constantly restocking and people like Mia Farrow walking in and ordering, wanting to be helped. So it's pretty high intensity but that's where Debbie really found the bug and really just went deep into that and became within a few years working in that capacity, kind of a crazy encyclopedic of the last 50 to 60 years of children's publishing and could pull out an author, a book. So when she came to Kansas City, she wanted to get closer to her roots in Omaha but not quite in Omaha, so when she came and found a space in Westport, she just immediately took it and got out. It's one of those crazy old tiny stories that doesn't seem viable anymore but had her mother pull the mortgage on the house for 30 grand.

Kelly Scanlon: It still happens. Believe me, I know a lot of entrepreneurs. It still happens.

Pete Cowdin: Yeah, no, it was great.

Kelly Scanlon: How do you feel in general about where learning, literacy and new technologies intersect for kids these days? You're offering a wonderful experience, but there are lots of kids in the classroom who struggle. Maybe they have reading challenges or there's dyslexia. How will the Rabbit Hole help those children?

Pete Cowdin: So the Rabbit Hole itself, we're not a literacy agency, we're a cultural organization first and foremost with a huge educational opportunity. The thing that the Rabbit Hole provides and we're already working on with organizations like Lead to Read and school districts. We have MOU's happening with Kansas City, Missouri School District. Our goal is to really scaffold and elevate all the good things that are happening on the ground by creating a place where you can walk into stories. It's a joy. There's not a challenge there that can't be overcome by just experiencing it. And one quick example, Lead to Read, we're working with them they do a beautiful program where they bring in mentors, they sit with kids every week, read stories with them, and what we're going to do with them is get publishers to give us books to give to all the students for one of their reading sessions and then work with classrooms, select classrooms to bring them into the Rabbit Hole with their class. Then the next week they get to talk through the book and reread the book with their mentor. That way we don't disturb the beauty and simplicity of Lead to Read's mission, but we give them another facet where those kids become excited in a different way.

Kelly Scanlon: So, projected opening date, spring 2020.

Pete Cowdin: Yeah.

Kelly Scanlon: You can go out to the website and get involved. You've got various ways you can get involved, and the website again is?

Pete Cowdin: It's rabbitholekc.org.

Kelly Scanlon: Okay. Rabbitholekc.org. Go out and just bookmark it. If you're really interested in this, just bookmark it and keep up to date, I'm sure you will be letting people know about the progress and as you get closer to the date what it will actually be.

Pete Cowdin: And I forgot the most important thing. Get on our email list. And you can do that on almost every page of our website. But if you do that, you will be assured of an email a month. We don't overload you, maybe every two weeks as we get closer, with new news of what's happening, where we're at, if we do have needs, hiring needs or whatever, and just featured events. So stay in touch that way.

Kelly Scanlon: Yeah, okay. So you sign up for the newsletter and then most important, where is this going to be located?

Pete Cowdin: Well, as I mentioned, we're in North Kansas City.

Kelly Scanlon: Right.

Pete Cowdin: It's at 919 East 14th Ave. It's in the industrial district of North Kansas City. It's a working industrial area. Yeah, it's a wonderful place.

Kelly Scanlon: Can't wait to see it. Pete, thanks for all that you and Debbie do for children's literacy. We're excited for the Rabbit Hole's launch and we appreciate you being with us on this episode of Banking on Kansas City.

Pete Cowdin: You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

Joe Close: This is Joe close, president of Country Club Bank. We've been proud and certainly excited to partner with Pete and his wife Deb Pettid on their vision for the innovative literature museum for Kansas City kids sake. The Rabbit Hole promises to be a one of a kind experience built around promoting literacy, imagination and creativity with a sprinkle of wonder. There's nothing like it, and soon it'll call KC home. Pete and Deb's passion for literacy and helping children prepare themselves for the big wide world is remarkable. Their passion has fostered so much curiosity throughout our city, and it won't be slowing down anytime soon. Thanks to them, our community's future leaders have a place to learn the lessons literature provides that prove integral to growth and the foundation of aspiration throughout our lives. Thanks for tuning in this week. We're banking on you, Kansas City. Country Club Bank, member FDIC.