

Jeff Around Town – July 5th, 2024

Otis: Jeff's heading out around town, Jeff.

Jeff: I'm around town and I'm around here. Morning, Otis.

Otis: How are you, buddy?

Jeff: Hey, great, great. So, Otis, how often do you say hello to a total stranger?

Otis: All the time.

Jeff: Me too.

Otis: I gotta tell you the truth, I do. I say hi a lot.

Jeff: Me too.

Otis: Hey, how are you doing?

Jeff: Hey, how you doing? And I love how a random hello can lead to hearing incredible stories and maybe making a new friend. Recently, I'd stopped by Idle Wine and Goods on South 13th and Little Bow. It's a cute little cozy little wine shop and I'm there having a glass of wine, doing a little writing, and there's only one other couple there, but it's hard for me not to say hello to strangers.

Otis: Hi!

Jeff: Hey, so I got to talking to Craig and Katie Ledoux and it turns out they're transplants. They spent 20 years in Washington, D.C., where Craig held a music-related position at the Pentagon.

Otis: What do you do musically at the Pentagon?

Jeff: Isn't this incredible?

Otis: Run the music in the elevator?

Jeff: Well, you know.

Otis: I don't know.

Jeff: So yeah, you don't think of the Pentagon and music.

Otis: I think it's great. What did he do? It's amazing.

Jeff: He's a trombone player, but for over 20 years he was in charge of all the Air Force bands around the globe.

Otis: Ooh.

Jeff: Something like 600 musicians.

Otis: And they're good. They're really good bands.

Jeff: They are top notch. And you know, not just marching bands. I'm sure they were busy yesterday with the fourth, but all kinds of music, jazz, big band. And Otis, I love the idea that in the halls of the Pentagon they're discussing Gustav Holst and Percy Granger. So, he eventually became the manager of the U.S. Air Force Heartland of America Band here at Offutt. So, the three of us were talking about how music connects us and how for the Air Force, the music is a form of outreach and diplomacy, which is really powerful and beautiful. So meanwhile, Katie at that time was working at the Smithsonian and the Kennedy Center where she helped secure funding and helped plan a lot of really big projects, such as a large public art project dedicated to the memory of the 9-11 victims. And also, was instrumental, Otis, in planning the Kennedy Center's first ever complete performance of Wagner's Ring Cycle.

Otis: Whoa.

Jeff: Even more incredible.

Otis: So, you just meet these people in a wine shop.

Jeff: You just meet them in a wine shop. Even better.

Otis: I gotta get out more. Or I gotta go to more wine shops.

Jeff: Otis around town.

Otis:

Jeff: So even better, Wagner's granddaughter at the time was still alive and she came and sat just a few seats away from Craig and Katie during the performance.

Otis: She just topped me. I sat next to Ian Fleming's daughter once.

Jeff: That's a good one.

Otis: Wagner.

Jeff: His granddaughter, yeah. So, they moved to Omaha in 2017 and in an interview in Omaha Magazine, I got to the Ladoo party late. I didn't realize that they'd already been interviewed. So, I'm reading this interview in Omaha Magazine and Katie once recalled an encounter when they first got to Omaha. It was an encounter with a stranger in the old market and the person offered a cheery, unsolicited hello.

Otis: Hello.

Jeff: And her first thought was, what does this person want? So.

Otis: Hello.

Jeff: But they soon realized what a great and supportive community this is. So, Craig now works for OBI Creative where he says it was his deep appreciation for the power of music and public engagement that has helped him create memorable experiences through marketing and Otis, in 2020, Katie launched Sunflower Grant Writers with just her. Now she has a whole team, including Craig, securing funding for all types of organizations, large and small, including lots of art programs for kids, city development, healthcare.

Otis: Wow.

Jeff: She's passionate about giving voice and helping those who want to help others. And so on a quick personal level, they also support a lot of local artists and even commissioned work for their home, including a stained glass sunflower in their front door because a sunflower is not only a nod to Van Gogh, their favorite artist, but also as it says on the Sunflower Grant website, "when sunflowers can't find the sun, they turn and face each other until they're able to catch the sun's rays".

Otis: Awe.

Jeff: And Katie wants Sunflower to be the group that nonprofits and others can turn to when they need assistance to get back to the sun. So, if you're from Omaha, you probably like Otis and like me already say hello to strangers. And if you've just moved here, get used to people being nice, not just on sunny days like it is today, but also when it's cloudy and rainy. So, when you say hello back, you just may never know, you'll hear some amazing stories and Otis make a new friend and Otis that's another Jeff Around Town.

Otis: Wow, a great addition to our community. Yeah, I love when people, new people come to town and really make it a better place, great. Well, you go out about town now, have a good weekend.

Jeff: I'm going.

Otis: All right, buddy. Jeff Around Town, every Friday, 8:45.