

AN INTERVIEW WITH J.K. RUSS

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This is Claytee White. It is December 22nd, 2017. I am here in downtown Las Vegas.

J.K., could you just give me your full name and pronounce it for me?

Sure. Sorry for my (?). I am known by my initials J.K. My surname is Russ, R-U-S-S.

Thank you so much. Tell me a little about how you grew up and where you grew up.

I'm originally from a small town in New Zealand called Motueka in the South Island. We lived there till I was about three years old. My father was a tobacco overseer.

Tobacco?

Yes. It was a big tobacco-growing area.

I grew up on a tobacco farm in North Carolina.

Wonderful. I'm sure there's lots of similarities even though it's the other side of the world.

Exactly.

Then my dad went to work for the Evaluation Department, the government, and we moved to Masterton, another small town, and there were there until I was about ten. Then he got a position in Palmerston North, which was kind of, I guess, a midsize town; it was around seventy-five thousand people. So we moved there and I went to high school there, Iowa Topic College, Foundation People and then Queen Elizabeth College. From there I actually worked in a publishing company, the Dunmore Press, for quite a few years. Then after that I traveled; I did the big overseas experience that so many New Zealanders do because you're way on the other side of the world.

So where did you go?

I headed straight to London. I worked there for a while and traveled quite a lot around, kind of Europe, but got down to Morocco, Egypt, as well as [PLACE]. It was a wonderful trip and a real eye-opener.

Oh, I can imagine. When did you come to the U.S.?

Two thousand ten.

What brought you here?

We had actually visited in 2008 and spent a few months just traveling around quite a few different states. I really enjoyed it, had a wonderful trip, but didn't imagine ever living here. But my husband and I both entered the green card lottery, the diversity lottery, and Matthew actually won it, so we had six months to—

Describe that to me.

The lottery?

Yes. Tell me how that works.

I'm not sure how long they'll continue doing it. It's certainly been operating for quite a few years. I think there's a number of different countries internationally who perhaps are not so well represented here in the States that the lottery is offered to. From my understanding it's random if you get selected through it. You do still have to go through quite a process and you have six months to basically tie everything up and be in the States; otherwise, you're forfeited. So it was one of those things. It was a pretty amazing opportunity. Even though it was kind of big step into the unknown really, we knew we had one friend living here in Las Vegas, which is why we spent a little bit of time in Oakland. We came here. She was wonderful, just helped us get acclimatized a little. We've been here ever since.

Wonderful. When you're coming from New Zealand, what kind of opportunities do you see allowed for you when you move to the United States?

Well, I think particularly in Las Vegas—because we've both been artists for a long time, curated shows—we could see that there are opportunities here that maybe in some of the other cities, like

L.A. or New York where it's a lot more established, it's probably a little bit harder to find your own place whereas I think they are definitely opportunities here in all sorts of areas for people who are willing to just put some work in. We could see that there was definitely potential to find a niche for ourselves. It's such a fascinating city and so inspirational for lots of creative people, so that's what keeps us here.

Wonderful. I love it. Tell me about your most exciting show or most interesting that you've been able to put together or create since you've been in Las Vegas, something that's kind of different for Las Vegans.

I would think of one that we had downtown; The Traveling Miracle Show was the title of it. It was a group of artists. I performed in it with a friend, Mara Padia. I also curated it overall; applied for funding from the Allied Arts Council, so we were lucky to receive some funding for that. We held it on a First Friday kind of near the heart of the festival, so consequently there were lots of people just coming by who just stopped in. We had some really fun things to really engage, I think, a wide variety of people. Green Homes was making food and we had a whole project around that. We had a unicorn for children to have rides on, which was very popular. Gibi Joe, Vatoook, Matthew Cooper also did like videos and installations. It was just really engaging and people seemed to really enjoy it. We really aimed for something that felt friendly and welcoming and inclusive. So that was a really popular show and we then took it on the road to Reno, so that was why it was The Traveling Miracle Show, based on the old-time people who went around creating miracles as they went. Yes, that was maybe one that I felt really proud of, but I've certainly been involved in quite a few big-group products here, too, which I always think are fun because you're getting to work with other people, collaborate with other people. You usually can reach a wider audience as well.

Are sales good here for your art?

I think it's not an easy city to sell work, but having said that I've been blessed with some lovely supporters of my work. Yes, it's got its own challenges, but it's not impossible to overcome them here, I think.

Good. You live in a place downtown that most people don't even think about. We don't know about it. How did you find this place?

We were in Summerlin for a little while, but we found we were coming in and out all the time to the Arts District area, so we just started looking around this area. It didn't take us long to find somewhere. Again, I think downtown has its own challenges and it doesn't suit everybody, but for us we've made it work. We've been able to expand our space to have more studio space, too. It's certainly great being able to walk to Fremont Street and places like PublicUs. We walk. We've always walked and, of course, not a lot of people do that here, either.

Because we don't live down here so you can walk. I'm just going to give the cross streets. I don't want to give your address.

Sure.

We are at Third and...What is that street?

Gass.

Third and Gass. As I look out the window, I'm looking at all of the modern buildings downtown. I think I'm looking at...What is that tall one?

That's Juhl, I think.

Oh, I'm looking at Juhl out the window, okay. Then some office buildings.

Yes. And they can see City Hall through there, too.

That's right, City Hall from here. This is wonderful. Tell me about the area that's right

here, these few blocks. Who are your neighbors?

It's quite a mix. There's quite a few wedding chapels around here, so in the daytime it's really busy with happy people at weddings, so that's fun. Of course, there's still quite a lot of the bail bondsmen as well. There's quite a diverse mix of people who are still living in this area. Then, of course, there's the big apartment buildings, too. I think it is a pretty diverse neighborhood.

There's a big apartment building where?

You've got Soho Lofts and also Juhl and Soho Newport Lofts.

Yes. So those are the new buildings.

Right, they're more recent.

But there are no older large buildings in the area, okay. Do you have any challenge in the area with homelessness?

There's certainly a high number of homeless people downtown, but they actually do all the recycling in this area because there's no official recycling. The homeless people around here are really...It's interesting. I guess we all kind of coexist. It's part of the scene. Personally I would like to see that the numbers significantly drop because I understand we've got one of the highest numbers, so we've still got a lot of work to do.

Yes, we do. Yes, we do, definitely. Tell me about what you were doing on October first, that evening around ten o'clock.

We were actually both home and went to bed reasonably early, so we didn't even know about it until the morning. Matthew woke up first and saw it, and so kind of notified online that we were both fine and safe because, of course, in New Zealand everybody had seen it before we had and were really worrying. Yes, I just kind of woke up to that terrible news.

How did you decide to do your exhibit related to that shooting?

It was something that the city actually approached me and asked me if I'd be interested in doing a collage-style project working with large numbers of materials, these beautiful cards and letters that they had had sent into them. It was a fairly short time frame to at least put some of the project together because they had the council meeting on the sixth of December. I wasn't sure if I would even be able to achieve something in that time, but it was such an amazing project I was like, I just need to make time to do this.

I'm glad you did. The particular materials that you are using, where were they collected from?

They put out the call, I think, online. I'm not sure of the process, but certainly pieces have come in from all over the country and even from internationally as well, so these beautiful letters that people maybe there's somebody in France who wrote this lovely two-page letter and poem. Las Vegas is so special in the hearts of a lot of people, isn't it, who maybe came here to get married or they've spent amazing time here. There were postcards from Australia, so all over as well. But certainly lots of groups, school groups, which is so lovely, the young elementary school students doing beautiful drawings and church groups, community groups. Some of the other festivals, like music festivals, took time to write music.

Oh, that's great. I had misunderstood, I think, the way this was put together. This was a special effort, not just those things that had been left at various memorial sites. Do you know who headed this?

Yes, this was separate from the memorial sites. Hearts for Vegas is this particular project that went out asking for messages of love and support. People have interpreted that in different ways, too; some have written directly to first responders, some to the victims who were hospitalized, some may suggest to people who have lost loved ones, and some people just generally wrote to

everyone here in Las Vegas, "We love you; we're thinking of you." So it was the communications at City Hall, the team who implemented this, I think fairly quickly after October first, so it really gave people the opportunity to respond and feel that they could contribute to the healing process. I think that was their main focus.

How did you come up with the concepts that you used in putting this together? What was your thinking?

I really wanted to be kind of choosing the materials in the way that they were displayed because there's so many lovely cards; maybe they're hand drawn, they've got a picture on the outside, and then they've got a lovely handwritten message inside. So I wanted as much as possible to keep all of that information available for people to see, but it was quite a challenge bringing together so much diverse material and trying to create something visually cohesive as well. It was a little challenging, but I felt like it just did come together fairly quickly once I started working on it.

I really wanted to focus on the heart. They're all separate square components, so there's digital hearts and then there's also letters spelled out with the cards just saying "Las Vegas" surrounded by hearts. It said "Love for Las Vegas;" it's kind of really come through.

We're hoping to continue to add to the initial installation and maybe bring in groups to assist with the process of creating more of these pixelated heart cubes because there is so much wonderful material there. We're looking at different ways of incorporating more, as well, to add to that initial installation.

Oh, good. Now you have it at City Hall. Where do you plan to take it after City Hall?

I know that City Hall is looking at taking around to a number of venues. I'm not sure if they've exactly been finalized yet. But I think that's the aim is to kind of make these accessible to as many people as possible because the messages are for everybody in Las Vegas.

That's great. As you were putting this together, we read articles in the newspaper, everything was online. What were your feelings about what had happened?

I guess everybody was really kind of shock. Obviously it was so real for the people who were there, and then for those of us who weren't there, we were just seeing all these things on television and kind of that one step removed. But it was just certainly really, really hard to take in and just such sadness for all the pain and suffering that so many people have gone through and how this is going to impact the city as a whole, obviously, for a long, long time. Because I was also teaching classes of drawing students, it wasn't just my own response to it; I was really quite closely connected to all of their responses as well. Some of them were much more closely connected; some of them had been at the festival. Especially on that Tuesday coming to class, some of them were just pale, just in shock. It's just such a hard thing to contend with.

So we made some cards ourselves in drawing class; we gave them to each other. They also made some drawings, which were collected. There was a big collection at UNLV going to all the first responders. I think that was great for the students, as well, to utilize their own skills that they had been developing with the drawing to be able to contribute as well. We all have different gifts that we can use in different ways at these difficult times, so for the drawing students, they were able to use their drawings in a positive way.

Good. Getting off of that topic just a bit, you teach a drawing class. Are you saying that you can teach anyone to draw?

[Laughing] Absolutely. I honestly believe everybody has the ability to draw. There is obviously certain schools, too, that people can pick up to kind of assist them in that. I think drawing is amazing. It's like writing, too. I believe that we all have the power to write. It's a matter of...If you're going to go on to be a professional writer, obviously you fine tune all those skills. Yes, I

think drawing is a real gift. A lot of people getting older maybe—children are usually a lot more comfortable in drawing and along the way many of us can kind of sensor ourselves, I think you could say. Yes, I think drawing is wonderful for anyone to be engaged. It's just a matter of overcoming some fear sometimes.

Wonderful. I like that. You're coming here from a completely different country, different culture. Tell me about your ideas, how you grew up with guns, and if that has changed at all since that shooting.

New Zealand, guns are not nearly as common as they are here. Usually it's more in the hunting thing. So I had a little bit of exposure to guns growing up. For instance, we lived on a farm and they would go out shooting sometimes. But it was still quite a shock to come here and see people openly walking around with guns and things like that; that's really different than what I was used to. The police in New Zealand have not carried guns; they'll bring in a team, an armed responders team if they're dealing with someone with weapons. There's been a few mass shootings in New Zealand all the same, but definitely not to the extent as here.

Personally I would really like to see some changes in the gun laws because we witness the kind of harm that can be caused by a single unbalanced person and it just seems like at the moment unfortunately these people may appear relatively okay to everybody else. So there's something in the system that's not working at the moment. But I can see that there are some big issues to overcome to bring about major changes. But personally I look at the Port Arthur massacre in Australia and how the government responded, but how the public generally also agreed that things had to change. They haven't had a major massacre with guns since those law changes. People can argue and weigh out things in different ways, but to me that's a pretty clear cut example of positive change that can happen if people are willing to get in behind it, yes.

Being new to Las Vegas—not new—this is not where you grew up. Do you think that the world's opinion of Las Vegas changed as a result of this? More affection for it? Less affection? How do you think the world sees Las Vegas?

I think Las Vegas generally, there's probably a lot more positive feeling for the city after this event happened there. I think generally it's probably like, *oh, just another mass shooting and when is this going to stop?* I think that's just maybe more on a national level. But I think Las Vegas, because people have really seen how amazingly the response of this city here and people have come together and supporting each other, that sense of community and caring, which maybe people hadn't really seen Las Vegas in that light before. Just, of course, sympathy, there's always people are just devastated, aren't they? So I think everybody feels like there's been a real outpouring of support and love for the city, but also admiration for the way that people responded here.

Some of the last things. Do your shows usually teach you something about yourself? If so, what did this project teach you?

That's a good question. I have done some collaborative collage projects previously, like at P3 Studio, Left of Center Gallery, Life is Beautiful Festival, and for me those are great learning experiences because it was very much a group effect, but people were contributing something of themselves in the process and often we'd get to have conversations. So for me those have been wonderful learning experiences, which I think in a way helped me to prepare for this much more intense emotional experience of working with materials from a lot of other people that I didn't get to meet these people personally, but I was able to take the time to read the messages and enjoy the images and so I felt a sense of connection.

I think one of the things that really touched me in this project was the young people and

their responses. There's children who do beautiful drawings and then they wrote really wise messages. It's wonderful because they're obviously getting guidance from the adults around them, but it's such a difficult thing for anyone to deal with and to hear these words of wisdom coming from the mouths of young children, all the pains, that was really encouraging.

So I do think this whole project is a wonderful communication and I think it will go on to really bring people together and hopefully really offer a lot of just support. But also, there's some really great messages in there for all of us on how to move forward to continue to care for each other and make the most of every day because you just don't know what can happen.

Exactly. I'd like to end with you talking about art in Las Vegas. We have an Arts District. Downtown is becoming the kind of place where we can go and see a show or do different things. Tell me about what it is now, what you see for Las Vegas now, and the future of art here, and different kinds of art.

I think it's such a diverse city with people from all over. The people who have been here a long time, who were born here, they have a whole other experience to share with those of us who come from other places more recently and I think it's a melting pot as such. Because the city itself is so amazing, it does attract artists, too, so I hope that we'll actually see more residencies happening here, opportunities for artists and writers to come and spend time here and gain inspiration. I think they can also provide opportunities for artists here to gain experience; beyond here, whether there's kind of reciprocal opportunities. I think that kind of flow is really important to keep the scene lively and engaging. It would be great to see the gallery scene becoming more vibrant again. It seems to go in waves a little bit and I think we've been in a bit of a trough for a little while, but I think there are signs of things that hopefully we're starting to come out of that.

I think studio spaces for artists is still a big challenge here partly because artists making

work can't really afford the rents that a general retailer can. At the moment it's still pretty tough for artists to find decent amounts of space here to be able to really work on the larger projects. So that's something hopefully that will improve, too, and I think that would make a big difference. That will keep a lot more artists here, those kind of logistics.

What can the city do to remedy some of these things?

I know in some other cities there's been some of the older buildings that have been repurposed with subsidized studio spaces, available studio living spaces available for artists; that's the thing artists need. It's something that's a little bit different from regular people, I guess. It's finding things that are specific. I know research has gone into this recently and I'm hopeful that before very long we'll start to see some positive developments in that area.

Okay, great. This is wonderful. Is there anything else that you'd like to share about October One, about your project, about your exhibit? Comments you've gotten about it?

I guess at this point in the new year, I'm going to be meeting again with Rebecca Holden and the team at the city about how we move forward from here. I think this is kind of the initial aspect of it, but there's certainly the potential for it to be developed further and really make it accessible to a lot of people. I think it's a case of watch this space and more things will be announced fairly soon.

This is wonderful. Thank you so much for talking about it. Most people don't know about this aspect of it. We know about the memorials, the garden and all of that, but we don't know that there is an exhibit. So thank you, thank you so much.

Thank you, Claytee.

[End of recorded interview]