Hello, I'm Deborah Davidson, director of the Suffolk University Gallery. And I'm so pleased to be here today with graphic design professor Keith Kitz.

Hi Keith.

Hi Deborah. Nice to be here.

We are talking today about the importance of mentoring and being mentored, in conjunction with the current exhibition in the gallery; Mentor, Teacher, Role Model. The theme of mentorship encompasses the breadth of the work produced by the full-time and adjunct art and design faculty.

The relationship to the respective practices is essential to their interest in, and ability to nurture and guides students. Their own work ties to and stimulates their passion that guides their teaching, as well as demonstrating their relationship to each other as colleagues. They in turn were mentored by teachers when they were students, and in this way, they all make an important contribution to Suffolk University as a whole.

And Keith, I'm gonna quote you in a statement that you wrote for the exhibition. You say that, "Mentorship is at the heart of art and design education, and our collective fields have a rich history of apprenticeship as a path to sharing, learning, and advancing the techniques and tools of our professions."

So if you could expand on that...

Sure. That would be great.

So, to me, what is more valuable, when you're starting something new, or you're starting something, a journey, to talk to somebody, or to work with somebody who's been there before. So that's, to me the great role of mentorship, someone who knows the ropes and can train you and teach you and share with you in an honest way.

I just wanna say, I'm not in the exhibition 'cause I'm the curator of it, but this idea of mentorship is very important to me. And I just wanna sort of say that, I've had many mentors, as probably many of us has. Yes. Starting from my grandmother to, you know, my teacher in college and so on.

Sure. So...

And I know you talk about your family. Could you share that with us?

Yeah. So I come from a family that I feel is full of artisans.

So my father was a fine art painter,
my uncle is a florist and a sculptor, and also a watercolorist, my grandmother, a baker, a quilter, a crocheter. So being around all of these people growing up, and seeing what they were doing, and being able to be curious about all these different aspects of their lives, and them sharing with me openly and honestly about those crafts and those different practices was really enlightening.

Yeah. That's great. How do you see your own role as a mentor? I think you've touched on this a little. Sure. So I see myself as really a coach and a cheerleader, as well as a mentor. So I'm helping students to understand the practice of graphic design from a professional standpoint. I've been doing this for 30 years, so I can talk to them about client interactions, and things that maybe don't fit so neatly inside of pedagogy or curriculum. So I can talk to them also about real time things that are going on in my practice. So I think it's just the reality factor of professionalism, really comes into play. Right. That makes me think that, in any profession, you know, having technical skills and knowing what you're doing is important, but also those kind of relationship skills are equally or more important. Yeah. And that's something that you kind of just gain almost by osmosis from your relationship to the students and they to you. The human centered skills in any profession are the skills that are really challenging to teach inside of a classroom. So really being able to point to practice, really being able to point to the things that I'm actually doing and my colleagues are actually doing what their clients, really is the thing that is a difference maker. Right. So that you... By demonstration, you don't even have... You're not explicitly teaching that, but you're demonstrating that. Yes. And I would add to that, it's the rights and the wrongs. So the successes and the failures, like, I love to talk to students about things, especially when I was their age, where there were problems and maybe I did something wrong, and talk about how I managed that situation,
how I was mentored through the management of those situations, it's very helpful. Yeah. That issue of failure which is part of the process. Absolutely. It's okay. You don't have to be getting an A every time. It's the things that lead to success, and success is the thing that leads to confidence. So these are the things that are gonna help. Right, all tied together, yeah.

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Well, this is, I guess, more sort of a general question, but, what makes a good mentor? I think a good mentor is not only someone who is a practice professional, but someone who's willing to listen and be open and honest with whoever the mentee is. And then, someone who has the time that's available. 'Cause this is something that... The great thing about mentorship is, it can exist outside of a curriculum. It can exist outside of all these kind of trappings of education. It can just be a one to one, and it can be something where it's kind of, an ask me anything situation. And I think that, that... Taking away grades and class structures, it really helps. Well, you mentioned your family were your early mentors. I was wondering if there's one person along the line who stood out. There's a whole slew of people.

I am blessed with a lot of really great educators in my path. My first inspiration to become an educator was my fourth grade instructor, Jay Williams, who I talk about every time I'm interviewed, because this was someone who was really very patient with me and my fellow classmates, and just taught with a certain level of care that I had not experienced prior to that. And then, I had a whole list of people. 'Cause I went to an arts high school after that, who were really professionals in practicing... You know, practicing artists, who were really helpful in talking about how to make what I wanted to make my career happen. And then beyond that, I would say that when I reached my master's degree, working side by side with my then teacher, who then became came a colleague when we co-taught together, John Crane was really helpful to me. He'd worked with Paul Rand back at IBM, he's the person who developed the Polaroid logo. So he has all of this great experience and could talk to me about,
like that "Madman Era" of advertising.
Like, he was a part of that.
So really just a brilliant maker and a very interesting man.
Yeah. Well that sounds invaluable and fantastic.
Yeah. And...
You know, I really like that idea.
In fact, we have a couple of people
like that in our exhibition who were students,
and of course their mentors are now their colleagues,
or they are colleagues with their mentors.
And to me, that's like a really great kind of leap
to then like, "Oh, we're on par with each other."
Yeah, absolutely.
I think it's an unusual at first situation,
'cause I've been in that situation,
And also with some other colleagues
where you then become peers.
And I think that, it takes some finessing at the beginning,
it is really one of those things, especially for me,
because I aspired to be a teacher when I was in that program
and then being able to have that person as a peer
was really quite great. Right.
So maybe our last question is this, which is,
how does your own experience affect how you teach?
So I really do very strongly teach
from a mentorship perspective.
So all of my classes really are structured as a studio.
I look at it as like, I'm the art director
and my students are the designers of a firm.
So we're really setting things up
in very practical and very pragmatic way.
And, you know, I talk to them about,
"Hey, when we have this process meeting..."
This is like a Monday morning meeting inside of a studio."
And when we have presentations, I talk to them about like,
"Make this a client facing conversation
and not just like, it's all of us and we know each other."
So that kind of modeling and practice really helps.
Yeah. I love that.
That you're modeling sort of the real world...
Yeah. I think modeling behavior
is really key to being a good teacher.
Right. And I guess in the same way, or in addition,
the critiques that you hold with your students
would be like the art director saying to the artist like,
"Our client really likes
this better than this," or whatever.
Yeah. Critiques never end.
So I tell them, it's like, you know,
"The things that you're doing inside of a classroom
as far as a critique, these are the types of critiques
that you're gonna have with your team,
with your ADs and CDs inside of your firm,
and also with the clients.
'Cause the clients are gonna come in at some point and say, "Love this, I don't love this, make this bigger, make this smaller."
And you need to be able to justify the design choices and talk about the rationale. Right.
I think that's a really good place to end.
I wanna thank you so much for this conversation.
Absolutely, my pleasure.
And just to mention,
that the exhibition is up through March 11th,
of many other faculty artists and their ideas about mentorship are there. Great.
So thank you. Thanks Deborah.