

48 Storytelling Accelerates Workforce and Economic Development



Joining us from our main stage at the ACT Workforce Summit in Nashville, Will Coppage is a creative community developer. He helped us explore the concept of wonder in art and its power to draw us in repeatedly. Will shows us how this principle applies to community development, emphasizing the importance of fostering creativity, maintaining a positive community appearance, and promoting workforce skills. The episode concludes with exciting news of a storytelling initiative at the 2024 Workforce Summit in Atlanta.

Voices of Excellence on Episode 48



Will Coppage,
Creative Community Developer
[LinkedIn](#)

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- [ACT Work Ready Communities](#)
- [ACT Workforce Solutions](#)
- [2024 ACT Workforce Summit](#)
- [Tear the Paper Ceiling Campaign](#)
- [Inquire on WRC Storytelling and Poster Exhibition](#)

Transcript of Episode 48

[Jingle Open with Music and Jasen] Will Coppage is a Creative Community Developer. Find out what that means and how storytelling accelerates workforce and economic development, on episode 48.

[Podcast Open] Ready for Work is a podcast from A-C-T! spotlighting excellence and innovation, throughout the workforce ecosystem! Jason Jones hosts this journey, with trends and ideas to help your region's workforce reach its highest potential.

[Jingle] Now, let's get Ready for Work!

Jasen: Joining us from our main stage at the ACT Workforce Summit in Nashville, Will Coppage is a creative community developer. He helped us explore the concept of wonder in art and its power to draw us in repeatedly. Will shows us how this principle applies to community development, emphasizing the importance of fostering creativity, maintaining a positive community appearance, and promoting workforce skills.

This is our first in a series of podcast episodes on FRED Talks from the ACT Workforce Summit in Nashville. We'll hear from Will, then wrap up the episode with news of a storytelling initiative for the next Workforce Summit, happening in October in Atlanta.

On deck first is ACT's own Fred McConnel to introduce what FRED Talks is all about as he welcomes Will to the stage for a talk inspires us to view communities as works of art, full of possibility and opportunity.

Fred: I want to welcome you this morning to our Fred Talks. If you've been here before, our Act Workforce Summit. You know what this session is about. And everybody knows who it's named for. And that is legendary actor and renaissance man Fred Savage. Fred Savage, I think in his Wonder Years years, really helped us all with our workforce skills training and still has an impact today on all of us. [ambient audience laughter]

So, props to Fred. But really, we're here today about fostering relevant and engaging discussions. We have an exciting panel of Fred Talkers today sharing their expertise. And for our last Fred Talker today, Will Coppage, the President of Creative and Community Development Services. Please help me welcome Will to the stage.

Will: My name is Will Coppage. I call myself a creative community developer. And today we really are going to go on a journey. So, who here remembers that first time they heard Pink Floyd? Dark side of the moon? Yeah! Right! How about Stairway to Heaven. You know, for the folks that are a little bit older than myself, probably had it on vinyl and you had the headphones on. You listen to it over and over, right? Why? Why did you do that? Who likes Star Wars? I mean, who has seen Star Wars? say over 100 times the original trilogy, right? Right. Yeah.

And so, the question we ask, why do we do that? Why does a piece of art, and when I used the word, art, today, whether that's drama, books, movies, etcetera. Why does a piece of art call us back? You know, why does it elicit us to want to repeat it over and over again? Now, I would say that is probably the greatest desire of an artist.

Now, I'm sure there are some artists, kind of pompous and say, I could care less of if anybody looks at my work, but for the most part, all artists want their work repeatedly engaged. So again, how do they do this? As Rich said, it's wonder. The artist has learned to infuse wonder into their work. And so, what is wonder?

Wonder, is this evocative emotion that makes us inherently say, what are the possibilities? What is this that's bigger than us? That's a really cool thing. So, you know, if somebody's going to say when they're feeling down, listen to Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah on repeat over and over when they're feeling sad. Why would I do that? It's because for that moment I'm like, I'm not alone. There's something greater and I see that more. There's so many more opportunities and possibilities.

And so when we think about creativity, I'm sure that everyone in this room has gone to a school function or let's say, a friend's party, and somebody might be playing a guitar and you say, oh, that that person's so creative, or I can go to a school function and you see some artwork on that wall and you say, oh, this, this little human is so creative. But why? Why do we say that? We're saying that they're creative because of the product, right? This kind of tangible thing that they create. But I want to take it a step further. I truly believe in what a creative person is and does, because I honestly believe that every one of you have produced something, a product in your life that is amazing.

So, we are all somewhat artists, but when you start labeling that word creative, what does that mean? And I believe that creative or creativity is the exhaustion of failure. And it's the willingness to embrace failure and to exhaust failure repeatedly. Right. And so, when we see this, we've always been told that either you succeed or you fail. And so, I want to point out that failure is the pathway to success. Because, just like not every piece that an artist produces is a masterpiece, they are learning through the process and they understand to embrace that unknown in that process.

So, I'll keep talking about music, but what does this have to do with community storytelling and community development? I guarantee you think about a really cool community that you went to. Think about a thriving town that you love to visit. And I guarantee you, it does two things. One, it calls for you to want to visit repeatedly, right? You think about it over like I want to go visit. I want to vacation. And the other is they have somehow infused this idea of wonder in their community.

Think about that town that you love to visit. And you're walking downtown, and you see, empty storefront. Your brain automatically starts going, man, I bet that would be a good coffee shop or good toy store or a good tattoo parlor. That wonder where we automatically inherently think of the possibilities and opportunities.

So, as we're talking about community storytelling in ways to evoke this wonder in our community, it can be very exhausting, right? Overwhelming. I mean, there's so many things that we could go. But I've kind of brought it down to three different areas that I truly believe we're getting by, started on the right foot. One is to embrace the creative community, right? I'm talking about creativity. You got to embrace the creative community. The second one is have a positive community appearance. And lastly is assess and promote the workforce skills, equity of your community.

So, diving into why it's important to embrace that creative community. Local art and artists are the organic branding of your community. I'm from the Mississippi Delta. Everybody knows about Blues all over the world. All the art. Everything that's produced from the Mississippi Delta is an organic reflection of our community. The more opportunities you give as a community, your creatives to show their work, I promise you the quality of life in your community will grow.

Why? Because there'll be more things to do, whether it's concerts, whether it's plays, whether it's pop-up shop, whether it's workshops. It will give something for you and your family to do. And how many times in your community do you hear other people go? Well, there's nothing to do. If you invest in your creative community. It will give them an opportunity to help you attract.

Also one thing that people often overlook is folks in creative community, well, they're entrepreneurs. It will help increase the tax base. When we talk about promoting community appearance, it can be beautiful creation, of course, but it's also city ordinances and sound ordinances. But why is that important? A positive community appearance will make people feel safe. And when people feel safe, whether they're visitors or residents, they explore more.

When they explore more, they spend more money. They start to develop other areas of the community. They start being proud of. And when they start exploring and not be afraid of going into areas, they also become healthier. And a healthy community is a thriving community. Now, workforce and anybody that knows me knows that I could a I love talking about workforce right here.

This is called pathway to possibilities. This is an eighth grade Career Science Hands-On fair that travels around at these. We have about 3,008th graders from the community that come in, and we have all the local and regional folks help out. Was obviously we know workforce is important. And as a previous economic developer, if you don't know that workforce is the main driver for industry attraction and expansion, right.

So how do we get those decision makers to know that your community has those levels of skills? And we know we're here, right. The Act work writing assessment is the number one way to objectively show skills in your community and allow those folks in charge to promote that. Now, I want to take it a little step further.

We all know the importance of workforce training and cross-training. And I'll say promote those, yes, but promote the people that are taking those classes. Those are the moms. The dads, the college grads, nights and weekends. And why? It's because they believe in this community. Why are they getting those skills? Yes, to get a better job, but why? They want to stay in the community.

Those are the champions that want the community to grow. They're training for jobs sometimes that don't even exist so they can stay in the community. Those are those people that want to stay and grow. They believe they see the wonder. They see the opportunity in the community.

So, in conclusion, how can you be like an artist? How can your community be your work of art? How can you infuse wonder to beg for people to return, residents to stay and grow?

To be in the community is to believe in a community. Thank you.

Fred: What a great way to end this. As our FRED Talkers exit the stage, please join me in a round of applause for an incredible job done today.

(Ambient applause fades and music begins)

Jasen: Another fun fact about Will Copping. In his role with Washington County, Mississippi economic development, Will was the guest for our first episode of the Ready for Work podcast. It was great hearing from Will five years later as we're on episode 48.

Will's advice on the impact of storytelling for Work Ready Communities is evident in the success of the Mississippi Delta region and hundreds more WRCs across the U.S. In partnership with Opportunity at Work for the 2024 Workforce Summit, we want to hear success stories and testimonials from your working learner STARs and champions of your workforce ecosystem. We'll bring these stories together to celebrate at the Summit in Atlanta, and well beyond with Opportunity at Work. In addition to success stories, the Summit features a Poster Exhibition to showcase successful Work Ready Communities. Connect with us by email to W R C at A C T dot org to learn more.

We'll feature more FRED Talkers from the ACT Workforce Summit in Nashville on upcoming episodes of Ready for Work. Registration is open and we hope you'll join us for the 2024 Workforce Summit in Mid Town Atlanta. Check out the speaker lineup and more at A C T dot org slash workforce summit.

[Podcast Closing] Thanks for listening to Ready for Work, from A C T, your partner in workforce solutions and work ready communities. Subscribe in your favorite app, or learn more at A C T dot org, slash, ready for work podcast.