



Episode Transcription: “Neon Talks with Jenna: Gas Filling Tube Suckers”

Jenna Canals:

From Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington, this is Frit City. I'm Jenna Canals. The Museum is currently presenting *She Bends: Redefining Neon Legacy* through October of 2023. This exhibition highlights the dynamic work of women and gender-expansive neon benders creating work today. For decades, neon signage has been used to send messages out into the world. This miniseries will dive into how neon is evolving and how artists are using this traditionally functional medium to push boundaries and speak a new language within the art world. Hi, everyone, and welcome to this episode of Frit City: “Neon Talks with Jenna.” Today we have with us Dani Kaes, Jacob Willcox, and Galen Turner. Together, this trio of Tacoma-based artists create collaborative neon artworks through the artist collective Gas Filling Tube Suckers. Formed in early 2022, the collective came together out of a shared desire to strengthen a community of local neon artists by providing access to materials and education. Their studio, based near Tacoma's Wright Park, and welcoming to all, is a wonderland of retired pinball machines, Frankenstein-ed sculptural neon experiments, and Americana ephemera spanning the last century. Without further ado, let me welcome Gas Filling Tube Suckers.

Jacob Willcox:

GFTS.

Dani Kaes:

GFTS [pronounced “giftus”] for short.

Jacob Willcox:

Yeah, GFTS for short, if you're in the know.

Dani Kaes:

If you're on the level, it's the GFTS.

Jenna Canals:

GFTS.

Dani Kaes:

Yeah, GFTS – you start saying it, and it just rolls off the tongue. Although everybody loves to say the full name. People love saying it out loud. It makes so many people giggle. It makes it really hard to take yourself seriously, but I don't think we're really in the business to take ourselves seriously.

Jenna Canals:

Okay, well, then let's start breaking down here. What is the business of Gas Filling Tube Suckers? Is who is GFTS? Who is Dani? Who is Jacob? Who is Galen? What are you all like as individual artists? Like, what were these journeys like that brought you here to art and to glass?



Dani Kaes:

I mean, we all kind of came together separately, and then once again came together. I met Jacob twelve, thirteen years ago, almost.

Jacob Willcox:

Something like that.

Dani Kaes:

And I met Galen ten years ago, and that was an individual pass for me. Like, Jacob and I didn't come to Galen together. Jacob was pretty on glassblowing for a long time. I got out of glassblowing as soon as I could because I didn't like being really hot. I didn't like carrying a bunch of heavy stuff. So, I really went towards neon – light, empty tubes.

Jenna Canals:

But that introduction to glass, from what I understand, for you and Jacob at least, was pretty much through the Hilltop Artist program here in Tacoma.

Jacob Willcox:

Absolutely.

Dani Kaes:

Yeah. So, I took an introductory glassblowing class at Tacoma Glassblowing Studio. My mother gifted it to me because I was going through a horrible breakup. And so, she's like, "You need to get out of the house. I can't handle you at 15 just, like, crying all the time."

Jenna Canals:

Get used to it, this is not a phase.

Dani Kaes:

So I went there and I took this introductory glassblowing class, and I got pretty close with the staff there and they facilitated me getting an interview for working the production at Jason Lee – now Hilltop Heritage – School, where Hilltop Artists is done out of because I wasn't –

Jacob Willcox:

How old were you when you started working on production?

Dani Kaes:

I had just turned 16. Because I was not a part of that program, really. I didn't go to school in Tacoma. I was existing down in Puyallup. And so, it was really through the community finding someone who wanted to be a part of it and facilitating that even further into finding that place at Hilltop.

Jacob Willcox:



I went to Hilltop Heritage Middle School, and I became a student of the Hilltop Artists program. And through that, you know, I started interning at the Museum of Glass in high school, and I ended up going to art school at Alfred University in upstate New York, where I was able to take a neon class right before the pandemic hit. And then I happened to get a little chunk of change from the school through some student grants that they had. And Danny had noticed that I had started posting some stuff about neon I was doing in that class, and so I hit her up on a whim – because we weren't friends at the time –

Dani Kaes:

Oh, we'll get to that.

Jacob Willcox:

And she was like, "Here's this dude Galen's phone number." And so as soon as, you know, I returned back during the pandemic, I got ahold of Galen, and he kind of gave me everything I needed to set up my own little studio in my parents' basement while I was still in school. And he's like, "You got a pretty nice setup," but he's like, "You can just come hang out here." And then he was like, "You just got to keep coming back."

Galen Turner:

Yeah.

Dani Kaes:

One of the hardest things about neon is to keep people doing it. It is a pretty frustrating... It's a notoriously hard medium. And similarly, I worked at Hilltop, volunteered with their after-school program after I graduated high school. I got an internship at MOG because of Hilltop Artists, and I met Galen through Greg Owen. They introduced me because I really wanted to do neon. I wanted to do neon before I wanted to do glassblowing, but it was just inaccessible. There were no classes at the time. There was one class in Whidbey Island, but it was like a guy doing it out of his garage, and he wanted too much money. So, I just went into glassblowing because, weirdly enough, it was the accessible medium. And so, I had to end up playing this really weird chess game of getting into neon by just meeting glassblowers. And then yeah, I showed up on Galen's doorstep one day, just dropped off.

Galen Turner:

Yeah. So, it's been pretty much all hard knocks. I didn't have any real people to hold my hand. I had a couple of people here and there. Doug Hitch is great, and he took a class... He built the neon plant at Evergreen [State College]. He took a class back at Pilchuck, and that's back when Fred Tschida was driving across from Upper State New York to –

Jacob Willcox:

Alfred University.

Galen Turner:





Alfred University. With a neon plant in the back of a van, and he'd set it up for the summer at Pilchuck, and they'd do it. And he [Doug Hitch] took a class there, went to Evergreen and set up a plant by asking questions through Fred. So, I kind of give it up to Fred. He kind of really, through his work through Pilchuck back in the day, I think he allowed this medium to be accessible as an art medium, more so than the sign industry, which a lot of people have taken onto that normally wouldn't have. And I really... I don't think Fred actually knows how many people he's touched and how much larger this gas-filling, tube-sucking activity has become because of him.

Jenna Canals:

So, what is the neon community like, and why did you guys feel like you needed to create something like Gas Filling Tube Suckers?

Dani Kaes:

Well, GFTS started kind of by accident and then on purpose, because we were all hanging out and we were all doing stuff, and one thing that we do that is different than a lot of neon shops is be kind of a team sport, which I think comes a lot from glassblowing, because glassblowing has to be teams.

Galen Turner:

Neon is real independent.

Dani Kaes:

Really independent.

Galen Turner:

Which is very interesting.

Dani Kaes:

So we were already doing what we were doing, but then GAS [the Glass Art Society Conference] happened for 2022, and we were kind of involved with that. And so, Galen got asked to do a demonstration there, which he wanted to be a group demonstration. We were, like, by the fire pit outside late one night, and we were just, like, doing this application to get all this paperwork in for Galen, and they needed a name for the group, and then that's when we named the group.

Jacob Willcox:

Yeah, Galen just started shouting things out, and he goes, "Gas Filling Tube Suckers! You fill the tube, suck the tube!"

Galen Turner:

That's what I would always call the manifold. Like, "This is my gas-filling, tube-sucker machine."

Dani Kaes:

And it's really the best definition of what we do and what we were doing. Galen built this mobile





cart, which is what we were using at GAS, and so it just seemed perfect. And it's a funny name, and so we're always trying to do something a little bit silly.

Jenna Canals:

But doesn't it speak... It speaks literally to the science of neon.

Dani Kaes:

Oh, absolutely.

Jenna Canals:

All of you are very well versed on the scientific aspects, the chemistry aspects of neon, which is that...?

Galen Turner:

I don't know. I learned it all by accident through neon. It never stuck in any of, like, junior high, high school, college, but through neon, actually, I could taste it, touch it, smell it and be aware of it.

Dani Kaes:

Yeah, I mean, a lot of people do learn that way. If you get an electrode box, which is what we use in neon as our Point A and Point B for circuits, they will tell you how to process them, but it doesn't make any sense. It makes a sense to a certain degree for manufacturing, but when I was learning how to process from my first mentor when I was working in the sign industry, it was so cut-and-dry, and you know right away that it can't be that easy or it can't just make that sense for every single thing that you're doing. And so, I started asking a lot of questions that no one could really answer for me. And so, I started asking professors and reading more into very specific types of chemistry, gas chemistry, how glass moves when you're heating it up and that sort of thing, and what was happening on the inside of the tube because it was just, like, frustrating that no one that it's been done the same way forever, but every person that I asked had no real answer for what was happening on the inside of the tube. And so I learned a very common way of learning processing, which is in stages. But to me, it doesn't make sense to have blanket things like that, because every tube is different and there are things that you can mitigate or use to your advantage to be a better processor. And so, I took a lot of time to learn that science, to be good at that, because that was the thing that I really liked in neon, was to just kind of vibe out and process.

Jenna Canals:

Do you feel like learning those scientific aspects has helped you avoid kind of, like, certain... I don't want to say, like, flubs, but mess-ups in the studio, or are those things like still kind of unavoidable even if you know the perfect temperature ranges or the perfect steps?

Galen Turner:

It's all good in theory. It's all good in theory. Practice is...yeah.

Dani Kaes:



No, I mean, I do think it makes me a lot better in what I'm doing because I know steps of how to do certain things. There's a color that I like to use a lot, which is an uncoated ruby, which is essentially just red glass. There's no protective coating on the inside, because we use a lot of phosphor coated tubings, which protect the glass itself, which is a porous material and uncoated cobalt. And those things are not easy to process. They don't really like to run a very specific way. And so, to get them to be nice, I really started to R&D that process. And I think learning all the science and all of the foundation that I had made that a lot easier. And so now I get those tubes first try, which is always very exciting.

Jacob Willcox:

I processed an uncoated ruby when I was in college and it failed within a week or two, and that's because I didn't know Dani's recipe. I haven't had that issue since.

Jenna Canals:

So, do you feel like sharing within the collective is, like, you guys are teaching each other, you're providing that community that know, people like Galen didn't have when he was coming up in neon and learning everything? Is there like, a lot of community that kind of comes together when you think about GFTS?

Jacob Willcox:

These two are my mentors. In the group, I have the least amount of experience when it comes to neon bending and neon, plasma as a whole. So, they treat me with respect, as an equal, but I definitely consider them as my mentors, and the information they provide me... Definitely, I wouldn't be where I am today without the knowledge that both of these two have given me.

Galen Turner:

Same here. I'm constantly learning every day from both of these two as well. And yes, it used to be a guild, and everybody was hiding their knowledge and a lot of it died with certain people. But things have definitely changed. I think a lot had to do with the industry actually failing and a lot of shops closing up. And because shops were closing up, then manufacturers were closing up, and then it was getting hard to locate product, and then the community would actually have to be calling each other up looking for, like, a stick of ruby or whatever just to finish a sign. So that kind of maybe helped us get a little bit more communal. But at least, I should speak for myself, I'm more about the arts and the education rather than the signage industry. I do some of the signage industry just didn't kind of keep the lights on and such, but it's the last thing I want to do. But the arts and education heavily rely on sharing of knowledge and asking questions and such. I think we have a saying in the shop, or at least I do: there are no stupid questions. And I think that's really, really important because if you don't ask the questions because you're embarrassed or whatnot, that can really be really detrimental, I think.

Dani Kaes:

Yeah, I think that we've really... Same with Galen. Arts and education and access. I know, Jacob, that's something that you're passionate about, something that we all kind of grew up with. I mean,



Hilltop is that and we have good relationship with Pilchuck, which is, again, all about, kind of, improving that access. And I do think that we've done a good job of building a community because we've opened a door for people to come through. We have friends that come through that are other parts of GFTS that come every week or every other week that have a place that they can come and experiment and not come expecting to finish something. Which, I think, is a lot different than if people were taking a class, or if people were working in the industry, or even taking college courses where you have an assignment to do. Having a place to come in, and throw glass away, or see if something's going to work, and prototype, and have people who have knowledge that can answer those questions is something that I'm really proud of, that we've, kind of, built out.

Jacob Willcox:

The amount of times I've heard Galen say to someone who will be like, "Oh, can I come back?" He says, "I dare you to, and I dare you to come back again after that." In the summer of 2022, there was a Hilltop Artists residency at the Museum of Glass, and we had some friends in town. We wanted to show them the Museum of Glass, and it was just serendipitous that Hilltop was down there as well. And we saw a bunch of them who were like, "Oh, we're all hanging out at the studio later. Come through." And me and Dani were actually prepping to teach the first neon class for Hilltop Artists at that time at Pilchuck Glass School. And so, we wanted to do a dry run of how we were going to approach that class, because we were working with a variety of ages amongst our students. So, we were like, "What's the best way to get people into the flames?" Quick, low pressure, just to feel how the material moves, because they have glass experience –

Galen Turner:

Intimidating for a lot of people. It's a hard thing sometimes.

Jacob Willcox:

Yeah. So, we were like, "Okay, let's do a Twisty" – because there's a big event at Museum of Glass that's been hosted at multiple shops around Tacoma, but most recently at Museum of Glass, called the Twisty Cup – and we were like, "Oh, let's do a Twisty Straw competition." We invited a bunch of kids over from Hilltop, and Galen made a very quick trophy, hopped up on the table, and that was just a lot of people's first bends that day, and it was fun. And so, we incorporated that into our teaching.

Dani Kaes:

Twisty Straws were just a great way to introduce the material to people who have never touched it before or people who have touched it before. But neon has no translatable skills from any glass material that I have tried, other than heat exposure, because I'm used to being hot. But even, like, flameworking does not super translate to neon. And so introducing this familiar material, but in a new way, and you get a straw after.

Jenna Canals:

Win-win.





Dani Kaes:

And save the turtles. Shouts out.

Jacob Willcox:

And there's always a chance for a little reception, have some drinks out of your straws whether they're practical or not. It's a community-building event that also exposes you to a new technique of glassworking.

Dani Kaes:

Yeah. It was a fun way to stay connected with Hilltop. I mean, we try to do that as much as possible. Hilltop is a place that I want us to emulate. It is a place that really cares about their alum. It's a place that is never-endingly in their support, just in what they will give to people if you just ask. They want to see everybody succeed.

Jacob Willcox:

Absolutely.

Dani Kaes:

And neon doesn't really have that. And so, I would love for us to get to the point where we emulate Hilltop. I mean, because we keep Hilltop on our hearts, kind of, at all times.

Jacob Willcox:

They also help us out with things that we may need. We have a good working relationship with them, as well as a loving relationship with them.

Galen Turner:

Yeah, they're absolutely incredible. The idea that these kids are being introduced and have access to this medium at such a young age is absolutely incredible. So jealous. It's, like, one of the most expensive mediums to express yourself with as an artist, and to have access to it and not worry about cost... Man, I wish we had those kind of things back then.

Jenna Canals:

Well, it's really sweet and heartwarming to hear you guys talk so much about Tacoma community and how connected you are to all of these different artists and institutions here. I want to talk a little bit about your individual styles just because I feel like Tacoma, even visually, has influenced the direction of some of your work. Do you guys feel like Tacoma flows into your work at all?

Galen Turner:

It's home.

Dani Kaes:

Yeah, it has to.



Galen Turner:

Man. It's a real big, dirty, muddy puddle.

Jacob Willcox:

I mean, I don't know who I'd be without Tacoma.

Dani Kaes:

Tacoma has influenced the work, my new, kind of, sets of work, just because I've been spending so much time with my friends here. Community is something that I've actively sought out for such a long time, and it hasn't always come super naturally. In fact, Jacob and I just became friends. We became friends last year. It's fantastic.

Jacob Willcox:

Are we friends right now?

Dani Kaes:

You got demoted recently, and I can't remember why, but I'll re-promote you to my friend

Jacob Willcox:

On this podcast?

Dani Kaes:

On this podcast.

Jacob Willcox:

Breaking news, everyone. Me and Dani are friends again. No longer acquaintances.

Dani Kaes:

We have three matching tattoos, but sometimes we go in and out. I just have a hard time with feeling secure in my connections. And so, community, for me, is something that I've always just sought for. That's why I was straight edge for such a long time, because I found a lot of grounding in that community, whether they were good people or not. And so, a lot of my new work now has been focused on what I've gotten from that community, and how that's felt, and that security. And even if we get into tiffs or something, it's always fine at the end, which has always been something that I've really looked for. And, you know, we're not all of GFTS, and so we have other outlets to collaborate with. And so, I think a lot of that work has been a process, too, that I'm exploring. But a lot of my work in general is, like: I love cartoons. I love the Vegas airport. I love gambling. I love bright colors. So, neon's always, like, really worked. I love shapes, too, and there's so many shapes out of neon that really just are meant to be.

Jenna Canals:

Yeah, I feel like fun is just an aspect that comes to mind when I look at your work –



Dani Kaes:

Thank God. What if it wasn't?

Jenna Canals:

What if I was like, "It makes me feel very sad."

Dani Kaes:

What if you were just like, "Your work horrible. Tell me about that. Tell me why your work is so bad."

Jenna Canals:

I'm sorry, but when you see a bunch of alternating lighting-up cowboy boots, it brings you joy.

Dani Kaes:

Yeah. My artist statement that I've been giving out to people, it always ends with, like, "My work is not something that I would want in my house," because I want to make it big –

Jenna Canals:

I want it in my house.

Dani Kaes:

You can have it. Girl, I got so many cowboy boots out the wazoo from the last show.

Jenna Canals:

Oh my god.

Dani Kaes:

But I like making things flash. I like making things animated. I like the movement. I like when things have gesture. I like things with excess. I like making big piles of stuff, or something that's really visually overstimulating. But I don't like to assign anything outside of that, because I want it to be a viewer experience. And so, whether it is being overwhelmed, or being comforted, or any of those two things, that's up to you. I think so much of my art is just because I think about it, and I have to make it, and then if I don't make it, I'll just keep thinking about it. So, I wanted to make neon cowboy boots, and then the GATHER show happened, and I was like, "What if we made a hundred of them?" And then I had to, because I just thought about it at one point and it just kind of needed to be there.

Jenna Canals:

I live for that level of excess. And Jacob, how about you? What about your individual practice?

Jacob Willcox:

It does come down to Tacoma. Everything about me started in Tacoma, so, you know. My artistic career started at age twelve. I didn't believe that art was cool. I thought art was kind of woo-woo,



and then I started riding on things, and then blowing glass, and skateboarding, and listening to punk and hardcore all at the same time, all when I started the Hilltop Artists program. And that kind of just led me down a rabbit hole of just, like, making things. And so, I felt like I was very disconnected from what I was making in the hot shop to what my actual interests were. And then, once I kind of realized – that was around ages 16, 17 – I was like, “Okay, I'm making boring things in the hot shop, but I'm looking at all this cool album art and I'm surrounded by all this graffiti in Tacoma that I'm paying a lot of attention to.” So, I ended up going to art school and neon became a medium that I found in art school. It really spoke to me because I like drinking beer, I look at lots of beer signs, and really indulgent spaces are just something that have always had a pull to me, something about the nightlife and just excess, flashing lights. And so neon really lent itself to me in that way. And then, once I started bending neon, just like glass blowing, I wanted to get good at it. I wanted to be as physically good as I could so I could make these complicated signs. And in that process of wanting to get good at neon, I started working at a sign shop where I had to very quickly learn how to do it at a professional scale and a large scale very quickly. And then I started noticing that working in a sign shop, being the bender and having to bend every piece of neon that goes out of that shop, how much that was informing my practice, and that's where my... The last piece I kind of made for myself was at the Tacoma Art Museum's GATHER show, and I made a big blue arrow, and I was really investigating signage in the way that signage actually affects our perception of things. So, it was an arrow pointing up and down. It's called Going Up, but we all know going up isn't necessarily a straight path, and that's kind of what I was investigating there. But signage has, whether I like it or not, been a huge influence on my work. As much as I like to think, like, the strip clubs, the casinos, all that, that's, like, what I want my inspiration to be. But what my real inspiration is, is what I'm doing 24/7, and I've been working at a sign shop a lot. So, signs have been a huge inspiration on my work, but I've also been working pretty heavily with GFTS for the last two years. And so, that's where the communities come in. The punk communities, the skate communities, the glassblowing community. It all kind of piles into me as a person and who I want myself to be surrounded with. So, Signage is a big part of my work. Tacoma is a big part of my work. Gambling, strip clubs, dice also a big part of my work. You know, you think about Tacoma, and it's all represented in my work. I'd think I've lived in almost every neighborhood, and I see every little bit in it in different ways, but I'm still finding my voice. I'm relatively new in my art career and I'm very new to neon, even though it's all I've been doing the last three, four, five years, I don't know at this point, but it's all there. Glassblowing's in there somewhere.

Jenna Canals:

It all adds up.

Jacob Willcox:

Yeah.

Dani Kaes:

I just have to echo Jacob, because I worked in the sign industry for, like, half of a decade. You've been inundated with it, and you bring up a good point of, like, you can't really escape it in your



own work. I did a lot of assembly. I trained a lot of people to do assembly. So, I got really used to electrical code, wiring, transformers, wiring, big, big signs. I've been inside of so many signs in Seattle just because I'm, like, the smallest person, so they would just make the little person go and fit inside of signs.

Jenna Canals:

Dani, on record: how tall are you?

Jacob Willcox:

You got put on blast.

Dani Kaes:

My license says I'm 5'3". It's a lie. I'm 5'3" if I put my hair up high. 5'2" on a good day, when I just wake up. But I agree with Jacob where a lot of my work is, like, because I got known for assembling things, putting together. How can we make this massive thing contained, and how does it work, and how can you put it together? I mean, the boot pile was really... My last mentor, – because I have three of them – he came to the GATHER show, and he was just really impressed, but the only question he asked me was "What does it look like on the back?" Because it was five circuits and just kind of a nightmare.

Jacob Willcox:

And to kind of chime in on that, I can say all three of us, I think, where our main interests meet is relays and blinky lights.

Dani Kaes:

Oh, we love relays and blinky lights.

Jacob Willcox:

I'd say that's probably the most common ground amongst all of our work. We all make very different work, but blinky lights, I think, are present in all of our work.

Jenna Canals:

Well, GFTS. Gas Filling Tube Suckers. It has been a wild ride to have you all today in studio, Frit City. We are honored to have you all. Thank you for all of your input, stories, ideas, and opinions. Before we want to head out here, I was wondering, is there anything coming up for our GFTS members? Is there anything we can look out for? I know that you all have a residency coming up next week at Museum of Glass.

Dani Kaes:

We have a piece going up at MOG that should be there until January. We're always teaching classes.



Jacob Willcox:

Yeah. Dani has a class at the Museum of Neon Art with fellow other neon bender Dani. So, it's Dani Kaes and Dani Bonet at the Museum of Glass.

Jenna Canals:

Doing big things. Well, thank you, Gas Filling Tube Suckers.

Galen Turner:

Thank you.

Jenna Canals:

For our outro, we'll do a nice shoutout session.

Jacob Willcox:

We gotta shout out Glasscolor.com, Olympic Color Rods, and Gaffer Glass. They will be providing us with some great colors to do some artistic research on hand-pulled neon tubing that you cannot buy from any manufacturer. We're making new colors. We're lighting things up. We're making it fancy. All thanks to Gaffer and Olympic. We need you, we support you, and thank you for supporting us.

Dani Kaes:

Oh, shout out to the other GFTS members that aren't here. Gina Masseno, Emma Hendry, Alanna McBride.

Jacob Willcox:

Zane Scott.

Dani Kaes:

Zane Scott. Zaney Waney.

Galen Turner:

Coupon Turner.

Dani Kaes:

Zaney Waney, thank you for showing us the greatest movie of all time: Hackers, 1995. Angelina Jolie's first starring role.

Galen Turner:

Peace, I'm out.

Jenna Canals:

Thank you all for listening. This has been Frit City: "Neon Talks with Jenna." Thank you for listening to "Neon Talks with Jenna" in celebration of our current exhibition, She Bends: Redefining Neon





Legacy, curated by Meryl Pataky and Kelsey Issel. This has been Frit City, a production of Museum of Glass. Hosted by Jenna Canals. Produced by Susan Warner, Elisabeth Emerson, and Jabari Owens-Bailey. Recorded and edited by On Purpose Recordings. Original music composed by Quinton Merada. Copyright 2023. Thank you for listening.