

Russ Bennett

Northland Construction, Why Art House, Camp Meade



Middlesex, Vermont

Story

Artist and builder Russ Bennett has always been motivated by helping create a better society. He works on breaking down the social structure so that art can create community and conversation. "Society understands money," says Russ, explaining the recent regeneration of Middlesex, Vermont where economic development and art have intersected to recreate a community hub. For 42 years Russ has worked in contracting, design and art with these values and beliefs. He prides himself on being able to work only with people he likes as a key to enjoying what he does. Through his company, NorthLand Design, Russ works all over the country creating large scale musical festivals, such as Bonnaroo and Outsidelands as well as many of Phish's multi-day musical festivals. He brings the same values of nurturing people with humor and love to all his work, whether designing and building a home for someone, creating the sense of place for 50,000 people at a music festival, or restoring artisanal food shops to vibrancy. He also runs Why Art House, a gallery and community space for artists and creativity in Middlesex.

Community

Why Art House is dedicated to supporting artists and does so by making sure artists keep most of the money from selling their work. Russ says that while he ends up losing money in this process, it's a good experiment in supporting art and artists over valuing profit. Russ believes it's hard for artists to do their work while trying to manage supplemental jobs to pay for a roof overhead, food and art supplies. As a contractor, Russ has been able to further support local makers and creators through his work on projects, such as the Montpelier food and chocolate confectioner Rabble-Rouser and the popular Red Hen Bakery in Middlesex, which he designed and built. In 2017, Russ, along with two other entrepreneurs, purchased Camp Meade, a 10-acre former Civilian Corp campus from the 1930s, next to Red Hen and transformed it into an indoor-outdoor gathering space with the intent to bring a sense of community back to Middlesex. Camp Meade holds regular gatherings for music and local food as well as special events, such as breaking the Guinness Book of World Records for creating the world's largest S'more.

Final Words

Russ moved to Vermont in 1971 and fell in love with the landscape and community. While he struggles with the lack of racial diversity in Vermont, he takes comfort and pride in Vermont's social justice values and the fact that neighbors take care of neighbors regardless of differing political views.



Photo credit: Russ Bennett

Right Now

During the pandemic, Russ is working on trying to help facilitate community while still managing social distancing. "We want to be part of the solution in getting the world back on track," he says. Russ's advice is, "whatever your passion is, it doesn't have to be in Vermont, just commit to it." He believes that when all else fails, what really lasts in a society is art and that dedication to this is key to make a difference for yourself and others. Above all, doing what makes you happy and being able to laugh once a day is the most important and the rest will fall into place. Like Russ's mother always said to him, "Everything is attitude, position and timing." Or as Joseph Campbell, one of his favorite authors, said, "Follow your bliss."

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Written by Brett Koslowsky
Edited by Korey Ward

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