

Conversation with Rebecca Rhodes

Cory: Hey there everybody, it's Cory with The Abundant Artist. Today I am here with Rebecca Rhodes from Pennsylvania in the US. Rebecca is a watercolor painter and teacher who runs a series of successful online watercolor classes. I'll let Rebecca talk about herself a little bit here in a second, but I just wanted to share how we met. One of the cool things about having a mailing list of artists like we do at The Abundant Artist is there will be people who will lurk on our list for some amount of time, it might be a few months, it might be a couple years. Then I send an email out, like a survey after a class signup. I just sent it to a segment of our list saying "Hey, why didn't you sign up for this class?" And Rebecca emailed back and said "I don't need your class! Everything's going great!" And I was like, "Awesome! So would you be willing to come on a FB live and talk a little bit about it on our podcast?" So Rebecca, thank you so much for joining us, and I'd love to have you tell everybody a little bit about yourself as an artist, tell us about your background as a teacher, and how you ended up teaching online art classes.

R: Okay. It's an honor to be here with you. I became a full-time artist in 2015 when I retired from teaching. I taught public school music for 27 years, and never had time to do anything else. I took a sabbatical in 2012 to get a Master's, but then there was time to do something else too in addition to studying! So I thought, you know, always in the back of my head I wanted to try to paint. Never did it before. And so I thought, okay, how about watercolor? It's cheap. Cheaper. Easy cleanup. I got on Google, looked up how to paint in watercolor, did tons of research, and realized that I was hooked on it. Completely hooked. And from there, I went back and taught for two more years, and I love teaching. Love it. But I just wanted to paint all the time. And eventually that just started taking over everything, like my brain. And I went home one day, and I told my husband, I said, "I want to retire!" And he said "Okay..."

I retired and became a full-time artist in 2015 and then had to figure out how to do it all, because I had no idea. I mean, by then I knew I was a pretty good artist, because I started doing commissions and started posting stuff on Facebook and people were liking what I was doing. But I had no idea how to start selling the art or how to make a living doing this. I retired from teaching, but I retired early, so I'm not getting my pension yet, so our salary's cut in half. And we said okay, we're gonna give it a year and a half. And if this doesn't work in a year and a half I'll go back to teaching again.

Thank God, it worked.

Cory: That's awesome. So I'd love to hear a little more about it. I was telling Rebecca before we started the broadcast that her family is so full of creative people! You've got family members who are artists, you're a musician, there's all this artistic creativity in your family. I just think that's so cool, because my family has just very different skill sets, very different backgrounds from that. I'm the weird sport who was like, "I'll go do artistic things." And everybody else in my family is either a laborer, like welders, and laborers and stuff like that. So I was the first person in my family to go to college and do any of that kind of stuff. So I think it's really neat when you come from a family like that. I would love to hear from you how having that kind of a family

informed your mindset and thought going into your teaching career as well as your second teaching career.

R: First of all, my family, they were always super supportive of the first career, and the second career. Always your number one cheerleaders. And I appreciate that. Growing up, my father was a music teacher and an art teacher. So there was always music in the house. And in fifth grade, I used to draw cartoons and things like that when I was younger. But in fifth grade, that's when they start teaching you the instruments. And we had a trumpet sitting around the house, so I picked up the trumpet, and ended up being pretty good at it. That was it for the rest of my school career. Band, choir, not a lot of time for art. I was a high school art editor, but that's about it. Went to college for music, and as a music teacher there's not a lot of time for much else. It's a time-consuming job.

Cory: Right.

R: Am I answering your question?

Cory: You are, yeah. I'll give a shout out to a couple of people that are watching live. Marsha Ann's watching live, Basset Artwork's watching live, so I know there's another, there's a bunch of people, Eric, Joe, Sierra, Julie, Steve, thanks so much for joining us ya'll, it's fun to do these casual conversations every once in a while with artists and kind of see where they're coming from. So Rebecca, as you were making the transition from a long experience teaching music offline to teaching painting online, what were the major challenges that you had? Because a lot of artists, last year I wrote an article for Professional Artist Magazine about artists who are making a great living teaching online art classes, and one of the things that came up a lot was how do you teach, like how do you physically teach painting online? And if you're an experienced teacher, how do you make the transition from teaching offline to teaching online? So I'd love to hear your thoughts there.

R: So I taught music technology, and that helped. So I feel confident with editing video. But it's easy. Don't let that stop you from wanting to do this. It's something you can easily learn.

Cory: What is music technology?

R: Have you ever heard of Garage Band? That's basically what we did- it's a music editing program. And we taught students how to compose on the computers. And we did some video in there too, so it's something I always wanted to do and just never had time. So that just went right into the online teaching. As far as just discovering online teaching, is that what you were asking also? Okay.

Cory: Yeah, how did you discover it, and what were the challenges? Because when you're in person, you can see people's reactions and you can physically take their hand and show them something, but when you're teaching online you can't. So how did you make the adjustment?

R: I took a course from Anna Mason, an online course. And she does botanical work. And I just kind of borrowed her ideas, and it just came pretty easy. I use my phone to record and I set it like this, and I just record myself painting. And you know, I think it's because I did it as a teacher, I

didn't run into a lot of difficulties. I think you're gonna have to hit me with some questions to help me you know get more specific. It was so much fun!

Cory: Just a naturally easy transition.

R: I think it's because I did it as a teacher.

Cory: Right. What kind of tools, so you're using your iPhone to- is it an iPhone or is it something else?

R: It's a Samsung Galaxy. Is that Android?

Cory: Samsung Galaxy. Okay. So you're using a Samsung Galaxy, you record your videos and your audio. How are you doing the editing?

R: I found a very inexpensive program called Filmora. Are you familiar? Yeah.

Cory: Filmora. No, I've never heard of it.

R: I started so cheap. Everything. And I figure eventually, eventually I'll probably move to – is it Camtasia?

Cory: Sure, that's one option.

R: I'll probably move to that next. But right now I'm pretty happy with Filmora. It's pretty inexpensive. And I use Audacity, which is a music editing- free program to do noise reduction.

Cory: Yep. Okay, interesting. That's pretty much it. So I've used Audacity a little bit. You just throw the audio in there, and there's a noise reduction feature in Audacity that you do a couple of clicks and it removes all of the white noise in the background.

R: That's what I'm talking about, yeah.

Cory: Very cool. So then you compile that together and throw that on YouTube?

R: Yeah, and it's time consuming. That's the biggest thing. You can create a painting in a couple of days, but it takes about two weeks to edit. At least two weeks to edit the video. With cutting and pasting, and adjusting the sound, and then you have to download it and it just takes a long time. But it's fun.

Cory: Interesting.

R: Because you've got to give yourself time to do it.

Cory: Okay. Right. So you're doing these videos on YouTube, and I notice on your YouTube channel you've got about 7,000 subscribers. You get a lot of people just following you to find, what's the word I'm looking for? Suggestions on how to, you've got all these specific tutorials on specific subjects like how to paint a detailed dog. Right? And I think there's even like videos about specific breeds of dogs.

R: That's right.

Cory: So you're doing all of these specific tutorials and you're giving away, are they simple tips, or is each free YouTube video an in-depth tutorial on how to do-

R: It's the entire tutorial sped up. Sped up by 10x. You know I figure, okay, if you like it, then come over to my online school and that's what I do. I say come to the online school where you can see it in real time. And I get a lot of people from YouTube. What's it called- a sales funnel? I funnel them from YouTube. Mostly YouTube.

Cory: Okay! So then what made you decide to use Teachable as your teaching platform instead of just embedded videos from YouTube or something like that?

R: So, it's 2016 and I'm not making money. And I'm starting to get a little worried. So I find this artist, I'm on YouTube all the time, researching, I find Angela Fehr, who's a watercolor artist. She's talking about how she teaches online and how she uses Teachable. And I'm like, oh my goodness! Here I am a teacher, it just seems like, why didn't I think of this before? So I looked up Teachable, I did a lot of research on it. And I saw mostly good things. And I know there's other platforms out there, but I just decided you know what, I like what I'm seeing on Teachable, it's a platform where you can place your videos and they won't do any kind of advertising, you have to do your own advertising. But they'll take care of all the technical stuff. And they're letting you put your videos on their platform. And that's how I chose them, I know there's others out there, but I didn't even look at anything else. I looked at lots of reviews and I'm happy with Teachable.

Cory: Nice! So tell us a little bit about, so most of your students come from YouTube, is that what you said?

R: Most of them come from YouTube, it's starting to pick up now with Pinterest and Facebook, but still I think the most are YouTube.

Cory: Okay. And how are people finding you on Pinterest? Are you posting the same tutorials on Pinterest, or are you doing something else?

R: I took a course- I didn't take a course, but I've been studying up on how to advertise on Pinterest. I've created a bunch of different boards, all having to do with watercolor, and one of them is my board. It's got all the YouTube videos on there, and it'll take you to YouTube.

Cory: Right. So people find you on Pinterest, and then they click on the videos there, watch them on YouTube, and then from YouTube they'll click over to your classes.

R: That's what I hope they do, yes. That's what I want.

Cory: Excellent, alright. So why are you using YouTube instead of like Instagram or Facebook?

R: YouTube is where I get the most reaction, it seems like. That's where people seem to be coming from the most. And I started on YouTube too, way back. Facebook is just, you never know if people are seeing your posts on Facebook. I feel like I can't quite trust it, you know what I mean?

Cory: So you've noticed that you're getting more like easier attention and traction on YouTube?

R: Absolutely. And on Instagram, it seems like people see my work on Instagram more than Facebook. Again, Facebook is good too. Pinterest is good too. But YouTube seems to be the one where the most engagement, that's the word. Engagement.

Cory: Excellent. So you're on Teachable, and you used it because you found it and you didn't need to look for any other options. So how are things going? How's the business? What does your business look like right now?

R: So what I do is offer a subscription plan. For \$20 a month you can paint anything in my school. And I have a goal, a certain number subscribers. When I achieve that goal, I'll be earning a good living. And I'm about halfway there. So it's going, it's a very slow process. It's not going to happen right away. But very slowly, it's growing in subscribers. I have a really big email list. And then out of that email list, probably ten percent purchase. So as long as it keeps going up, and it's slowly going up. And I know that people join and they leave. And that's all part of it. But so far so good, I'm thinking in a year and a half I'll be where I want to be financially. Now I don't rely on just the school. I mean, I do other things. But that's a large part of my income.

Cory: What other things are you doing?

R: I do commissions. I do on one on tutoring online. Like if someone wants to learn how to paint their dog, like a specific dog, we do it online. I attend some shows, selectively, some art shows. What else do I do?

Cory: How do you pick the shows that you attend?

R: Back when I first retired, I experimented and I did a lot of research on shows. I went to a couple small ones and I learned how to do it, and then I thought, I don't think I can do this full time. It's a lot of work. But to answer your question, what I do is I find artists who live in my area and I look at what shows they go to, because then I know they're good. I audition to get in to those shows. So I pick the best ones.

Cory: So you're paying attention to what other artists are doing.

R: Yeah, you have to, it seems like it just makes sense to do that. So I have a couple favorite artists whom I admire. I try out, you have to- a lot of these are called juried, you have to go in and kind of audition. If they accept me, I know they're good shows, and I know I can make money at them. And you know, being an artist is a solitary thing. And that was hard for me, being a teacher. So it's nice to get out and do shows. So I do maybe four a year. And little by little I'll probably do more and more. And that's a whole other side. It's fun because one part of this is teaching. So mostly in the online school I'm doing what people want, which is how to paint a pet portrait. But then in the shows, people don't really want to buy pet portraits unless it looks like their pet. So I do other paintings of wildlife, and also sheet music art. I take little pieces of sheet music and paint on them and people seem to like that.

Cory: Yeah, I was gonna ask if you were still doing the sheet music art. I'm glad to hear that you are, cause that's pretty cool.

R: Yeah, it keeps things fun and different ways to bring money in. So you don't have to rely on just one thing.

Cory: Excellent. Well if somebody is at the very beginning, and they're like, "You know, I think I'd like to teach but I'm not sure what I would teach, or how to get started," how would you recommend they get started?

R: Okay, so you're not sure what to do. Well, I mean, what's your favorite thing to do? What are you really passionate about? That's the first thing. I was already painting animals. Maybe you could take your phone and experiment on YouTube and see if you're getting interest and comments. It might take a couple months. That's what I did. And you know, if it seems like people are really liking what you're doing, then this might be something that you might want to teach. And then research Teachable and Skillshare and, what are some others out there? You know, do the research. Most of these platforms, these teaching platforms, you can try it for free. So what's the worst that can happen? Maybe people aren't interested in what you do. There's always somebody who's gonna love what you do. That's the great thing about art. Right, don't you think?

Cory: Yeah, absolutely. Rebecca, thank you so much for this quick conversation. And I think a lot of people will find it valuable to figure out how they can get started teaching. I appreciate you taking the time. And if you prefer audio, we'll have an audio version up on this on The Abundant Artist podcast feed, which you can find on iTunes, and we'll also have a blog post up in the next week or two with a recap of this conversation as well as links to some of the resources that Rebecca mentioned here. So again Rebecca, thank you so much, and thanks so much everybody for tuning in, and we'll talk to you soon.