

## Creative Warrior Kelly Sullivan

A Creative Warrior is someone who not only guards their creative vision, but lives it in each step and breath they take. This month's creative warrior is New Jersey artist, [Kelly Sullivan](https://www.thebabblingbrush.com), [www.thebabblingbrush.com](https://www.thebabblingbrush.com).

Through a mutual friend I recently met, Kelly Sullivan, an innovative painter and artist who has the vision and fortitude to bring the creative arts to people all over the country. Kelly lives in Lambertville, NJ., just over the river from Bucks County, Pa., an area that I grew up in and a place that continues to be a home in my heart.

Kelly and her husband Tom lived in Teton Valley, Idaho for years before returning to her home roots in NJ. Their two children have grown up and returned to Driggs, Idaho, which brings her back to this area to paint often, pre-Covid. The rugged outdoorsy fellow in her painting called 'Olaf' may look familiar to many Teton County residents. Olaf Koehler or Olle, is a longtime Jackson, Wy. local, a kayaking renegade, and Manager of the Mead Ranch for the past 40 years. Former Wyoming Governors, Cliff Hansen and Matt Mead and their families, have owned the ranch for generations. Olle generously took Kelly on a tour of the ranch and his love of his surroundings and his charming personality inspired her to paint his portrait.

Kelly's collaborative paintings for corporate retreats, called [FingerSmears®](#), can include hundreds of people from all walks of life and each person gets to add their own unique flare, smudge, or stroke of color and detail to just one piece of art. Teton County residents may have seen "Jackson 399" hanging in the Teton County municipal offices. It was created years ago by visitors and community members during the Fall Arts Festival. After Covid hit, her corporate work and main source of income got wiped out in a matter of two weeks. She was forced to rethink how to best use her creativity to keep her long-held dream alive, the renovation and transformation of an old local theater into a creative hub and center for her community. She began painting her [Storybook Village Series](#) in order to continue to fund the old theater's renovation.

After tragically losing her dad to Covid this past summer, Kelly has needed to tap into her creativity more than ever. She gives insight into how creative expression transforms our lives and how changing a long-held perspective or point of view taps us into our creative power.

### Kelly Interview:

L - What does creativity mean to you?

K - I think creativity is the ability to exercise your imagination. Can you imagine a scenario that is different than the one that is presented to you? You can see creative solutions to a problem. You can see a variety of options and you choose one because you have the ability to imagine it.

L - Why is creativity important?

K - It's important because we are constantly handed situations that are not ideal or that we need to overcome, get around, and move through. First of all, you have to realize that you have the ability to work around those things and that you're not forced to take what is handed to you. We have the ability to create change. A well exercised imagination helps us to shift perspective and lead a more directed and joyful life.

L - Do you think creativity can be developed?

K - Oh, yeah, absolutely. I think exercising your imagination develops your creativity. I'll walk down the street and I'll constantly want to stop and look at things. It's almost like drinking up this visual pleasure and looking a little bit more slowly. Imagine trees dancing or water singing or just let your mind flow in fanciful ways, it's just fun to think that way. So, yes, I do think creativity can be developed.

Creativity is different than craft. Being a painter, being a singer, being a dancer, that's not necessarily creativity, it's being able to access your creativity, but it's putting a lot of hours into a craft. I think painting is great for everyone, painting, singing, dancing, theater, whatever it is, exercising that part of yourself is really important. Whether or not you decide to make it a refined craft or a career, it's still incredibly important and I don't think you can have a well rounded existence without bringing that into the picture. I can't be successful without math and science in my life everyday. People who are successful in math and science will be even more successful and happy if they bring a little bit of creativity into their lives.

You may say you're not creative, maybe it's not your strongest suit, but that doesn't mean it's not important in your life.

L - You recently lost your dad during Covid, I'm so sorry for your loss.

K - He passed away in June. He wasn't doing well for a couple of months. He didn't have the respiratory issues, it's different symptoms sometimes for older people with Covid, he had really intense and noticeable dementia and physical weakness that was causing him to fall. We couldn't see him and that was really the hardest part, that he had to die without any of his kids. My sister did make it for maybe the last 10 minutes of his life, but he died before I got there. It sucks. Covid sucks, that's all there is to it, it sucks. We all come and go but that's not the way you should go. He was a good dad. We should have been with him.

I think I now need creativity even more, I need it. I think during Covid in general, I need it. Having a parent die really makes you think about things in a much different way. I guess I'm still hashing all that out.

L - I lost my dad to dementia while he was alive and I think I was numb for a long time, I kinda just went through the motions. My dad was the glue of our family in a way, he took care of us all, and after the loss, it was like everyone fell apart. I'm now writing about my dad. If there is

a silver lining, I think it increased my empathy for others and myself in a way. I describe grief as waves, I think I am fine and then something triggers me.

K - I kinda worry a lot less. If I slam the car door too hard, my husband will be like, "Ugh, do you have to slam the door so hard?"; and I'm like, it doesn't matter, get over it, life is short, let's turn the radio on and sing a song, who gives a shit about the car door, it's really unimportant. My father use to say, "Just have fun, just enjoy yourself." So, that's what I try to remind myself because I work really hard. I didn't really get parental support when I said that I wanted to be an artist, they were like, "Go to nursing school." I went through my life demanding that I was going to be an artist and very resilient about it and headstrong. I worked my butt off because I always felt like I had something to prove and I think I did prove it. I know my parents at this point are very proud, they're like my daughter the artist. I know that I kinda got there in their eyes. Most of the time, I got there in my eyes too, I guess.

L - I get it, taking those moments for fun are really important.

K - Taking those moments are really important. The amount of time we spend dancing in the living room or singing or scribbling pictures or playing, I just think it's really important to play more and worry less. I'm trying to do more of that.

I also understand that this is a really hard time for so many people. Losing your jobs, and your income, and having small mouths to feed, it's a hard time for some people to relax enough to play. When you're hungry or worried about how you're going to keep the electric bill on, it's a lot harder to dance in the living room.

L - Do you have any thoughts or suggestions for people going through the stress of Covid?

K - The arts are free and they are really powerful. There is so much science that points to the positive power of art. Singing increases your Immunoglobulin A's. You don't need fancy paints to create art, you can make art with a pencil, you can make art with sand, and you can make art out of nothing. It can also be in the way you cook, decorate your space, or exercise your imagination. Using your creativity is one of the best things we can do with ourselves whether there's Covid going on or not. It's probably more important right now because we have so much of this heavy, bizarre stuff. It gets me through the days. The kids moved out of the house a couple years ago and I finally got around to commandeering their rooms. Our daughter's room, I turned it into a yoga studio. My husband will come up and he'll DJ and I'll just dance on this wide open floor and I'll feel like all's right with the world, my body's happy and my brain is happy, you know.

L - I wish I could come up and dance with you in that room, that sounds so fun.

K - Well, next time you are on the East coast, post Covid, come over.

L - Do you think people in general can have a deeper connection to themselves and their creative spirit? I'm just wondering, is there any good that can come out of this stressful period of Covid? Maybe I'm reaching here Kelly?

K - It's been a struggle for all of us but there is good that comes out of everything and it just depends on what your perspective is. How are you going to look at it, are you going to focus on, all the horrible stuff that came from it or are you going to focus on the different and new ways we've been forced to grow? You can always shift your perspective. I think sometimes it's easy to forget that, I forget that. I'll get caught up in some 'whoa is me' moment, but the reality is, you can shift your perspective. There are good things that come out of every struggle, you just have to force yourself to see it and then focus on it and stay focused on it, instead of the other stuff. I think we do that everyday, right? We try to tap into ourselves and whatever this life experience is and focus on the things that make us feel connected and warm and safe.

Quite often the arts do that, the arts connect us to ourselves and our outer world. The arts are like magic. Sometimes you don't know how to express or say what you are feeling and you can pour that out in a piece of abstract art or a piece of music or a dance in the living room. I think as human beings we have to express ourselves, it's part of our makeup. We have to express ourselves and it helps if we do it in fun ways.

L - Tell me about your painting, what inspires your work?

K - I grew up going to my Grandmother's house in the Poconos in Pennsylvania and she introduced me to oil painting. I loved the smell and the messiness of it, I was just taken by it. We would make anything creative, pom pom dolls, collages, and all kinds of interesting things. It was like magic camp. In my twenties, I picked painting back up and I started doing collaborative paintings around the country. Actually, I started doing collaborative paintings in San Francisco because they were cutting funding for arts education and I thought that was a bad idea. So, I produced a hands-on arts festival in San Francisco and I got Haagen Dazs to sponsor it and we brought in groups of kids and they were able to paint, sculpt, make masks, and drum drums. I had to come up with a way to paint with people over this 10 day period with a very small budget, so I bought one big canvas and cheap acrylic paint and that's how I started doing *FingerSmears*®. The *FingerSmears* and collaborative art have been a big part of my career as a painter.

When I have a painting on the easel, my life is better. I wake up in the morning and all I can think about is that painting. When I go to bed at night, I'll look at it on my phone just to see where the problems might be or what I might want to change.

L - Describe to me how *FingerSmears* works?

K - I design the image based on the event. I submit sketches to the client and then bring the canvas on location. Everyone who is there, sticks their fingers in paint and I offer a little direction, put a little there, put a little there. Some people know just what they want to do and I let them have at it, they see the overall gist of the painting and understand what it's about. So, if you make a mark, it adds to the overall unity of the piece. They all sign the canvas and I pull it all together in the end. I orchestrate it all. It's a creative, collaborative painting that is designed to amplify the message of the group. It's mostly leadership conferences with

hundreds of people from all over the country. The painting winds up in headquarters or where-ever. We also have a digital version, called Paint.Team, that allows people to paint through a web application. We've had some really interesting Paint.Team projects going on at two local Pa. hospitals right before Covid hit, but that is all put on hold right now.

L - Where are you at with your painting and work now?

K - I'm working on a painting series called, *Storybook Village*, based on Lambertville, NJ, where we live. It is a beautiful old village on the Delaware River and there's another beautiful village on the other side called New Hope, Pa. There's a very rich history here of art. I started this *Storybook Village Series* because if you're going to be stuck somewhere, this isn't a bad place to be stuck. I had to think a little bit creatively, I had a huge year of corporate collaborative work, probably one of the biggest of my career, and then Covid hit and my entire year got wiped out in a matter of two weeks. I'm in the process of buying an old theater in town, which has been a warehouse for the last 50 years, it's a 5,000 square foot building on one of the oldest streets in town. I'm going to reinvent the space back into an art space where I can bring corporate teams to Lambertville for small leadership conferences. They can have their meeting in this really interesting art space and we will use art, all of the arts, visual, theater, improv, voice, all of it to amplify the message of their meeting. It took me a year to get that through the city and I just got that approved. My full year of *FingerSmears* all over the country is what was funding the acquisition and renovation and when that all fell apart, I was unwilling to give up this vision. So, I really had to turn my focus to just selling fine art in order to finance this project. I'm happy to say that I am selling more fine art which is great. I think people are spending a lot more time in their homes and paying attention to their space. The people who actually have the ability to purchase fine art, they're more interested in it, they want to surround themselves with beauty and color. The *Storybook Village Series* is very much about this area and part of it is a push to sell more fine art to fund this Strand Renovation Project. I have to think creatively, I have to work really hard, and I have to sell a lot of paintings.

My studio has so many paintings from Teton Valley, Idaho and Wyoming because I go out there a lot to see my kids. I have a van that we converted into a camper, so we drive out there a couple times a year and I paint in that area. There are so many people who live in New Jersey who come to my studio and they're like, "Oh, Wow, Jackson Hole, Wyoming or Teton Valley, Idaho!" It's kinda funny, I have an interesting mix of New Jersey, Wyoming, and Teton Valley, Idaho in my studio.

L - Looking ahead, what are you excited about?

K - I'm definitely excited about renovating the old Strand Theater. It has been approved by the city and we're starting to gather the team that's going to do some of the work. We'll manage the whole renovation project. I'm excited about having a flexible art space where we can have visual exhibitions as well as performance, small black box theater, and small interesting meetings.

Career-wise, I'm very excited about the Storybook Village Series that I'm working on right now. It's really fun and interesting to paint and I'm doing a lot of night scenes which I haven't done traditionally. I'm also doing a lot of buildings because this is a small village and for years I avoided painting buildings but buildings are kinda fun, they have their own personality and character. Oddly, the first piece that I did was a chocolate shop in town and I put it up online and someone in Driggs, Id. bought it.

I'm excited about Covid being over and people actually being able to gather again. I really miss that, like all of us do, I love to cook and I miss having dinner parties. We all are excited for that.

To read more about Kelly and to view her work, go to her webpage, [www.thebabblingbrush.com](http://www.thebabblingbrush.com).