

Kelly McCoy – *Interview conducted by Willard Watson at River Girl Outfitters, in Todd, NC next to a wood stove with dogs sleeping nearby.*

Q1 – Who are you, When and where were you born?

My name is Kelly McCoy and I joke and call myself the “real McCoy” and not because of the Hatfield’s and McCoy’s. I am originally from a little town in Alabama called Hokes Bluff. I was born on September 10, 1973.

Q2 – What did your parents do for a living? Did you contribute to the family income or help parents in their work in any way?

My father was a steel worker and he fished bass tournaments in his spare time. I joke and tell people I helped him in that aspect and that helped me get into my fishing career. My mom was a house cleaner and she took on side jobs working at Walmart or helping friends out. I definitely contributed to the family because I did the housework, I learned how to make biscuits, I learned how to cook, and I would go with mom help her on certain things.

Q3 – What do you do for a living?

Gosh, that is a good question. Here at River Girl fishing company it started off 11 years ago to teach fly fishing, guide fly fishing, sell fishing licenses and educate about the river. In that 11 years it has turned into a tubing rental company, a kayaking rental company, we do eco-tours where I float with people and we talk about the river the health of the river and how to protect

it. We do bicycle rentals for Railroad Grade Road, what else? It has turned into a huge outfitting business, is what it's turned into because of the need of the community.

Q4 – So River Girl has been around for 11 years now, were you working in a similar type of industry before that?

No, so when I lived in Alabama I started out in aquaculture, raising catfish and tilapia, so aquatic creatures for food. I got an internship in Mississippi, so I left Alabama, went to Mississippi did the six-month internship in Mississippi, ended up finishing the internship and saying, "Where do I go now?" I went with the flow of life and I stayed in Mississippi another six months working there at the Delta Aquaculture station and ended up getting my residency in Mississippi so I ended up going to Mississippi State University to get a fisheries science degree. That's where I got my nickname River Girl was at Mississippi State, so when I graduated there I was like, "Where do I go now?" So Florida called me. So I went down to Florida and I worked down there for five years as a marine biologist.

We vacationed up here two years in a row, and I floated this river two years in a row and I fell in love with it. So I made a plan to get up here and on this river. So we sold everything and moved up here. And I didn't have a job. So I worked for a year looking for a job, couldn't find one. Worked on getting pregnant via artificial insemination, after nine inseminations I got pregnant and then I started River Girl or I think I started River Girl and then I got pregnant, but anyways it all came about really quickly. And so what I have done for my whole life is work with fish, researched fish, investigated fish and done research projects and stuff on fish.

Q5 – How did you decide on your career?

When I moved up here I was looking for fisheries jobs and everything was coming up for the coast. After I graduated from Mississippi State all my work related things were marine, so everything was coming up for the coast, nothing was coming for up here. So I actually started River Girl not here in this train depot, but over inside the Mercantile Bakery that's here in Todd. I opened it upstairs in this little tiny room, and it was me, a 200-gallon fish tank, a desk for tying flies, building rods and it started off just tiny and quaint like that. Then this building became available so I moved River Girl over here. And everyone that came in, every two or three people would say, "Can we rent a kayak?" and I was like, "Nope, but I can take you fishing!" Then someone else would say "Hey can we rent some inner tubes?" "Uh, nope but I'll teach you how to fly fish." Then somebody comes in, "Hey can we rent bikes for the road?" "No I don't have any bikes, but I've got fishin' rods."

So then it was like, OK maybe I should get some kayaks and maybe I should get some tubes. I started the outfitting portion with the Tahoe that's sitting out front, it's over in the corner over there, and a five by eight trailer, I bought two tubes, I bought two kayaks, and as I rented those out I bought more, as I rented those out I bought more. So I've never taken out any per se loans, to buy the equipment, I've bought the equipment as I made money and I just put it back into it, and put it back into it. So slowly over the 11 years we're now up to having 150 tubes in the back yard, 50 something boats, kayaks, canoes, tandems, kids kayaks. I started the biking program out with used bicycles from friends' houses but then people would call me from three miles down the road like, "Hey the brakes went out can you come and get me?" So I was like, "OK, maybe I need to get some nice bikes." I worked with Boone Bike (Initiative), Shaw

and Sarah down there and they helped me outfit with a fleet of their bicycles, so now we have brand new bicycles. It really fell into my lap and worked out perfectly. I believe in doing the right thing, doing good karma and everything has come back really nicely.

Q6 – How would you say the work has changed since you started?

It's gotten really fast, it's a fast paced business. I tell customers that come in here, we're either slow as molasses, like right now in December, or its just nuts. There will be 40 people coming in and lining up. Making sure everyone has a life jacket, making sure they've signed the waiver, making sure they've left their keys, they've got the right footwear on. See these shoes? (*points up to clothes lines of shoes hanging from the ceiling.*) These are our lost soles, so these are comprised of flip flops, crocs, jelly shoes, and I think there's a pair of high heels up there somewhere. It's just amazing what people will try to wear down the river. It's just become really fast paced, that's how its changed, but again it goes back to its slow period when we are in the winter time.

Q7 – When do you work? time? (day/night) (weekdays/weekends)

Yeah, so we're open April to November, but November back to April we are reservation based, because I still have fisherman that want to go fishing when it is 20-degrees outside. And I try to talk them into waiting until is like 33 or 34 (degrees) because I don't like having to crack the ice out of my guides, but that's our season to be open, April to November. We are busiest from

Memorial Day to Labor Day - when the kids get out of school and before the kids go back to school.

Q8 – Describe a typical work day

It could entail since I am the owner, for me I could come in and suit up and take people fishing while the staff are here running the boats, and the kayaks, and the tubes and things. Or I could come in here and check in customers. I could hop in the bus and tell the schpeel about the history of the river and take people out. I work right alongside all of the staff so if I'm not out fishing or teaching fishing or doing an eco-tour then I'm here helping them outfit customers and get them on the river.

Q9 – What type of people do you work with?

Most of the staff are either locals that live here in Todd or some of the college kids from ASU, because to do this job you need to be strong, (laughs) you need to have a good public face because people come here and they're excited to go down the river, so you don't need someone who is like (low energy voice) *"OK get your life jacket, sign a waiver,"* you need a fresh face to keep them pumped about going. Most of the staff that work here work here for five or six years at a time, until they are old enough to fly away to their real positions in life. The customers that come in could be locals or most of the people that come here are off the mountain, so they're coming from Charlotte, Raleigh, Wilmington, they're coming from hot places up to the cool place to cool off and float the river.

Q10 – What do you do with downtime at work?

HOOO! Rest, when we get all the customers on the water, there's always something here to do but I tell the staff that if you've put out 20 people and you've had some *high need* customers and they've tested your patience or your stress levels and stuff, come back here and grab something to eat and go sit by the creek back here and kind of de-stress, and take some time to regroup. We usually set up games out front, we'll have the corn-hole boards.

I had staff a few years ago that set up these boards in the back yard where he would throw knives. So if he had customers that would really get on his nerves, I would know, if he was in the front yard playing corn hole, he's having a great day, if he's in the back yard throwing knives, (laughs) he's having a rough day. But it was kinda neat because he taught some of the other staff how to through knives. He taught me how to throw a knife, and it's quite an art, throwing a knife and getting it to stick in a board, that was a fun summer.

WW – It seems that working in the outdoor, recreation industry that your clientele can take a lot of the fun out of that.

Most of them come in and they're really excited. It's been neat to see some families that came here 10 years ago that still come here. And I met their kids at 5 years old and now their kids are 15 years old and they're coming here to volunteer, they're coming here to work part time and do some things too. Most of the customers are really really good, but you'll have some of those that are *really* high need and they want you to bend over backwards for them, and we do,

because you do that when you want to keep your customers. In the same turn if you get riled up you need to let the steam off.

Q11 – Does your occupation have any special sayings or expressions? What are they? How did they come about?

There's one that I've said ever since we've started and it's "Live, Learn, Fish." You know, I think the normal saying was live, learn, love or something like that and I was like, let's change it up a little bit. And then when I sign all my emails or if I do hand written letters and stuff instead of doing best wishes I do "best fishes" and then sometimes I do "fin-cerely" instead of sincerely, because that's my son's name is Finn. And then sometimes I do "over and trout" instead of "over and out." I try to do everything with fish, cause I always have fish on the brain.

Q12 – What are things about your work outsiders would not expect?

Probably how hard it is, because you don't know how many times I hear, "Gosh you gotta love your job, you gotta love being able to just take somebody fishing and make \$200 or \$300. Wow this is the life taking people and putting them on the river!" I said, "It is!" And really it is, I really *love* my job, I *love* my life, I *love* living here, I love everything about it, but it's hard!

But it's hard, because when you take someone fishing, you're *not* fishing, so it took me a little while to get used to taking someone fishing and not fishing so my hands are here (*points to pockets*) and I have an extra rod in here (in pack) and I'm pointing and saying, "OK, Ol' George is sitting over there, you gotta put that fly right there and drift it," but what do they do?

They throw it up in the tree, so guess what I'm doing? I'm climbing the tree getting that fly out, or I'm yanking that fly down and I'm retying a fly on.

So I don't mean this in a rude way, but guiding fishing is like babysitting, it's hard babysitting. Especially in the winter when it's really cold outside and your fingers are freezing off and like I was out two weeks ago and it was so cold and I doubled my socks up and everything, but you're in 40-degree water, my feet got so cold they felt like ice cubes, I really felt that if I stepped on them too hard they might just crack and bust open because they were so cold.

And then loading a trailer full of kayaks, loading up 50 tubes for a church group that's coming, and you're excited and you're fun and you're excited for them, *its hard work*, and when you gotta get two more tubes on it and your *stretching to squeeze them in*, it's really hard, hard work. I think that's what a lot of folks don't realize about this business is that it is a lot of fun, but it's a lot of work too.

Q13 – What were originally the most difficult aspect or your job?

Planning, where you were going to put people in. Planning where you were going to take people out. Making sure you have all your insurances covered like building insurance, vehicle insurance, outfitter insurance, making sure you're just covered on all aspects so that this fun thing you are doing for people you're not hurting them, or injuring them or putting them in a dangerous position. So planning, organizing, and just making sure the taxes are paid, making sure you're good with Uncle Sam, all those kind of things would be it.

The youngest to go down the river is probably six months old, we let babies go down that river, but I make sure the mother is going to hold the baby. The baby is in a life jacket and I make sure that the father, or the other parent is paddling, or steering or in another tube attached, so whoever is holding the baby, that's your only job is to hold on to the baby. We have a group that comes up from Linville, her names Effy, they're in their late seventies and eighties and there are six or seven women that come up and go tubing. And I think our oldest came out last year, he was 87 years old and he paddled his own boat.

We have handicapped folks that come out. We try to accommodate anyone that wants to come out and float the river. My mother is a double-amputee, with the legs, I pick my mother up and put her in a kayak and the staff help me pick her up in the kayak and walk her into the river, and she paddles the river, but we go with her in case she flips out or something.

Q14 – What is/was the most satisfying?

Oh gosh, its seeing the happiness that that river, that the outdoors brings to people. About three or four years ago a little kid came up to me, maybe 5 or 6 years old, and came up to me and tugged on my shorts and goes, "Miss River Girl, I just needed to tell you that this was the coolest thing that I did with my parents this summer." I was like, Wow! It wasn't Disney world, it wasn't a water park, it was floating this little docile river out here and I just thought that was cool.

Q15 – What advice would you give someone beginning this line of work?

I would say do your homework, know that it is expensive. Those boats are really expensive; the insurances are really expensive. Just do your homework, and I would really recommend going and interning or volunteering at an outfitter so you can see behind the scenes what it's gonna be like, because so many people try to get into this business and they realize how hard it is and they end up selling it. Just doing your homework and knowing all the details of what you'd be doing.

Q16 – Describe a memorable moment from work.

When my son was about 4 or 5 years old, he obviously loves to fish, because I do. So he was out in the backyard, and he would be out there with just a little Zebco 33, with a little rebel crawfish and he would fish in the backyard and I would let him do it on his own and I would be in here working and he would holler, "Mommy, I dot one, I dot one!" So I run out and of course he's landed a tree fish, or a rock fish, or a stone fish or a stump fish, he's hooked up on something and I would have to get his hook out. It's that boy cries wolf type thing. You know he's yelling, "Mommy I dot one I dot one!" and I'm like, "OK, Finn I'll be there in just a minute," because I was actually in the middle of like loading a kayak into the back of someone's car or something and I was tied up so it took me a few minutes to get down there and in the back of my mind I'm thinking, he's hooked on a tree or a log or something.

I get down there finally; he has got a brown trout about 18-inches long that he has caught. He has pulled it up onto the grass, he has taken a bucket of water and wet the grass, he

is wetting the fish, because I've taught him that you always touch a fish with wet hands so you don't take their slime off because their slime is their protective barrier, it protects them against parasites and bacteria and so forth. So I run down there and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, Finnigan! Couldn't you have told me that you actually caught a fish because you always say I dot one, I dot one, but you've caught a tree or something." He's like, "Look mommy I'm keeping him wet so he stays alive!"

So anyways I wet my hands and I picked that fish up and put that fish back in the creek and I actually had my GoPro camera on me so I got video of that fish swimming away, which was pretty cool. But you know I take fishermen in this creek and they catch little ones that are like eight to ten inches and my son catches one at 4 years 18-inches long, that was pretty cool. It was right there (in the backyard), and he was just spending his own time, doing his own little thing, being a boy, and catching a big fish. That's not his only big fish, so I'll tell you this other story, we used to live about a half a mile down the road off of one of the low water bridges, and we were fishing one afternoon and he was fishing with his little Zebco, and he knows how to fly fish but he catches more fish with that rebel crawfish, so he's catching little rock bass. So he'd catch a rock bass and he'd always have a five-gallon bucket because what he would do with these little fish is take'em off and put it in the bucket and examine them, keep them in there for about ten minutes then let them back go.

So he's been catching rock bass all day and I'm down there and I'm fly fishing and I'm catching some trout. So he says, "Mommy can I use yours for a minute?" So I'm like sure and I do what other parents do. I get on my phone and I'm checking my email and checking Facebook or whatever as he's fishing with the dry fly, little tiny little parachute adams, he hooks into a

fish and he is like, “Mommy! Mommy!” so I drop the phone and the rod is bent over like this (makes u shape) and it’s a bamboo rod, not a nice bamboo rod but an old bamboo rod and I see this fish, its huge. So I go, “Finn give me that rod!” Because I knew he would never get it up onto the bridge, I pick that fish up, and get it up onto the bridge, I put it in the bucket, it hangs out by six inches, it’s like 25-inches long! I have a picture of that fish. It broke the rod, the tip of the rod. That fish went back into the river too. That was his biggest fish, he hooked it, I landed it, but because he probably wouldn’t have been able to get it in. So those are his two big fish stories.

But my other story I really, really wanted to tell you was that, see all these shoes that are up here? (points to the lost soles) So I never owned a pair of Crocs, because I couldn’t justify spending \$30 on foam. See these shoes? I’ve got a pair of Crocs now; I’ve had them almost 10 years. Now I don’t recommend for people to wear crocs on the river because they are oversized and they slip off your feet really easy, so people lose them on the river. But I wanted a pair, so that’s why started collecting these lost soles, I would tell customers, “When you find these, see if you can find me a pair, size eights, and it doesn’t matter if the colors are the right size.” The way we’ve collected these is the first Tuesday of each month we do Trashy Tuesdays, so we put all of our boats out for free for people to pick up trash, and whoever brings back the most trash I give a free fly fishing lesson to, whoever brings back the coolest piece of trash – which could be an Etcha-Sketch, a baby doll head, a Spiderman head, a Wells Fargo box, who knows what your gonna pick up off the river – they get a free t-shirt. So anyways, while they’re out collecting garbage I tell them to bring back the flip flops and the crocs because I want to hang them up and show people what not to wear.

Well I had a couple of college kids that came out on Friday and they said, "Hey, we heard that if we go out and pick up garbage we get a free kayak rental," and I said "Well I do it the first Tuesday of each month because I can't afford to do it every day." And they said, "Aww we drove all the way out here thinking..." and I was like you know what, I said, "OK I'll let it go this time. If y'all pick up garbage you can have a free kayak rental." So they saw what I was doing with the shoes. So they took their free kayak rental and came back, brought me their garbage and everything. I didn't give them any prizes I just let them do their thing for free. Do you know that they came back the next weekend with these shoes, they bought me a pair of crocs and gave them to me and said that was so nice of me to let them go kayaking for free because that was like a \$70 value that I gave them. So they bought me a pair of \$30 Crocs and I got my pair of Crocs. And they continued to come here for another six or seven years until she, graduated and moved off the mountain. And they still I think they've come back here whenever they are up here, but I just thought that was so nice.

Q17 – How long have you been fly fishing?

Oh gosh, this is 2017? Probably 23 or 24 years. I learned how to fly fish in Mississippi on the campus of Mississippi State University, because in my fisheries classes I had a guy who said he was going to start a fly fishing club, and I was like, "Oh a fly fishing club?" and who would think about fly fishing in Mississippi? That's what I thought and that's what most people think when they come up here is that you can only fly fish for trout, you can fly fish for anything that's got fins and gills. So I learned to fly fish for bream in a bass pond when I first started out.