

Bob Gilbert (00:00):

Welcome to tourism heads and their tales. Today, I am delighted to welcome Rita McClenny. Rita serves as President and CEO of the Virginia Tourism Corporation. The state agency charged with marketing the Commonwealth as a premier travel destination and film location. The mission of VTC is to expand domestic and international inbound travel and motion, picture production to generate revenue and employment in Virginia, a native Virginian, Rita was born and raised in Southampton County and presently resides in this City of Richmond. In addition to her day job as president and CEO, Rita serves on the board of a number of tourism industry associations, such as the us travel association, national council of state tourism directors, aerospace advisory council, which is an interesting one. Uh, the society of international business fellows, Southwest Virginia cultural heritage foundation, the Virginia film festival, the African American cultural resources, taskforce, and venture Richmond. That's um, pretty impressive list of areas where you spend time. So enough of me yapping here, Rita welcome. And why don't you tell our audience more about yourself, your background and your journey so far.

Rita McClenny (01:24):

Thank you, Bob, for that very kind introduction. Um, I think our work is done here. No, just kidding.

Bob Gilbert (01:32):

<laugh>

Rita McClenny (01:34):

I love what I do and promoting the Virginias for lovers brand and having the opportunity to travel our beautiful Commonwealth. Uh, it's just a joy and you are correct. So we are amplifying Virginia's abundance and the result of that is people come, they visit, they spend their precious dollars and that supports the state and all that estate and government does for their citizenry. And we're happy to be a wheel in the economic development, entire machinery. And, you know, so I come to this job. I was the film commissioner, as it's known, however, in Virginias called the director of the Virginia film office. So I was in that position for 20 years, recruiting lots of wonderful projects. And of course everyone can appreciate the beautiful, dirty dancing. I'll just mention that one because it's so iconic and coming up on its 35th anniversary film that mountain lake. Yeah. And, uh, we stood in for the [inaudible] in New York. So we do share that with North Carolina. And I must just say that in fairness, because they're our sister state neighbor, but the lodge is in mountain lake in Pembroke Virginia, and anyone can still come and enjoy a dirty dancing weekend.

Bob Gilbert (03:03):

I love it so

Rita McClenny (03:04):

Enough about dirty dancing back to me.

Bob Gilbert (03:06):

<laugh>

Rita McClenny (03:08):

So I, uh, I grew up at a farm and I'm a sporting, uh, woman. I love outdoors, polo fishing, um, shooting clay, sporting clay. So just any, I was, uh, on the tennis team in college and I continued tennis. When I moved to Atlanta, I was with, um, trust company bank of Georgia and then Eastman Kodak before I moved back to Virginia. So family drew me back to the Commonwealth. We still have our family farm and I live in the city, but it's nice to get away for farm weekends and you know, to hang out with family. Yep. And it's just a great team here at VTC.

Bob Gilbert (03:49):

So we all know Virginia with the tag and Virginia is for lovers and I'm not quite sure how many years that has been going, but I think I was first introduced to it when I was living in the DC area. I was with, uh, choice hotels at the time. And it was Pat McMan who, who, I guess a predecessor, but we going back, I think this must be in the mid to late eighties. And so the campaign for Virginia is Pfor lovers goes back before Pat. So how do you manage to keep it so vibrant and, and how it still resonates with the citizens, with the business leaders and with visitors? How, how does, how do you achieve that? How do you refresh that? Keep it relevant.

Rita McClenny (04:38):

The Virginias for lovers campaign was launched in 1969, wow. By the market agency. So it's been 53 years young and we keep it relevant by making it relevant to the traveler and associating the brand of Virginia's for lovers with travel. So when someone hears Virginia's for lovers, we want them to get on a plane, get in the car, get on a train and come directly to Virginia and take in many of the things that people love to do on vacation, whether it's speeches, mountains, culinary, film, exploring where movies have been made sports music, all the things that anyone would enjoy that are some of our major drivers, is the connection of Virginia's full lovers to travel. And that's how we keep it relevant.

Bob Gilbert (05:32):

So obviously the first half a dozen questions that I'm sure you are asked today is the impact that the pandemic had on, on your state and the recovery efforts that you have in place. And I would assume that because you have an abundance of outdoor activities and with the proximity to the capital region, the, those areas didn't do as bad as some of the city areas. Is that the right assumption? And how are you doing in terms of your recovery?

Rita McClenny (06:07):

That is the case, uh, in terms of the pandemic, it was devastating and hospitality and travel tourism was the most impacted industry from a jobs and a spending perspective. So we quickly had to come up with a plan, devise, a strategy, and how to keep the attention of the traveling public. So they wouldn't forget Virginia. So they wouldn't entrench too much into the home and the sofa and you know, and not want to get out. So what we did is we came up with many, uh, virtual promotions and images and we kept in touch with the media. So we wanted to inspire, we wanted to give people a reason to dream and plan for their next vacation. And then we came out of that phase by having a campaign called Wonderlove, where every locality across Virginia could insert their images. And much of it was related to outdoor activities. You're correct. And we really looked at cuz people were mostly traveling by car. So we looked at how would someone get from point where they live point a to Virginia, by car RV, whatever mode of transportation. And we really call it the tank of gas trip to get them here and giving them plenty of ideas and content to explore and to stay outdoors and be in a small pod, if you will, with the people that they were trusted to be around and they felt safe. So it was all about ideas, safety, and inspiration.

Bob Gilbert (07:52):

So has the price of gas impacted that recovery?

Rita McClenny (07:58):

No. We didn't see a lot of downturn in the numbers of people who were coming. What we did see a change in is how people were spending their planned vacation money. So maybe instead of having an expensive meal or going out for a retail therapy, they spent it on the, the fuel. So there was a balance, but people wanted to get out when it was time to get out, they definitely got out. So they just made a decision with the budget that they had and how they would distribute that on their holiday or vacation.

Bob Gilbert (08:33):

Right. So then you, you've got a pretty robust recovery in place. I would think that probably, you know, I know that you had spent a lot of effort internationally and growing the, the state's the brand reputation internationally, uh, how is that returning,

Rita McClenny (08:52):

Uh, that's load of return and it will be, yeah. I mean, if, if you look at forecast, they say 2024 and you know, it depends on the policies of various countries and now you can enter the us without having, uh, to have a negative COVID test. So that's positive, but it's uneven how countries treat, uh, their citizens coming in. And some of it, you know, is on the us state department side as well. However, we are marketing in the UK and in India and Australia. And we have in fact, a group of journalists who are in state right now for a couple of weeks from Australia, India, and the UK.

Bob Gilbert (09:36):

Wow. Now, do you set up your own representation in those markets or do you co-op and team with brand USA?

Rita McClenny (09:47):

We have our own representation in those three particular countries. And, but we do partner with brand USA and we partner with capital region USA, which is a association and Alliance between Virginia, Maryland, and Washington DC. And also we are a member of travel USA.

Bob Gilbert (10:07):

Right, right. I, I recall when the capital region was formed, which was very progressive at the time because it recognized that the, um, visitors, they didn't see the boundaries, they didn't see the, the, the state lines and that, you know, was really, um, eye opening, I think. And, and again, as I said, progressive for the, uh, for the time, um, yeah,

Rita McClenny (10:32):

25 years.

Bob Gilbert (10:33):

Wow. That's now was that Matt Gaffney was, was he there? Um,

Rita McClenny (10:38):

Yes. Matt Gaffney was there, um, as a director of capital region USA.

Bob Gilbert ([10:44](#)):

Yep. Yep. That's uh, time flies when you're having fun. Right. So <laugh>, you mentioned the, the number of years with juniors, for lovers, how long capital region has been in place. So I, I wanna dig a little bit deeper into the film world, you know, clearly that is a passion of yours because you, you have skin in the game prior to, to your current position. How has the film industry, in addition to dirty dancing, how has the film industry impacted Virginia?

Rita McClenny ([11:18](#)):

Is that a wonderful impact on Virginia? Because travelers are able to walk in the footsteps of a filmmaker like Steven Spielberg with Lincoln that filmed in 2012. If you look at a series that was produced by HBO, in conjunction with Tom Hanks and his production company, John Adams, you know, based on the novel, yes, these are always that the visitor can connect with the state and go on a tour in a trail based on what appears and where it was filmed in the state. So we have some really great examples of that, like the new world and, you know, principally, it can go, you know, around history projects, uh, you know, Hannibal film, the follow up sequel to silence of the lambs, uh, Anthony Hopkins. And he was here for back to back films, Atlantis, but stars, Anthony Hopkins. So we just, we have a wonderful filmography. Uh, we just wrapped not too long ago on dope sick, which received 14 Emmy nominations it's on Hulu. So I would encourage anyone to go see that. I mean, it's a really tough topic about the opioid crisis. Yeah. And how that evolved and really kind of cracked down it's on Hulu currently. So I would encourage anyone it's, uh, Michael Keaton to go check it out. So yeah, we have a beautiful filmography, but also when a production comes to film in Virginia, they hire Virginias, they procure Virginia resources and products. So it's a real spending machine, you know, we call it content, manufacturing.

Bob Gilbert ([12:57](#)):

Content Manufacturing. That's interesting.

Rita McClenny ([13:00](#)):

So you're creating a product,

Bob Gilbert ([13:01](#)):

Right? Yeah. Yeah. Because they obviously a film crew doesn't come in for one day, they spend a fairly lengthy period of time in filming production. Maybe not postproduction, but, and that obviously is income into, um, and supports the, the local taxes as well, as well as state.

Rita McClenny ([13:24](#)):

Yeah. You can look at it like a film. Would it be the equivalent of multiple conventions back to back?

Bob Gilbert ([13:31](#)):

Yeah. Plus you get the visibility, um, yes. With the, with the, the movie itself, which is an additional benefit to that. So yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I've seen over the, the last, well, maybe over the last two or three years, but maybe accelerated with the pandemic, but the coming together and closer partnership between economic development and the tourism side of business is your relationship as, as

good with economic development. I seem to sense that that is the case. What kind of efforts do you partner with with the economic development?

Rita McClenny ([14:13](#)):

Yes, we do have a very close relationship. In fact, we share offices. Yeah. And we look at tourism as the front door to economic development. Our job is to highlight the quality of place and the quality of life, which has a positive impact on Virginias. And also those who are looking to expand in Virginia or to move to the state. Right. So it really is a beneficial relationship that is shared. And if not, should be because a lot of the transition of what DMO destination marketing organizations are doing now are really looking at their stakeholders and also looking at advocacy in the view of how does it impact this place, where we all live and how do we build the community vibrancy through tourism with new product development and promotions, because you're talking about, you know, in this current environment, people may move to work remotely, a retirement location. So there's so many other factors that tourism can have a runway effect of bringing in other types of individuals who would move to Virginia for various reasons.

Bob Gilbert ([15:29](#)):

Right. And depending upon the kind of business that is brought in to the state, it does have the impact from a tourism perspective. I know recently, I think it was a couple of weeks ago, but Caesars broke ground for Caesars Virginia in Danville. Yes. You know, that I presume was started off from economic development, but obviously impacts the business community and the tourism community with, I don't know, five, 600 rims that are coming into town. How long was that in the plans? Because that isn't an overnight kind of decision from, from Caesars entertainment.

Rita McClenny ([16:08](#)):

Yeah. The legislation was passed by the Virginia general assembly a few years ago and communities decided how they wanted to invite various casinos to propose, you know, how they would impact a community that had been awarded the opportunity to have that investment build in their location. So there's Bristol, Virginia, Danville that you mentioned Norfolk, Portsmouth. And there is a fifth one that, uh, remains to be decided Uhhuh. Uh, it was initially awarded to Richmond, but the citizens did not vote for it. So that's an interesting place to be in. So will they have an opportunity to go back for, you know, public referendum or not? When you talk about Danville again, it was a consideration for a number of years and they're supposed to be up and running in 2024 and it's estimated to be a 650 million investment.

Bob Gilbert ([17:06](#)):

Yep. Which is excellent for the state for the community. And it's an additional asset. So look, uh, look forward to big things there as you from a state perspective. I mean, your, your mission is not just the state, but supporting the, the different partners that you have. Well, partners, I use that word for the regions that you have, how do you migrate and disseminate that state level, mission, goals, objectives, et cetera. And how does that flow with the different regions that you have? And I know that before the pandemic you were introducing or had introduced drive 2.0, and if I'm understanding correctly, you, as a result of the pandemic, went back in and pivoted made changes to it naturally. Um, but how do you arrive? What is that process to engage with, you know, engaging with the bigger state plan and given the opportunity to regions, to participate in their strategies and how they align.

Rita McClenny (18:13):

We have 10 regions in Virginia that are divided by localities that are geographically together, continuously mm-hmm <affirmative>. And we look at the data as it relates to personas visitor profiles, target markets. However, what's really important and is essential in this, is that having the locality and the DMO at the table with the conversation. So the drive 2.0 was a way to engage and generate community collaboration and conversations. And these conversations ultimately would end in what is a game changer for your locality or for your region. So we always want to look at it through a lens of leveraging collaboration and how public private partnerships can be beneficial to again, have a more robust, uh, community or region for inviting tourists in or business travel and meetings and sports, and all the reasons that people will travel. And certain regions are exceptional at some of these sectors and someone to work on, uh, attracting, you know, maybe a piece of business that they're not in. So it's really a great way to have a, a wide ranging conversation to come up with a strategy that the community agrees upon.

Bob Gilbert (19:37):

And then the end result is that everybody is supporting the same outcome.

Rita McClenny (19:42):

Yeah. There's buy in. Exactly. Yeah.

Bob Gilbert (19:45):

So do you go beyond what I think a lot of other states do, and that is you provide the support and you provide the road to funding you supply the toolbox, I guess, for the, the different regions to build and enhance their plans. So you have, um, I think you call them your how-to guides. Yes. Um, is that something new? Is that something that's been in existence for a while in terms of those co-op opportunities?

Rita McClenny (20:17):

Yeah. Co-op opportunities have existed for a long time. However, how we refined it to make it even more impactful is to create the roadmap to success through collaboration and planning and what is the game changing idea? So everything ladders up to something that is special and phenomenal and can really boost a region or a locality for enhanced visitor spending. So we have seen the evolution. So the exact how-to guides, those have been around for about five years, but the co-ops have existed much longer. But what we do is have a way for the brand and marketing division to collaborate with the partnership marketing division. So within VTC, there is a collaboration then externally in the communities who apply for one of these grants to amplify and grow themselves that yes, that money supports their plan development.

Bob Gilbert (21:20):

So what was the Genesis behind the title drive 2.0?

Rita McClenny (21:27):

We're driving tourism.

Bob Gilbert (21:29):

<laugh> that, that as simple as that,

Rita McClenny (21:31):

As simple as that we're behind the wheel and we are motoring, you know, towards progress. So really we're driving tourism.

Bob Gilbert (21:39):

Yeah. You know, one of the, of the many elements is the detail in your plan and in the regional plans, it starts off with what I term as the visitor economy, that the impact of tourism in terms of how many billions of dollars in direct spend the number of jobs supported state and local taxes contribution to GDP, how challenging is it these days to get to that real actionable data? Because there seems to be such a, a proliferation of data sources that it's tough to find that reliable and actionable, as I said, state level data, how do you manage that?

Rita McClenny (22:26):

Well, we go to the sources that are exceptional at analyzing the data, and it really starts with US travel because we really, as a country, you know, domestically across all states and provinces need a way to measure our performance in order to continue to have the investment made in tourism for the marketing and for the development and all the ideas that we have. So being a member of us travel, one of the benefits is data to their members. Then we have further a vendor like a tourism economics who goes in and distills that to the real fundamental impact. It has on say the Commonwealth of Virginia for jobs what's spent where and how that adds to the state from a tax perspective. Cuz we collect, if you go back to 2019, over \$1.8 billion in state and local taxes, that was at a spend of about 30 million, you know, by visitors. Yep. So we really look at it from a Commonwealth, but also from a local data standpoint, we have 133 localities across Virginia.

Bob Gilbert (23:46):

Wow. So I know that you serve on the national council of state tourism directors. Um, were, were you in grand rapids by the way for their, I was not, oh, you weren't year, but

Rita McClenny (23:58):

We got a great number of VTC team who were there because Bob, we really wanted for some of our newer members to be able to benefit from all the educational opportunities at the ESTO, which is the educational conference. Yes. And you know, not that I can't learn more <laugh> but someone had to stay home and, you know, keep the fires burning. Right.

Bob Gilbert (24:20):

That was me. So when it isn't just ESTO that US travel as an event puts on you, you were talking about the data. When you talk with your fellow state tourism directors, they're friendly competitors, are you finding that the challenges they face are, are unique or are they the, the similar kinds of challenges that you face within the Commonwealth?

Rita McClenny (24:45):

Oh, very similar. And we have many conversations about our challenges and coming up with solutions together, we have a leadership forum usually in December of each year, but you know, us travel looks at

it from so many perspectives, whether it's mobility, infrastructure workforce, of course is the big new topic. Yes. And, you know, just keeping our tourism economy functioning at a high level and how can we all have a unified voice? And a lot of it is around advocacy as well. When we go to Washington DC to call on our members to make sure that our top priorities are known and understood.

Bob Gilbert (25:28):

Yeah. And there's a change of leadership at us travel now with, uh,

Rita McClenny (25:34):

Yes, excited about Jeff. I think it's great. I think he was there before

Bob Gilbert (25:34):

Yeah. So, so I think today, um, and today is September the first and, and for those that are listening in a couple weeks from today, when, when this episode we'll drop, but I think today is his first date. Yeah. So after a, a tough innings, if you will, for Roger Dow, it's not been plain sailing for sure. And tough to keep all the different entities that make up travel and tourism focused and, and in the game. But yes, interestingly with the state with esto, we, one of our early interviews was with Nan Marchand, who I've known for many, many years, way back to her universal studios days when I was at Disneyland. But um oh, great. Yeah. So in terms of where you are in, in terms of recovery, what are you most excited for in 2023 and beyond for the Commonwealth

Rita McClenny (26:34):

As a result of the pandemic and the federal funds, Virginia tourism was a recipient of \$50 million to support the recovery of our industry. We shared the majority of that funding with our localities. 30 million went to the 133 localities. 18 million will be distributed into new markets, which we have a campaign outright now, our flagship campaign. And we're just about through the halfway mark, the 50% mark of it being in market since April the 24th. And it runs through early November, we expanded what we call tier two and tier three markets from our traditional tier one would be up and down the Northeast, the most populated corridor on the east coast. We really have had the aspiration to tell more potential visitors what we have in Virginia while they should be here. So we just really needed to have the ability to tell the story further out as an example, we're advertising in Columbus, Ohio, and Chicago and Cleveland, Atlanta. So Marcus that we previously just did not have the resources, but we know we have to be in the Northeast cuz that's where the most people live. And there's a lot of loyalty there and they're always new people, you know, moving about from that region. And that 95 corridor is very important. Expansion of our marketing was essential. And though the pandemic was devastating. We do have something to show as a benefit from it.

Bob Gilbert (28:14):

So we spoke before about the, the visitation during the pandemic that folks were coming out of DC as an example, and wanted to get into the rural areas, open spaces far from the mad in crowd, et cetera. Do you see that helping underserved areas, more rural areas? And how do you maintain if that is the case, then how do you maintain that visibility?

Rita McClenny (28:41):

Oh yes. And we managed that through our grants program. So we had some first time applicants, we amended some of the criteria. So those who did not have matching dollars could participate. We were

providing opportunity and inspiration and the assets and the tools for a small locality to be able to market themselves. And again, with the Wonderlove campaign, we provided all of the tools for them. All they needed was to bring the imagery and their ideas. And we gave them a platform in a way and a co-op program that they could advertise in. Cause the importance of the co-op is just to provide the best marketing tools that are time tested and recommended by our ad agency and VTC for investment. Because if you're a small organization and you don't have a marketing director, but you have someone who's over tourism and maybe parks and rec and other responsibilities that we wanted to make sure that they had the proper resources to have the best investment that they could possibly place themselves to draw attention to their locality and outdoor was a grand beneficiary.

Bob Gilbert ([29:57](#)):

Understood. And would imagine that a great there's the need for a great degree of education as well, because obviously if you're in a more rural area, you aren't necessarily trained or sophisticated such as a, you know, Richmond as an example of Virginia Beach as another example that, you know, you understand the dynamics of tourism in the infrastructure. So the smaller, more rural areas will need more support. Um, I would imagine,

Rita McClenny ([30:25](#)):

Yes, we wanted to lend guidance and a helping hand yes. With the tools.

Bob Gilbert ([30:29](#)):

Right. Right. So how do, what do you see as the future tourism trends? And this probably goes back to your conversations with some of your colleagues, what trends do you see? And I, we know one, I give the example, I call it the big quit and the workforce issues is one that we all need to try and find a solution for. But I personally, I think that was a trend that was happening and the pandemic accelerated that. But what future tourism trends do you see?

Rita McClenny ([31:01](#)):

I think what, at least the way with the future is technology. If you talk about touchless technology ways to make the visitor experience more in line with safety, safety will always now be a part of the conversation cleanliness. So technology to achieve that certainly workforce. And I think within the workforce, such hardworking people in our industry, how can you have a lifestyle where you have flexibility and you're making the kind of salary or hourly wage that is livable for your family. And to make sure we attract new people into the industry and not just to work necessarily frontline, but also to see a long term management career out of the, uh, sector and the fact that people can live any place to work, you know, so relocation and one of the bigger, I think, topics that we're gonna see and is gonna continue, cuz we're just at the precipice of it is sustainability and what that means for travel.

Bob Gilbert ([32:10](#)):

That is a keyword. And I think it has so many different definitions. You know, there's regenerative travel, which is the step beyond sustainable. Is that something you and your team discuss on a regular basis in terms of trying to manage tourism as best as one can, but with an eye to sustainability,

Rita McClenny ([32:30](#)):

We do talk about it and we have in place Virginia Green and that's a program that's been around for over a decade. So these are principally the food sector and lodging sector that have green practices. And

we know that people do travel, you know, based on an accommodation, you know, having that as a part of their offering we're ahead. We feel like in that way, but we certainly can go much deeper. So we do have conversations about it and we do engage with our Virginia restaurant and lodging association because they have a big stake in that as well with their membership.

Bob Gilbert ([33:08](#)):

So on a, on a related topic in Europe, I think they call it agritourism where folks will go and actually work on a farm or we go and pick grapes or olives or whatever. Are there any programs in place in the Commonwealth for the consumer to go and actually help work on a farm as an example?

Rita McClenny ([33:27](#)):

They do. I guess the best example I can think of is in the industry in raising goats. Mm-hmm, <affirmative> where you go in for cuddling sessions. You can help make the cheese if you pass all of the health and safety standards. But most of the programs that we see are around animals and having that experience, if you're going to a equestrian or ranch or a farm where you are helping with the herds. So there are opportunities in Virginia to travel for agritourism and actually be a participant on a farm. Or we have a lot of crafting. If you're going out to, uh, pick crops, we have the berry farms and yep. Watermelon patches and harvesting. So harvesting is a big part, particularly on our Eastern shore. You can go harvest oysters out of the bay and you know how healthy oysters are for filtering water. And they're so great for the environment and we are the east coast best place in America.

Bob Gilbert ([34:31](#)):

You're the hub, you're the oyster, the oyster hub of the east coast.

Rita McClenny ([34:35](#)):

We are the oyster hub of the east coast. We're the leading oyster developer on the east coast with eight varieties of oysters.

Bob Gilbert ([34:43](#)):

I do have to say that I do enjoy oysters and I've enjoyed chatting with you Rita. So I just wanna thank you so much. It's been a great conversation. I'm so happy. Thanks Bob. That we've had this opportunity today to, uh, introduce yourself and Virginia tourism corporation and the Commonwealth and, uh, Virginia is for lovers. Thank you so much for your time, Rita.

Rita McClenny ([35:09](#)):

My pleasure.

Bob Gilbert ([35:11](#)):

We hope you enjoyed today's episode, please like thumbs up, subscribe and leave a review. You can also visit Eddyalexander.com to learn more about our tourism marketing and destination management services and read some of our recent case studies. Finally, if you'd like to suggest future guests or podcast discussion topics, or to sign up, to get an email alert, when we drop new episodes, please do so. Eddyalexander.com/thatt.