

Episode #48  
**Meet Ancestry's "Lederhosen Guy:" Kyle Merker Exits  
 Accounting For Acting**  
 (7/29/2019)

<b>Who</b>	<b>Audio Segment</b>
Kyle Merker	<p>When I was a kid when I was in high school, I wanted to be an actor. You know, did the school plays and really loved theater. I would go and see anything that I could. When I got out of high school, I took some acting classes and I really thought I was going in that direction. But then life happened and I ended up being an accountant.</p>
	<p>INTRO MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST OVERVIEW</p>
Andy Levine	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. I'm your host, Andy Levine.</p> <p>A neighbor recently connected me with Kyle Merker and it was one of the most enjoyable Second Act interviews I've ever conducted. b</p> <p>First of all, most of you already know Kyle from his role on a frequently-played television advertisement for Ancestry.com.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PLAY 15 SECOND VERSION OF THE COMMERCIAL  <a href="https://vimeo.com/172984682">https://vimeo.com/172984682</a></p> <p>Yes, Kyle Merker is the guy who trades who trades in his Lederhosen for a kilt. And I was pleased to learn that the story shared in the Ancestry commercial is factually accurate.</p> <p>Kyle filmed the Ancestry commercial at the age of 53. And the experience sparked an old passion that encouraged him to pursue acting after 25+ years in the world of accounting and finance. And in just (three) short years, he's been remarkably successful.</p> <p>I really enjoyed my time with Kyle Merker. He's got this sparkle in his eye and this upbeat, optimistic outlook on just about everything. Here's the interview.</p>
	<p>FADE MUSIC</p>

Andy	I'd love to start with just a little bit of background. Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school? What did you study? That kind of thing sort of the early Kyle I guess.
Kyle	Sure. Early Kyle grew up in Queens, White Stone Queens. And I went to Catholic school for 12 years at St. Luke's and then Monsignor Scanlon in the Bronx. College, I went to NYU. I think I didn't want to be anywhere Catholic after 12 years. So, yeah, I studied accounting, and went to work for Arthur Andersen and had a fun career after that.
Andy	Looking through one of your blog posts, it seemed like you have worked at a lot of different places.
Kyle	Sure.
Andy	Tell us about... I'm going to sort of call it act one and sort of your career trajectory leading up to 2013.
Kyle	You know, when I got out of high school, I didn't immediately go to college. And I ended up at the Plaza Hotel where I went from cashier in the back of the restaurants up to the beverage manager running a \$12 million department. I was very young. So I had a pretty good job. And, you know, working at the Plaza taught me that I was smart. And I never realized that before. And I thought, "Well, if you're smart, you should probably go to college and you can have a great life. So I went back to school and studied accounting.
Andy	So you studied accounting. Were most of your roles in the finance field?
Kyle	Yes, yes. Almost all of them. In fact, you know, it's kind of funny. When I chose accounting...well, the accountants in the hotel industry get to go home at 5:00. So, I was like, "You know what? I think I'm going to do that." So yeah, so I graduated and I went to work for Arthur Andersen. And then I went to work for one of my clients, the Interrupt Radio Store. And when I was done with that, I worked for the Battery Park City Parks Conservancy. I was...what was my title? Chief operating officer? Chief administrative officer, that was it.  Loved it. Worked with smart people, wonderful people. Eventually, I ended up at a consulting firm called AEA Consulting. I was CFO there. Brilliant people. Loved working with them. And they closed their New York office and I got a job at the Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center in Brooklyn. And I loved every minute of it. It was a wonderful place to work that does great work. And I was happy to be part of it.
Andy	You had a very eclectic mix of different...
Kyle	Yeah, but you know, finance is finance, accounting is accounting. Show me where the light switch is on and I can make it fly.

Andy	<p>In November 2013, Kyle and his partner George made a major life change. They both quit their jobs, sold their Manhattan apartment and took a 116 day cruise around the world. They wanted to try retirement.</p> <p>Kyle was 52 years old. And in a blog post from that time period, he wrote "I feel like I'm stepping off a cliff."</p>
Kyle	<p>Yeah, the first step was really hard. You know, I love working. I loved my job. I love the people that I worked with. And it's very hard to make a change that drastic all at once. We had talked about it and I had toyed with it for years. But actually making that step and realizing money isn't coming in the way it used to and we have to move and all of those things that frightened me, quite honestly, made it kind of like I was staring into the abyss. So, "Wow, now what am I going to do when I get off that boat?" was my biggest concern.</p>
Andy	<p>So Kyle is now retired. He is living in a small seaside community off the coast of Long Island, New York. And he is getting a little restless. And a new opportunity suddenly pops into his life.</p>
Kyle	<p>So Ancestry was looking for interesting stories of people what they discovered with their family trees. And I had a couple of stories that I had found. And I thought, "Well, maybe they'll be interested in this." So I really sent them a couple of things.</p> <p>Apparently, 3,000 people applied the first time they did this and I was one of them. How I made it through is still a mystery to me.</p>
Andy	<p>As you heard at the beginning of the podcast and have likely heard on television countless times, the story that they liked best was about Kyle's supposed German ancestry.</p>
Kyle	<p>We did dance in a German dance group, my sisters and I, and my parents danced as well. And we went to these festivals and we danced and we would go to special events. And we would, you know, put on these Bavarian dances.</p> <p>And as I'm researching my family tree, I don't find any Germans. I expected to find a whole, you know, room full of Germans.</p>
Andy	<p>And your circle showed no German sliver or...</p>
Kyle	<p>My DNA?</p>
Andy	<p>DNA, yeah exactly.</p>
Kyle	<p>Well, then, and then I thought, "Well, let me spend \$100 because, gosh, something is wrong." And came back, no German. And of course, since then, as the database gets stronger, they're able to make stronger and stronger inferences. So that information has showed more Irish and Scottish than even that's in the commercial. So, yeah. So that's how we ended up there. And once I did my DNA and I didn't find the German, I started looking in Scotland.</p>

Andy	So your commercial is really a completely true story.
Kyle	It's a completely true story.
Andy	Kyle shared his story with Ancestry and didn't hear anything for months. But then he got an email asking him to make a self-tape. An audition on Skype followed and then they flew him to Los Angeles to make a commercial. And that commercial has aired over 22,000 times.
Andy	So it seems like this really birthed your acting career.
Kyle	Yeah.
Andy	Tell me what's happened since this commercial?
Kyle	<p>Yeah, the commercial after it had run a little less than a year, I thought, "Well, you know, that was really fun. And I always wanted to do this. So why don't I try and do some more?" So I got some pictures taken and I started sending them out. And immediately I got picked up by an agent here in New York City. And I would go on auditions for like little commercials. And by that, I mean like internet commercials, you know, the sort of commercials that not necessarily pop-ups but if you're looking at a pretty product on a website, you would click a button and you would see it.</p> <p>So I did a couple of those. But I thought, "This is going well. And I've always wanted to do this. Why don't I apply for one of these crime dramas? You know, I see them in the trades all the time." So I applied for one, and they brought me in for an audition.</p> <p>I was like, "Okay, I'm not really sure what I'm doing but let me just wing it." I went and I got the lead.</p>
Andy	Kyle started to get more and more work. And he got serious about acting.
Kyle	I realized, just like my younger life, I need to know that I know what I'm doing. And I signed up for a two-year acting program in New York City. I needed to feel internally that I had the confidence. So I took it very seriously. I studied a very hard program at the Michael Warner Studio. Michael's been a very good mentor for me and really taught me some...I don't want to say tricks of the trade, but some acting exercises that you need to do to get your character ready.
Andy	I got the chance to speak with Michael Warner by telephone.
Michael Warner	My experience working with Kyle is it's truly a breath of fresh air, mainly because he doesn't fit the profile of the student that I'm used to working with, in terms of age and life experience. He has a lightness of soul, I guess would be the best way to say it, because, you know, as we get older, we see life for what it is. And so, it's this beautiful combination of hard work, of discipline, with a open-heartedness, and eagerness to be taught that is a truly, truly, a breath of fresh air. I can't speak highly enough of him in every way.

Andy	In just three years, Kyle has built up an impressive resume of acting credits – commercials, films, some theatre – lots of work for someone who is relatively new to acting. I asked him what he attributes his success to.
Kyle	<p>I'm 57. I'll be 58 next month. Okay, so there's a couple of things. I'm retired. When I go into a room, it doesn't change my life if I don't get it. I'm not nervous. If I get nervous, it's because it's something that I really want. It's a really juicy role. But for the most part, I'm able to go in, just be me, read for the role. And it's okay if I don't get it. So I don't have the angst that other actors have I believe.</p> <p>There's one more thing. There's a lot of talk in the acting business about what your type is. You know, you're the Italian mafioso or you're the crazed killer or whatever. My look is...I don't want to say generic, but I play to a lot of types. So I get doctor, I get lawyer. Father of the bride is my best favorite thing to get. It's so much fun. You wear a tuxedo and you walk up pretty girl up the aisle and your wife cries and it's all beautiful. And so I love that.</p> <p>I also think taking classes with Michael has certainly helped me a lot. Now that I have a couple of credits and I am getting better roles and I'm getting feature film, you know, I'm getting short films, but I'm also getting feature films, I'm getting a lot of television work, I'm getting a lot more commercial work with a lot more name brands than I was getting at first. And it gives you a little more status.</p>
Andy	Is there anything from your previous work as a CFO in the finance field that you think has been valuable transferring that over to the acting world?
Kyle	I own suits. A lot of actors don't own suits. So it's really funny. But there's really not. I think, you know, once you have two people reporting to you, you're really just dealing with personalities. And so I think my career has really helped me deal with people in a very professional way. And I think I learned how to manage up and down and I think that kind of helps.
Andy	So, six years ago, you made this change. You quit your job. I'm going to assume you're making a probably a pretty decent salary as a CFO and to pursue acting. And I'm curious, would you describe yourself as happier in your new line of work?
Kyle	I'm a happy guy.
Andy	You were happy before and you're happy now?
Kyle	You know, I wasn't happy being retired. We traveled a lot, which is great. But it kind of gets old as well. We still travel, but not as much. But I needed to find something and I didn't go looking for it. You know, I didn't realize I needed it until it kind of happened. But it happened and I kind of grabbed onto it. And I am very lucky to find something that I absolutely love doing. But it keeps me busy. And it's kind of perfect for someone who's retired. It's not that I can work whenever I want. But I can not work whenever I want.
Andy	Is retired the right way or is it really rewired?

Kyle	I think I came out of retirement pretty quickly. Yeah, I had retired but people ask what I do now and I say I'm an actor.
Andy	I want to take it in a little different direction, Kyle. What advice would you give to someone considering a second act like what you've done?
Kyle	<p>Yeah. Well, I think if you're going to do something well, you have to take it seriously. And you have to be able to step back from what you're doing and look at it objectively so that you can make decisions in how to do it better. And if you're doing it better, it's therefore more fulfilling. So I really think it doesn't really matter what you do in your next career. You really have to make sure that, A, it's what you want.</p> <p>And also take it seriously. You know, you do a lot of self-tapes. Well, I have the proper equipment and by equipment I mean my iPad with a background that makes sense. I make sure when I do a self-tape that I do it really well, I do it the best thing that I could do. When I go into an audition, I make sure I'm off-book. If it's something really big, I might ask for someone to coach me to make sure that I'm going in there and I'm not...what do you call it? I'm not a hack actor. I'm going in and I'm being taken seriously because I'm taking it seriously.</p>
Andy	I want to go back and let's just say this Ancestry thing had never happened. Do you think you'd be on this path or would you be doing something different.
Kyle	I think I'd be on this path, but I don't think it would have happened as quickly. I think I still would have done this. I really do. It gave me an opportunity. But I think I would have come upon it because it was something that I wanted to do when I was younger. And I really think, you know, it was something that was inside of me that I had forgotten about. And it was woken up but I think it still it was gonna wake up.
Andy	Is there anything I've neglected to ask you that you think it's important in understanding what is a really interesting second act that you have here?
Kyle	<p>Let me back up. I always say you're going to be dead a long time. So you need to do things while you're here that bring you joy. And whether it's making money or not, shouldn't really be part of the equation. You know, I'm a volunteer firefighter because I love it. And I'm an actor because I love doing it.</p> <p>But I think every morning, I'd like to say I put down my hands. And if I don't feel wood, I get up and I do something and I make it worth it. Because someday, I'm not going to be able to do all of this. And so I try to do it as my days are full, my days are packed. And I think that's how you have to...I have to live my life. And acting has certainly given me a lot of opportunities to stay busy and in a way that is very fulfilling.</p>
	OUTGOING MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST CONCLUSION

Andy	<p>Kyle Merker traded his work in accounting for a new career in acting. That's a pretty dramatic shift.</p> <p>And while he certainly got an incredible boost from his high-profile work with Ancestry.com, his success comes from the right preparation. He took his new path seriously. He invested in himself by studying for two years with a top acting coach. He prepares diligently for each audition. And he's invested in the right equipment to help him record video auditions.</p> <p>He's had a lot of success in three short years. But he's also having a lot of fun in his new work.</p> <p>If you want to see his different acting projects, check out his profile on IMDB.com. Just type in "Kyle Merker" in the search bar. You can also follow Kyle on Instagram. His handle is @kylemerker.</p> <p>Special thanks to Kyle for sharing his story with us. We also want to thank Michael Warner of the Michael Warner Studio for speaking with us by telephone. Finally, I want to thank my neighbor Sue Check for suggesting this episode and putting me in contact with Kyle.</p> <p>If you like what you are hearing on the podcast, we'd love it if you would sign-up as a "Second Act Advocate." Just go to <a href="http://www.SecondActStories.org">www.SecondActStories.org</a> and click on the Advocate button in the upper left hand corner. We'll let you know when a new episode comes out and ask you to share it with your own social media following.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. There are more second act stories just around the corner.</p>
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