

our most valuable tools

by Justin Rothshank



I have a passion for using my functional pottery as a canvas. Pots as conversation starters and social commentators are important to me. This past spring I was able to use these interests to shape a residency at Baltimore Clayworks. I worked in partnership with Jubilee Arts, a community arts program of Newborn Holistic Ministries, in the communities of west Baltimore.

Over the course of the residency I made hundreds of ceramic cups, then worked with members of Baltimore Clayworks and of Jubilee communities to decorate these cups with individual stories, images, and words. By layering laser-printed decals, commercial decals, and gold luster, we were able to convey some of the history of the neighborhoods where participants had grown up, the dreams of the neighborhood youth, the complexity of

the family networks, and many personal stories. At the culmination of the residency, the entire collection of cups was given away. Recipients included aspiring ceramic students, neighbors of the brand-new Harris-Marcus Community Center, a local coffee shop, contemporary ceramic collectors, and anyone else who was interested in the story of the residency. My hope was that the handmade cups would serve as common ground between the giver and the recipient and form a foundation for a future relationship.

More than six months after the completion of the residency, the staff of Jubilee Arts still offers the handmade cups as gifts to new students and supporters of the center. The cups create a ripple effect; each recipient tells a friend not only about the cup, but also about where they got it, and why. They have

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OVERLEAF LEFT: Kiln building crew, 2010. Clockwise from lower left: Eva Zethraeus (studio ceramicist from Gothenburg, Sweden), Anja Zethraeus, Craig Hartenberger, Justin Rothshank, Layton Rothshank. Photograph by Brooke Rothshank.

OVERLEAF LEFT INSET: Craig Hartenberger. Tall Bottle, 2010. Stoneware, anagama fired to cone 12. Natural ash glaze 10 x 4 in.

RIGHT INSET: Zach Tate. General Burnside, 2010. Piece contains terracotta. Electric fired to cone 04 and 02. Underglaze and oxide wash. 11 x 12 x 19 in. Photograph by Zach Tate.

OVERLEAF RIGHT: Justin Rothshank. Bottles, 2009. Woodfired stoneware with natural ash glaze, fired to cone 12. Largest bottle is 15 x 9 x 9 in.

THIS PAGE RIGHT: Kiln builders, 2010. From left, Zach Tate, Justin Rothshank, Craig Hartenberger, Eva Zethraeus. Photograph by Zach Tate.

become a foundation for relationships at the center.

There is community wherever we go, and it's our responsibility to cultivate and sustain it. I was raised in the Mennonite tradition, which values peace, social justice, and conflict resolution, so this is not a new concept for me. My experiences growing up included parents who worked in the nonprofit sector, volunteer work trips, and conversations about social responsibility. After living in Goshen, Indiana, for a little more than a year, my wife, Brooke, and I continue to develop new friendships here. It is invigorating to find these familiar values among many of my peers in the clay world.

Last summer I constructed a new two-chamber wood kiln. I couldn't have done it without the kindness and generosity of my extended community. Two local artist friends contributed more than 2,000 firebricks to my project; a retired ceramicist from Michigan cut me a great deal on some insulating soft brick; a community art center in Pittsburgh sold me their defunct wood kiln; my friends at Standard Ceramic Supply coordinated the shipping of some twelve tons of bricks and supplies; and a contingent of artists and patrons from near and far came to help me build the kiln. Most important, two young ceramic artists, Craig Hartenberger and Zach Tate, dedicated their summer to working with me. Their views on my hometown and their willingness to build friendships enabled me to look at my surroundings in a different way.

As I reflect on the past year – my move from urban Pittsburgh to rural Goshen, my residency at Baltimore Clayworks, my toddler son's amazing growth, and my experience building a wood kiln – I realize that it is relationships that sustain my vocation. The maintenance of these networks is more important to me than the maintenance of my kiln, my

studio, and my best hand tools. And I must not only talk about this concept, but also act on it.

Giving my pottery away, to fund-raising projects or to interested pottery newcomers is one way to build community, and I try to do this as often as I can. I am also committed to larger efforts to create an environment for positive community interactions. As cofounder of Union Project in Pittsburgh, I worked for more than eight years to create a "third place," a place away from home and work where artists, community members, and people of faith would all feel welcome. I have served on the boards and steering committees of several community-based organizations over the years. And I have built wood kilns with the idea that these can also be a kind of "third place." These kilns are valuable tools for pottery-making, but I also look at them as a way to connect with local and international



clay communities, and as classrooms for hands-on learning. A firing isn't just a way to finish pottery; it's a way to begin building relationships.

My responsibility as an artist is not only to strengthen my skills but also to nurture my relationships with other artists, my community, and the world at large. Although these charitable projects have taken significant time and energy, I feel as though I have always received more than I've given. Valuable feedback on improving my work, gifts of free labor and of materials to grow my studio, much-needed encouragement to continue what I'm doing – I have benefited from all this and much more. These gifts are the most important tools in my studio practice.

CRAIG HARTENBERGER

I am in the third year of a BFA program in ceramics at Missouri State University

in Springfield. As I progress through my undergraduate education, I am meeting a growing network of ceramic artists, which has led to several unusual opportunities. When my friend Justin Rothshank asked for help building a new wood kiln, I jumped at the chance, knowing that this experience would allow me not only to learn but also to build stronger relationships within my community of artist friends.

Justin put me in contact with a local farmer and friend, Ben Hartman. Ben and his wife, Rachel, own and operate a five-acre organic produce farm on the outskirts of Goshen. I was happy to learn that in exchange for two days a week of farm work, I would be provided with a place to live and a diet of organic produce.

One afternoon, Ben asked if I would be willing to build him a small kiln instead of doing farm work. He had no design and no plans, but he did have a supply

of about 600 or so firebricks. I was surprised to learn that, despite being a full-time produce farmer, he still had time to pursue his passion for ceramics. Within a few weeks we had worked up a design for a small catenary-arch gaswood kiln that would suit his firing needs.

I came to Goshen expecting to build one kiln for Justin, and I was ecstatic to learn that I would be able to help design and build another. During the next few weeks, as construction and preparation progressed at both kiln sites, I began to see a side of Goshen that wasn't initially apparent.

When I told people what I was doing in Goshen, nearly everyone I met was

Craig Hartenberger is a third year BFA student at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. He plans to pursue his MFA in ceramics and hopes to teach at the university level. He has been involved in several kiln building projects and is currently designing and building a smokeless wood kiln on the campus of Missouri State. chberger14@gmail.com



Zach Tate is a ceramic artist from southern Missouri. He received his BFA in ceramics from Missouri State University in the fall of 2008. Currently he is an MFA candidate at Texas Tech University. polarllama@gmail.com

quick to mention the pots of wood-fire artist and longtime resident Dick Lehman. This small community that appeared to be out of touch with the world of ceramics was, in fact, anything but. Several local restaurants served their food on handmade dishes, and nearly everyone knew the local potters who dominate the ceramic scene. Justin took me on a tour of the local clay artists' guild, showed me the Lehman/Goertzen studio and gallery, and introduced me to the small ceramics program at Goshen College. I could not go anywhere without noticing something related to ceramics. My perceptions of Goshen took a 180° turn.

When I was planning for my summer in Goshen I made many assumptions, nearly all of which were shattered. I was expecting a town devoid of any knowledge or passion for ceramics; what I found was a town that celebrated its local ceramic artists and appreciated their craft. I was expecting to stay on a farm doing menial tasks. I ended up living two of the most enjoyable months of my life in a place full of energy, run by a farmer who was as knowledgeable and passionate about clay as about organic farming. I ended up applying kiln design, theory, and building principals to not one kiln as originally intended, but two. Most important, I was able to enjoy the whole process with friends.

The relationships I have developed with friends and professionals in my field are what keep me going. Sharing the joys and pains of clay, bouncing ideas off others, or just being with people who don't think I'm crazy for doing what I do, are the most important tools I, or any ceramic artist, can have.

ZACH TATE

I am a first-year MFA candidate at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. I graduated from Missouri State University in 2008 and have spent time working in Taiwan,

Japan, and Europe, as well as in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Springfield, Missouri. When Justin invited me to Goshen to help build a new wood kiln I agreed, not really knowing what I was getting into. The time I spent there had a profound impact on my work and my sense of community.

My work is figurative, and I base new characters on people I have met. Although my work is created in a studio, all my research comes from firsthand experiences and interactions with those around me. Goshen supplied me with a new range of wonderful individuals and personalities, from a different background than any I had previously encountered.

I had been involved previously in kiln building, but this was my first opportunity to work with a catenary-arch design. The building experience was valuable, and the community aspect was pivotal.

It is very easy to become isolated in one's personal work, struggles, and day-to-day routine. Working in Goshen was a chance to break out of my current mold, stretch my comfort zone, and give myself a break from academia before entering graduate school.

As a ceramicist I am extremely lucky to be involved in a medium that allows for free and open discussion and communal working. Without the ceramic community, there is no way to build and fire large wood kilns, or to learn the many styles and skills essential to being a competent artist. Working with close friends in my field has truly given me hope for my future career. This summer's experience helped me realize the importance of the clay community. I observed clay artists coming from all corners of the United States and Europe, working together to help a friend reach a goal – indeed, a great feat.