

A WORLD'S WORTH OF EXPERIENCE

by Zach Tate



In my young career I have been very fortunate in several ways. Foremost, I have been privileged to work with some of the most interesting people in the ceramics community. This has led to several opportunities to travel, make work, and experience the world to the fullest. During my time as an undergraduate and since, I have visited and worked in Europe several times, as well as in Asia and all over the United States. It's easy to explain how each experience has been fulfilling and fruitful, but my time in Goshen, Indiana, has been one of the most intriguing.

I first came to Goshen in the summer of 2010, as a favor to my friend and colleague Justin Rothshank. Justin and his wife, Brooke, are from the area, and they had recently moved back to Goshen from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (which is where I met them), in order to raise their family and continue their careers as artists. Soon after moving back, Justin began quickly to rebuild and reestablish his pottery studio. Most things seemed to come along relatively easily – except for the replacement of the large wood kiln he had been using. When he asked for help, Missouri State University student Craig Hartenburger and I jumped at the invitation.

When Justin first told me that he was moving back to his hometown, I really couldn't

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above: *Dick Lehman unloading a kiln. 2010.*

Photograph by Howard Zehr.

understand why. On the map, Goshen seemed particularly isolated from anywhere that I would consider a ceramic hub, or even a place of interest. When I Googled the area, I found out that it was a strong farming and Amish community and that the Mennonite-based Goshen College was located there. But for a summer, why not?

While working on Justin's kiln, Craig and I lived on Clay Bottom Farm, a local organic farm that supplies fresh produce to the Goshen area. In exchange for our living quarters in the farm's hayloft, we worked a minimum of two days a week on the farm. In addition, we erected a small catenary-arch kiln on the property for the farm's owner, Ben Hartman, who is also a potter. The two kilns were built over the summer; several friends and artists came from as far away as Europe to help Justin and to see the progress. It was a summer of camaraderie and perseverance – which were needed to achieve the goal of finishing a kiln of this size in a timely and cost-effective manner.

By August, my time in Goshen was coming to an end. I would be starting graduate school at Texas Tech University in a few weeks, and I had much to do to prepare for the upcoming school year, including finding an apartment in Lubbock. Still, things seemed oddly unfinished in Goshen. In a very short time, I had begun to feel part of this community in northern Indiana. I had encountered a refreshing blend of people and experiences that I had never imagined could be found there.

My first year at Texas Tech seemed to fly by in an instant. As summer approached, there wasn't much room for compromise in my mind: I was going back to Goshen. I had already begun to make plans to work on another organic farm as a part-time hand. This time, though, instead of living in a barn, I would be living with my partner, Leah Schroeder, whom I had met the previous summer during a cleanup after a tornado. I quickly set up a studio in Leah's garage. Within my first few days there, I had begun making work, continuing the research that I had begun in school. Coming back allowed me to extend relationships with people I had met the year before, which isn't hard to do in Goshen. Hours on the farm and community potlucks made me feel as though I was at home with an extended family once again.

Though reconnecting felt good, I didn't want to get lost in the routine, or recreate the same summer as the year before. This was my chance to really explore Goshen, move about outside the academic setting in which I had just spent the last nine months, and take advantage of everything that this experience could offer.

I decided to contact Dick Lehman, one of the most prominent potters and prolific writers in the clay world. Dick had been a resident of the area his whole life and had been a beacon of inspiration to my beginnings in clay. I had known of him as a glaze before I knew of him as a person. Feeling nervous and anxious, I emailed Dick to set up a convenient time to drop by his home and have coffee (or espresso, in his case). Dick graciously took several hours out of his day to get to know me, exchange travel stories, talk politics, discuss the future of the ceramics world, and share the vast knowledge and innovations that he had brought to the clay community. The afternoon left me inspired and reinvigorated, wanting to try new ideas and to experiment. This was the spark that had been missing from the academic setting. There was no distance between Dick and me during our conversation. We were two artists, sharing things we cared deeply about – no thesis requirements to comply with or citations needing to be made.

Days later, I contacted Justin, and we decided to try a cone 02-2 wood/soda firing, using the rear chamber of his wood kiln for this experiment. The firing went off with mixed results, but we could agree that a lot of possibilities had been unearthed. I decided this was a process worth exploring after returning to Texas,



above: Missouri Artist, 2011.
*Hand-built ceramic, multi-fired, and
railroad tie. 16 x 9 x 7 in.*

below: Zach Tate, Leah Schroeder,
and Oliver Biek, summer 2011.
Photograph by Leah Schroeder.





above: Justin Rothshank in his studio, 2011. Photograph by Zach Tate.

below: Patriotic Pair, 2011. Hand-built ceramic, multi-fired and railroad tie. 29 x 20 x 7 in.

but for now I had to turn my focus to a high-temperature wood firing scheduled for the first week of August in Justin's kiln. I didn't want to address my work in the usual way. Drawing from the conversations I had with Dick and others, I wanted to incorporate some ideas and ingenuities that had been voiced to me. I approached my studio time with a new vigor and began pushing my figures to higher degrees of likeness, asking questions and searching for the answers directly in the work before me. I had substantially less work for the kiln than originally anticipated, but I decided to pull out all the stops and offer up the remaining pieces to this firing. My hope was to get over the mental barrier of letting work go, to allow myself to be uncomfortable, and to let something unexpected and interesting happen.

Coming to Goshen was my first step toward the unexpected. I had known that this was going to be another interesting experience, a chance to help out a friend, and "another line on the resume." But my time there has ended up being much more than a

point on the spectrum of my life. It has been a revelation – a world of experiences nestled in a community. Graduate school and residencies have been extremely influential in my development, but the experiences I have encountered in Goshen have echoed equally loudly in my art and life.

I keep seeking opportunities to return to Goshen and further my growth. Working alongside Justin (someone who is still relatively young in his career), meeting Dick (someone who is in the midst of a very distinguished career), and being able to immerse myself in this community are blessings I had not foreseen. Beyond the deep impact Goshen has had on my artwork, it has made an even greater impression on my personal life. Meeting Leah and being introduced to each other's reality toppled many of my assumptions and brought out my better side. Along with affording personal conversation with people in the area and rich opportunities to make art in a community that appreciates it, Goshen embraces a patchwork quilt of people and has surpassed my expectations of a utopian community. For the first time in my life, I see a community that is comprised of folks who are interdependent and act for the greater good of the community. As Justin and Dick have each shown me in his own way, Goshen is a place where I can grow as an artist and as a person.

