

# trading experiences

by Justin Rothshank



Sometimes my three-year-old son, Layton, helps me put away the clean dishes. Often he'll pick up a cup and ask, "Daddy, did you make this one?" Usually, the answer is, "no," and then the question is, "who made it?" And he'll pose this question to every dish before it goes back on the shelf. And what I think is great about this, are the answers: "Marty, Layne, Ayumi, Bob, Martina, Brooks, Elisa, Malcolm, Janne, Keith, Yoshi, Dale, Meredith." Virtually all the pieces have a name that goes with them, as nearly everything in our cupboard is handmade by someone we've met, or know.

The first memory I have of visiting a working artist's studio is a trip my family took to the studio of Grey Stone, a potter living in Corunna, Indiana. I was about five years old at the time. My parents had met Grey at an art fair in Nappanee, Indiana, and decided to commission him to make a full dinnerware set.

Our whole family drove down to his studio with several miscellaneous pieces of handmade pottery from the family collection. They wanted Grey to make a set that would draw together the pieces they had collected over the years.

I barely recall Grey's house and studio complex. But what I do remember, even at that young age, is thinking how great it was that he could work at home, with his family around him, and produce things with his own hands. There were pots everywhere, in all stages of completion. Although I can't say for certain, he may have even been throwing pots on his treadle wheel when we arrived.

We returned to his place several months later to pick up the finished dinnerware—a set of eleven dinner plates, salad plates, bowls, and a few serving dishes. He had chosen a clear-ish glaze that pooled green, likely an oxidized copper red glaze.



Above: Layton and Justin doing the dishes and learning about pots. *Photo: Brooke Rothshank.*

Right: Stoneware mug and bowl by Grey Stone, completed 1996. Glazed and fired by Justin, 2010.

Far Right: (clockwise from left) Keith Ekstam bowl, Keith Hershberger mug, Yoshi Fujii bowl, Meredith Host cup, Janne Hieck mugs, Martina Lantin mug, Layne Wyse plates, Robert Briscoe bowl, Layne Wyse cup, Dale Huffman vase, Ayumi Horie mug, Elisa Hellend-Hansen mug, Brooks Bouwkamp cup and bowl, Marty Fielding mug, and Malcolm Davis mug.

One of my favorite features of each piece was that, upon close inspection, one could see that the pieces had been individually inscribed on the underside, just inside the trimmed foot. On the dinner plates, with the large foot area, there was room for the inscription not only of the potter's mark, address, and date, but also a unique saying or phrase for each of the eleven pieces.

A favorite family pastime then developed when guests came over and we got out the "good stoneware." Before serving the food, guests were encouraged to flip over their plates to read what was on the underside. I still flip over all handmade pottery pieces as soon as I first touch them to see if there might be an inscription or at least to look for the potter's mark.

It's hard to say what exactly made me want to pursue a career as a potter. Certainly the fact that my mom worked at the Old Bag Factory, the same building that housed Dick Lehman and Mark Goertzen's studio, for several years as I grew up made an impact.

And there was the fact that we always had a mug rack filled with handmade ceramic mugs at home for as long as I can remember. Or that my high school art teacher wrote me a pass to skip school for a day and go to my first wood firing at the kiln of Jeff and Tom Unzicker. Or that we lived only two blocks from the home of Fred Driver who had a pottery studio and kiln in his backyard.

But this trip to visit the studio of Grey Stone definitely made a big impression. It seems like more than just coincidence, then, that shortly after moving back to Goshen in 2009 to set up my own pottery studio and kiln, I came back into contact with the pots of Grey Stone.

After spending my first summer building a new wood kiln, and looking for used studio equipment, I received a forwarded email from Dick Lehman about a used pugmill available for sale in the region. Not having the ability to purchase it outright, I asked the

seller if she'd be interested in a trade. Fortuitously, she was. I drove to Kendallville to pick it up.

When I arrived, Debbie Walterhouse greeted me and told me that she had purchased all the equipment and materials from the Stone family upon Grey's death several years previously. She had acquired lots of materials, a kiln, some wheels and shelving, and this Walker pugmill. And, she had also taken several boxes of Grey's bisqued, but unfinished, pots.

Our trade, as it worked out, was kiln space for Debbie in my newly constructed wood kiln, and some stoneware clay, in exchange for the Walker Pugmill that Grey had used. Perhaps the same pugmill I had likely seen more than 25 years before when I made that first artist's studio visit.

While I was clearly trading an experience (firing her pots in a wood kiln), I'm not sure Debbie totally understood that she was also trading an experience, and a memory. She wanted me to fire some of Grey's old bisque pots in my first wood firing of this new kiln. What a perfect honor for me. Plus she gave back to me four of the newly fired pots, which I've given to my parents.

While I don't expect Layton to become a potter, I do hope to pass along the same sense of respect for handmade objects that my parents helped to root in me. It feels good to share moments of connection to others in our lives while unloading the dishwasher with my son. I think one of the strengths of the studio pottery movement, and the benefits of buying handmade objects, is this experience. There's a face and a name, and a culture and experience, behind each piece, not just dirt and glaze.

**the author** *Justin Rothshank is a full time studio potter living in Goshen, Indiana, with his wife Brooke, a painter and illustrator, and their three year old son, Layton. Check out [www.rothshank.com](http://www.rothshank.com).*

