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## **Crafting Resilience**

By Jana Bounds

When Waldorf School Orange County Art Teacher Elise Woodward was in high school, her art teacher focused exclusively on drawing and painting. Once when they were outside the studio, that teacher gestured to an old kick wheel left in the elements and some ancient bags of clay and told Elise she was welcome to try it out. She could use it if she wanted, but she would need to learn on her own.

“I just started trying to learn and was teaching myself,” she said.

Elise had no idea when she brought the old machine back to life and placed a hunk of unformed clay upon it that she would be molding a pivotal feature into the story of her life.

“I love the idea of making something with your hands,” she said. “It’s beautiful, and it’s something you put a lot of time, effort, and energy into, and you have that forever; you can give that to your grandkids. So, to me, the whole process is just amazing.”

Before long, her library card was full of books about forming, centering, techniques, and glazes.

She became enamored with the process of creation – trying, failing, and trying again.

Elise became so dedicated, her dad bought her a pottery wheel. He placed it in the side yard beneath a tarp and she would go out and “try to throw things.” Although grateful to her dad for supporting her love of ceramics, she still lacked a kiln, a missing key to ceramics, and this made her look to her college years with extra anticipation.

“When I got into college I was able to have full access to a ceramic studio space and a real ceramic teacher,” she said. That ceramic teacher, Steve Horn, is influential in the art and has some pieces in the American Museum of Ceramic Arts in Pomona. She then studied under famous minimalist ceramicist Nobuhito Nishigawara.

“I learned so much from him. He is amazing, but I feel like, as a reaction to his minimalist style, I’ve kind of gone the other way, and I want all the decorations and all the things,” she said.

Elise approaches teaching ceramics with the same tenacity she has carried her entire life. She transformed a storage area at WSOC into a fully functional studio; a crafting oasis where students can focus. She eats lunch in the classroom so that students can access the space to finish projects during their lunch breaks and will stay after school on Tuesdays to provide extra time for practice.

The waiting list to use the pottery wheel is so long that she has decided to do something about it: a sold-out adult ceramics class and fundraiser that will help secure two more pottery wheels for her classroom.

“I don’t grade on artistic talent so much as the effort put into coming to class, trying one’s best, showing up, and continually trying to make pieces and seeing them to completion. Those are some of my grading qualifications,” she said.

She believes the long, tedious process of making ceramics carries with it a valuable life lesson: a willingness to fail and the fortitude to try again.

“I just learned a lot from failure. I tell the students that’s your biggest teacher. You’ve got to get on with it and try - and you’ve got to fail, and that’s good because you’re learning. That’s what this whole process is about,” she said.

At the end of the quarter, when all the clay has been thrown, glazed, and fired, Elise brings cookies and prepares tea for the class.

“Out of their own handmade mugs, we have tea together,” she said. “And as we sit around, the students are so proud of themselves that they made something that’s functional. It’s a very special moment for them to see that to completion.”

Eight weeks of effort, from a ball of clay to a coffee cup they can drink from and keep forever; a tangible creation they can carry with them throughout life – a reminder that it’s okay to fail and to start again.

Elise’s ***sold-out*** 6 week adult Pottery Workshop begins this week. Participants will explore various pottery techniques with the goal of crafting unique and personalized functional ware pieces.

**Thank you, Elise, for your dedication to enhancing WSOC’s pottery studio! We are grateful for you!**