

connecting via clay

by Kelly Brinkmann

Do you live out in the country or in a town where the ceramics community isn't well developed? Having a hard time building a network of artists to talk shop with? Read on for ideas on how to get a group started.

Joining or creating a community of artists that can help to inspire new ideas, techniques, and methods is important for growth as an artist. When living in a rural area this can be difficult.

I live near family in a small community about an hour west of St. Louis, Missouri. When I moved to this area three years ago, I wanted to connect with a group of clay artists with whom I could share ideas and innovative techniques. Since there was no organized group, guild, or collective, once I networked with a few local potters, we decided to start one.

Meeting Other Artists

One of the first local artists I met was clay artist Jennifer Higerd, art instructor and gallery director for East Central College (ECC), the area community college. Jenn earned her MFA from Fort Hays State University in Fort Hays, Kansas (jennhig.com). Previous to her current life as a ceramic artist and teacher, she taught in an international school in West Africa, tutored hearing-impaired high-school students, and taught high-school Spanish. She received the Emerson Excellence in Teaching award in December 2018. When I first met her, she invited me to a guest-artist workshop being held later that fall at ECC.

Another local artist, Cindy Frick, sought me out at my booth at a local art show ([instagram.com/cindyfrickpottery](https://www.instagram.com/cindyfrickpottery)). Cindy has a clay studio in her home and makes and sells clay work at a local

floral and home-décor shop. Cindy is self-taught and has a voracious desire to learn clay techniques found online or in her travels. She often befriends artists during leisure trips with her husband and asks to tour their studios, finding inspiration and a chance to see things from a different point of view. Her clay making is a diversion from her role as owner of their regional family business. All of the proceeds of her art sales benefit the youth group at the local Lutheran church. Her high energy and passion is contagious, so we became friends and I invited her to join us at the guest-artist workshop at ECC.

Creating a Clay Community

During the workshop, we met several other artists from the community who had taken clay classes at the college, or had private studios in their homes. It inspired Cindy, Jenn, and me to begin talking about creating a clay group that would meet the first Thursday of each month with alternating programs for each month of the year. During odd-numbered months of the year, we would meet for private studio tours hosted by local artists, touring their studios and being introduced to techniques they used such as for forming handles, making handmade brushes, watching videos showing techniques that inspired them, and discovering new methods using wax resist. Often, the artists included hands-on time so others could learn from them, followed by time to socialize and share refreshments.



1 Group photo taken during the first Clay Club meeting. Back row: Cindy Frick, Gaye Ann Hutton, Janet de Agüero, Miguel de Agüero, John Dawson, and Molly Dawson. Front row: Jennifer Higerd, Kathy Wharton, and Kelly Brinkmann. 2 Jennifer Higerd with her clay work.



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These bad boys are wired single or three phase and their walls are 3" thick firebrick, making them energy-efficient. We'll wire and build the Oval tailored to your electrical specifications. They ride hard and can handle large loads and unusual size pieces. Ovals are equipped with standard relays but solid state or mercury relays are always a choice. Olympic Ovals are equipped with touchscreen or digital electronic controllers that you can control from your PC with additional accessories. These bad boys are built with a 2" blank brick ring at the top to avoid broken brick housing elements.



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2018HE 30" w x 20" d x 20" h
2023HE 30" w x 20" d x 24.5" h
2027HE 30" w x 20" d x 29" h

37" WIDE MODELS

2518HE - 37" w x 25" d x 20" h
2523HE - 37" w x 25" d x 24.5" h
2527HE - 37" w x 25" d x 29" h
2531HE - 37" w x 25" d x 33.5" h

42" WIDE MODELS

3018HE - 42" w x 30" d x 20" h
3023HE - 42" w x 30" d x 24.5" h
3027HE - 42" w x 30" d x 29" h
3031HE - 42" w x 30" d x 33.5" h

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3 Kelly Brinkmann's wheel-thrown strawberry bowls (named for their silhouette) and utensil jar, photographed during the group's photo lesson. Photo: Chimera Creative Works. 4 Jennifer Higerd's clay work. 5 Cindy Frick demonstrating during the group's first studio tour and visit to her studio.

During the even-numbered months of the year, our artists' group gathered for dinner at a local restaurant for a show-and-tell with tools, glazes, articles, etc. With my background in non-profit management, marketing, and business consulting, I typically shared items related to marketing or business, such as tips on how to promote clay events online, an outline to plan a product line or collection of work for retail sale, or a 13-tabbed document to track a business budget throughout the year. I also shared templates for flyers for clay classes I teach in the community (artandsouls.com).

During the monthly gatherings, fellow clay artists volunteered to host the group the following month until each had an opportunity to host a tour. Our group of 8–12 artists provided personal connections and the opportunity to host others in their studios. Group members include formal and informal art teachers, clay sculptors, hobbyists engaged in other full-time jobs, stay-at-home artist moms, educators, and retirees.

Learn Together

One month we participated in a tour starting at a local restaurant to view a mural painted by local artist, Kim Buxell Alsop (facebook.com/kimberlybuxell.alsop). She joined us for dinner and told us about the mural and how she created it on the walls of Streetside Tacos. Then, the group moved to a private gallery and studio tour with regionalist painter, Bryan Haynes (artbybryanhaynes.com). Haynes showed his gallery space and let the group talk about visual solutions for his *Cowscapes* landscape series.

The more the group meets, the more we realize that we have had some of the same obstacles, so we look for solutions together. One month, a local marketing, photography, and video studio, Chimera Creative Works (chimeracreativeworks.com), hosted the clay artists for a photography workshop to teach the group how to light three-dimensional work to shoot better images for marketing, portfolios, and entry into art shows. The class was well received because it helped us improve our photography skills.

Throughout the year we also attend art shows hosted by fellow club members. Some members who are inspired by online tutorials or videos share links with the group via email during the year. A smaller group within the club meets a couple of times during the month in a host's studio to make clay work.

Celebrate Together

After meeting for a year, we wanted to celebrate by hosting a mug exchange where each artist would create 12 handmade mugs to swap with one another. Higerd invited the group to exhibit in a "Mug Show" at the ECC gallery May–August 2018. The group gratefully accepted her invitation and created work for the show, culminating with a mug swap at the closing reception. The gallery show pushed the artists to grow by posing the challenge of creating a series of mugs.

What's Next for the Group

In 2019, we renamed the group the Franklin County Clay Guild to better represent our goals and to encourage the craft or trade of pottery making while offering ongoing, hands-on education. Our members serve in the Missouri Fine Arts Society, the Washington regional arts council, the Missouri Arts Council, and other organizations to make sure that potters are represented. The group wants to travel beyond our area to be inspired to create new artwork. We are working on plans to charter a tour bus to travel to art festivals and museums within the Midwest and invite others in the community to join us.

The clay guild is also considering plans to host a collective fall clay tour inviting the public to tour our area pottery studios and purchase locally made clay work. Additionally, we plan to review the "Rural Arts, Design, and Innovation in America" report to be provided by the USDA and NEA in early 2019 that outlines how the arts impact rural areas. We'll use the information to identify ways we can serve our community while sharing our passion for pottery.

By meeting together monthly, our group of local rural potters has been inspired to try new things and learn from each other. Together, we built a community of clay makers, and hope to serve as a model for other communities.

the author Kelly Brinkmann, artist and owner of Art & Souls Creative Studio, makes clay work on her own and creates business systems to help other artists, including a free downloadable business file. She also creates witty t-shirts for potters. To learn more, visit www.artandsouls.com.