

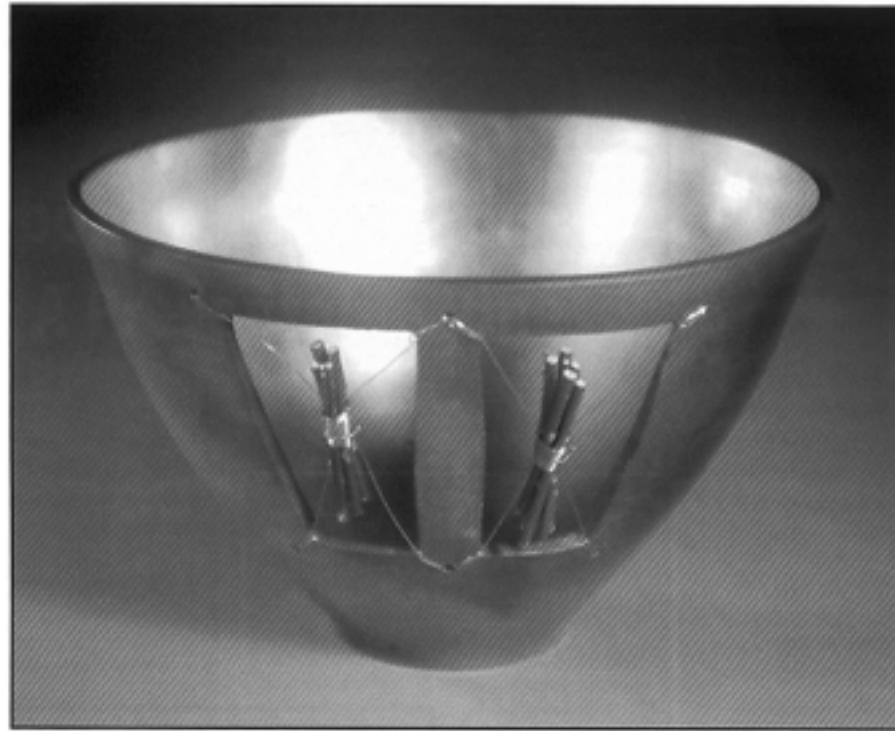
# Bowls of Compassion

BY JONATHAN KIRKENDALL

At age 25, having just returned from working with Central American refugees in Detroit, Michigan, I sat down to the potter's wheel for the first time in a basement of a production potter in a suburb of Washington DC. With the cool, wet clay turning underneath my hands for the first time, I thought to myself, "I've come home."

Since that time, my working life has been split between social work with the homeless and my pottery. During the past 15 years, finding a balance in my professional life between these two has been imperative. I have been lucky to find jobs that afforded me time to do both; in my mid 30s in New York, for example, I worked 4 pm to 12 am for the American Red Cross at the Emergency Family Center. On very intense nights, I would return home by 12:30 and head to the studio for a few soothing minutes of throwing before going to bed. Traditional, 9-to-5 jobs that did not allow me time in the studio were short lived—I just couldn't do it.

In March 1998, I found a job that has not only allowed me time in the studio, but actually nurtured my work as a potter. For the past four years, I have been working for a small organization called Miriam's Kitchen. Founded in October 1983 by a collaboration of churches, synagogues, and local businesses to serve a warm, nutritious breakfast to the homeless people in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington DC, Miriam's serves a unique segment of



Window Bowl with Twigs by Karin Abromaitis — one of many bowls donated by numerous potters to help raise money for the Miriam's Kitchen homeless shelter in Washington, DC.

the homeless population. While a large percentage of the homeless population in Washington, DC stays in shelters and is connected to services, most of the homeless men and women who come to Miriam's live on the streets and in the nearby parks. Many are actively mentally ill and most are not attached to services.

I began at Miriam's as the part-time social worker. I arrived at work somewhere between 6:30 am and 7 am, and sat in the dining room with the breakfast guests, answering questions, writing referrals, helping folks get connected to services. Work was over at 11 am, and I went off to my studio for the rest of the day, often teaching classes in the evenings.

In 1999, after conducting an in-depth needs assessment of our clients, we decided to expand services, and I had to decide whether or not to come on board full time as the Director of Social Services. My hours would be 7 am to 3 pm, which left me less time than before, but enough hours in the after-

noon to work in the studio.

This was a tough decision for me. I had developed regular customers and my classes were very popular, but I only had pots in a few stores in the DC area, and wasn't sure that I could live off that income. I had always planned at some point to start a small, private psychotherapy practice, but I did not yet have my clinical license in DC and couldn't count on that for income.

In the end, two factors swayed me to take the job: first, taking this job would enable me to build programs based on the experience that I had gained of what worked and what didn't work with this population, and second, I needed a new kiln and by taking this job, I'd be able to afford it!

The increased services included hiring full time case managers to work with our clients, and starting a transitional housing program to provide housing for working, homeless men. Increasing services meant that we had to increase our fundraising activities, and so the Executive Director and the board of Miriam's embarked on fundraising campaign to raise \$1.4 million, which would enable us to purchase a house, hire new staff, and fund both the case management program and the housing program for three years.

Years before, while in graduate school, I came across a quote by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation

master who founded Naropa University where I had gone to graduate school. In his book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, he writes, "The action of the bodhisattva is like the moon shining on 100 bowls of water, so that there are 100 moons, one in each bowl...100 moons reflected in one hundred bowls of water." This quote had greatly inspired me, and I had thought that it would make a great installation piece—100 hand-thrown pots, filled with water, placed around a garden with candles on a moonlit evening—ah, yes!

What started as an idea for an installation piece became the seed for a fundraiser for our new programs. But I wanted it to be more than a fundraiser for Miriam's Kitchen; I wanted it to be an opportunity to show off pottery, to introduce the public not just to pottery but to potters themselves. Under the leadership of our executive director, Ruth Dickey (an artist herself), "One Hundred Bowls of Compassion" became both a wildly successful fundraiser and an effective venue to develop interest in pottery and the work of specific potters.

The Office for Community Affairs at the World Bank offered to make the atrium of the World Bank available to us. Located two blocks from the White House, the World Bank is a new, glass, steel, and concrete structure with a 13-floor atrium in the middle, filled with trees, lights, and running water. A graphic design department of a local business designed the invitations, a flower shop offered to provide flowers at wholesale, and so many volunteers came forward to help our chef, Steve Badt, prepare the food for the evening that he had to turn people away! The Washington Toho Koto Society provided traditional Japanese music, and the flower arrangements were prepared by a teacher from the Ikebana Society.

It was very important to us as we planned this event that it not only be a fundraiser for us, but that we also create opportunities for the potters that donated bowls. The artists were invited to provide business cards and artist statements, which were printed

out on handmade paper and placed next to the bowl. And of course, the potters were invited to attend. For one bowl, potters were given one ticket, and two tickets were given out for two or more bowls.

Attendance by the clay artists added a great deal—both for our guests and the artists. One potter remarked, "Watching the bidding on my piece was great fun. I try to not get stuck on this as a form of validation I need to make my work, but it sure felt nice to

**"I was pleased to be able to help raise money for such a worthy organization. By donating a pot, I was able to give Miriam's Kitchen more money than I would ever have been able to write a check for."**

— Karin Abromaitis

have people want my work and to see them hover protectively around it as the bidding heated up." The guests, who paid \$200 a ticket for the event, loved meeting and talking with further commissions.

This event was a great success. It generated more than \$90,000 for Miriam's Kitchen. Potters were given a very enriched and uplifting atmosphere in which to show their works, and simultaneously they were provided with an audience who might not normally see their work. Several participating potters received further commissions. As for me, I never dreamed that my two passions—working with the homeless and ceramics—would come together in such a direct and useful way, especially in the atrium of The World Bank! One Hundred Bowls of Compassion will be repeated this Spring.

Martin Karcher, a former employee of the World Bank who contributed seven beautiful bowls (which combined brought in more than \$1900), summed up the success of the event: "Pottery, like music, is a universal form of communication," he said. "It speaks to the heart directly." ■

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