

Nancy Peterson Hilton on Empty Bowls 7/19/2014

(notes by Lisa Therrell)

Nancy Peterson Hilton and her husband Jeff Hilton started the Leavenworth Empty Bowls Festival in 1996. She served as the director of the event for four years until they moved to Albuquerque. Nancy and Jeff visited Leavenworth this summer. Nancy and I met at O'Grady's to talk about Empty Bowls. She reminisced with lots of passion and good humor.

How did you and Jeff first hear about the concept of Empty Bowls?

We were doing pottery shows all over the Northwest. The show in Roseburg had an Empty Bowls booth. You could buy a decorated bowl which came with a coupon to get soup at a local restaurant. The money went to the local food bank. We thought it was so cool. I started asking questions and realized there were different fundraisers with different models in different places. Most programs involved buying a decorated bowl. Most did not involve a dinner.

Then in 1995 Jeff and I got married. We didn't have any money and so we had our wedding at a friend's house off Ranger Road. We invited all our friends. We had a potluck instead of catering. We made toasting cups for everyone. Carl Florea was the minister—we knew him because of his social justice work sharing a connection to the Lutheran Church in Ephrata. I was in love with the idea of building community and what an amazing community we have here. We loved the idea of working with clay and community. I thought, "What can we do in the winter time to get our friends together, have a big potluck, and make money for the Community Cupboard?" We wanted a big dinner so it would feel like our wedding.

The first year people brought crock pots to the middle school which we plugged into power strips. We had this very Japanese idea of the generational cycle of a bowl—the earth, the person who mines the clay, the potter—the cycle is not complete until someone eats out of it. We were very philosophical and full of love. I talked to Carl Florea, Sheila Bergren, and Ann McLendon (cashier at Art in Park) about the idea. Ann said, "I love this idea. I will do whatever you need to make this work. How can I help?"

My intention wasn't for people to get their own bowl. When people wanted their own bowl, at first I was pissed. I was used to making beautiful things and letting them go. That is what artists do. Other people don't have that view. I was a little rigid about a few things.

I wanted adults to have the experience of decorating a bowl. So many people say they are not artistic or not creative. I wanted people to have the experience of doing something creative. They look so much better after being glazed and fired.

In the beginning I guilted people into decorating bowls. I had to totally put a guilt trip on John and Mary Schramm, telling them it was for the Community Cupboard. I wanted people to see what it is like to create art. Kids have the opportunity in school, but adults don't have the opportunity.

A husband of someone with Art in Park had experience with catering. He said we were lucky we were not busted by the health department or didn't burn the school down with our crockpots and power strips. He asked to take over and do it his way.

People would come up to me with their own ideas. People wanted to involve kids. I didn't want to deal with kids and adults at the same time. I just worked with adults. Now that I have children it would be no big deal, but back then I didn't have experience with kids and didn't know how to work with them. Joanie Sitman and friend were Head Start teachers in Peshastin. They asked if they could have a certain number of bowls to have kids decorate. I taught them how to decorate the bowls, and then I didn't work with kids directly. I wanted the glazing experience to be peaceful. Working with kids was more effort than I could take on.

People would come up and offer to get bread.

Sheila Bergren, Sharon Colburn, Rosemary Peterson, Nancy Hill, Margaret Neighbors, Sara Peckham, and others formed a committee with me. People took on different pieces. We had clear glazing days where we dipped the decorated bowls. The first year we decorated bowls at Sheila's. The next year we used the Icicle Inn. Then Harriet allowed use of Sleeping Lady. That made everything so lovely. People volunteered for blocks of time. We had things for people to look at for ideas. We got a grant for supplies. We had a lot of out-of-pocket expense.

So many potters stepped up and said they would throw bowls. It kept getting bigger. I think it was hard on the potters because they were used to seeing their bowls sell for more money, and felt their work was worth more. I felt very strongly that the event needed to be affordable. At the soup supper potters had their ceramics out to show what their regular pottery looks like (not to sell). Almost everything that people wanted to do made it better.

I learned a lot from all these people that understood community and knew how to behave. You can't be exclusive.

I was really strict about some things. I wanted it to be cheap enough that regular people can afford to come. If people can only afford to decorate one bowl, the whole family should be able to eat. So we sold soup tickets for \$3. People wanted to do away with that but I was really principled. I just didn't want it to be exclusionary. Jeff and I didn't have any money. We wanted it to be an event that we would have been able to afford to attend.

The question came up-- should organizers get a free ticket? I felt everyone needed to pay. I don't remember how we resolved this. Most people working can afford it. People staffing the event needed to be fed. They were fed.

There was an issue with who would fire bowls. Sara and Jeff fired a ton. It was hard to get enough people to help fire. We took up the slack. We loved it. It was so much fun. Pottery is hard work. Our bodies were tired. Giving of our time fed us. We were known in Leavenworth for doing a cool thing and it helped us sell pottery.

How many bowls did you throw the first years?

I don't remember. But I recorded who threw each bowl and who decorated it. I have that list. About 100 people came the first year. Tickets were sold at the door. We sold out almost immediately and the other people had to go home. We started discussing, "what are we going to do next time?" The first Empty Bowls was in October. We decided we needed to do it in winter when there are less tourists and less going on so we switched to March.

So the first year people didn't have a bowl picked out until they came to the dinner. Who did you get to help decorate bowls?

Friends came over to decorate bowls. Some decorated bowls in their studios and others in Bergren's garage—we just asked people over word-of-mouth. Some friends from Art in the Park came.

What changes were made after the first year?

By year four over 200 people helped put it on. People wanted to be involved. Having the event snowball into something bigger was a beautiful experience. It grew by leaps and bounds. That was grace. You can't plan for that. It's such a beautiful testament to how wonderful this community is. And that it has continued to be so successful. It really has nothing to do with us.

I want to do that with the work I do now. I want to foster community building. We still grieve about not being here. This still feels like home. This still feels like our people. I feel really grateful for everything. Jeff and I really don't feel like we should get credit. So many people made it happen. I'm really proud of people for carrying it on.

How did you deal with growing pains?

It wasn't too bad. People had ideas. If people were good at things we weren't good at, we were happy to turn over pieces. The first year I did so much of it. After that I was just glad for help.

Did you have discussions on how to balance raising money for the Community Cupboard vs. hosting a community arts event and meal?

Neither is more important than the other. I wanted an art activity that is accessible. Come paint a bowl as a contribution (reserve bowl). The first year people really didn't claim their own bowl. Painting your own bowl started the second year. People didn't have to have money to be involved—they could paint bowls which would be sold to others. The first year everybody bought a ticket at the door. It was a pottery sale with soup too.

Tell me your thoughts on the longevity of this event. 2015 will be the 19th year! Any chance you and Jeff could come for 2016?

We hope too. We have been reluctant to come back because we don't want the limelight.

You said you were rigid about some things. What were those things?

I was rigid about kids. I wouldn't be that way now. I was rigid about the ticket price being affordable. Some potters felt like their work should be worth more than \$10. I was sensitive to that. But it's a fundraiser. Selling it for what it was worth wasn't so much the point. We were creating an experience for people plus raising money. I loved the division of labor—how many hands touched each bowl. It was a community creation. I would lie in bed at night and think about it.

When did the artist bowl auction start?

The artist bowl auction may have started Year Two. They were displayed at the library. Someone asked to organize that part. The bowls were auctioned on KOHO by Rob Newsom.

People were so generous and would do anything. Damion Brown, the chef at Sleeping Lady, made a huge batch of squash wild mushroom soup, and then he came and served his own soup. Having soup from restaurants gave us so much credibility. Steve from the Alley Café came to pick up soups. We had about 5 soups. It was a Taste of Leavenworth. All restaurant owners gave very nice soups—not cheap ingredients or day old soup.

I have pictures of the first year. I have a picture of Cordy and Mike Bradburn.

I remember sitting in our studio working and listening to the bowls being auctioned off. It was so fun.