



POTTER TO ACTIVIST

by Susan Weaver

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OPPOSITE: Bowl, (*The Blueberry Brunch Collection*), 2007. *Earthenware, mid-range electric. 11 x 4 in. Photograph by Guy L'Heureux.*

So many people have taken up pottery for a hobby that I have often been mistaken for a hobbyist. Then I have to explain that it is my actual job: a lot of work and not much money, but it is certainly what I love to do.

I began my career as a studio potter in the summer of 1976, after training as a production potter in Montreal, Quebec. I was a decent thrower and had developed the beginnings of quite a good production, so I set myself up and started to produce and wholesale my work to boutiques in Quebec and other provinces. The steady demand and those many years of wholesale allowed me to learn about business while honing my skills as a potter. As my passion for ceramics grew over the years, I attended as many conferences and workshops as possible for professional development.

Now the wholesale market has all but disappeared. Because of the changes, I began to participate in more exhibitions and sales, and I now mostly focus on two major shows per year: a ceramics exhibition and sale outside of Montreal in July and August and a fine crafts exhibition in Montreal during the month of December.

The transition from wholesale to exhibitions and sales might have whetted my appetite to try something else. Perhaps, I thought, if I made changes to my work I could rekindle a certain satisfaction that I seemed to have lost. I thought about trying to make some experimental work, but I did not have the feel for it. When someone mentioned that with my experience, I should give something back, I considered teaching. Great idea, but it was not in me, although my studio door is always open to aspiring potters who would like to spend a day with me. The urge to find something new became more apparent when I reached my late fifties, but I had no idea what that something might be.

In the autumn of 2010, Rogers Communications, a Canadian telecommunications giant, sent letters to only seven homes in my neighborhood. They were pleased to inform us of their plan to build a 22.5-meter (73-foot) cell tower with a fenced-in area of 10 by 10 meters (32 x 32 feet) in the wooded area of our local park. To do this, they would have to destroy a good chunk of the woods.

I realized that something had to be done immediately. I made up some notices explaining the situation and delivered them to approximately fifteen other homes that had not received the letter. I received two e-mail responses and spoke with those two people about what we should do. One decided that he would print and deliver information flyers to 125 homes asking citizens to attend the next council meeting, while I began to petition homes in the immediate area. I was reluctant at first to ask people to sign because I knew nothing about telecommunication towers; I only knew that we were about to lose our forest. The people I visited encouraged me to continue. They could not believe that the city would give away our park, rezone our designated green space, in order to house telecommunication equipment. Within a week, the community was coming together. Many people attended the council meeting to express their views about the lack of transparency on the part of the city in regards to the installation of the tower.

The group grew; we held meetings and a core group was organized. It was decided that a

petition was not enough. We had to ask citizens to write letters to the company and all levels of government within the next month, the deadline for written comments. I became the official foot soldier again and spent the next few weeks – many weekday evenings and Saturday and Sunday afternoons – going door-to-door to talk with people.

This could not have happened at a worse time for me, as I was preparing for my December show, which was also one month away. That month became a balancing act between work and protecting this little park. As I was easing into the role of a community activist, I began to cut back on my studio hours. Thinking back on that time, I don't know how I pulled it off when it came to my show.

Surprisingly, Rogers had never received so many letters from citizens, their potential customers. Our member of parliament got involved and set up a meeting for a small group of citizens and Rogers representatives. At this meeting, I was surprised to learn that the cell tower would be for downloading videos and games: cell phones and 911 calls already worked just fine. The company had promised to hold a public meeting, but they kept postponing it. I knew that we had to get a large number of citizens to this meeting, so it was important to keep up the momentum in the community. We also had to keep the controversy in the media. A year later, the public meeting was finally held.

For a year and half, we worked hard to protect this small urban forest. We did not want to lose it. Just imagine: hundred-year-old trees – our community's assets – would be cut down for a cell tower that would probably be outdated in a couple of years. Finally, after a lengthy mediation between the telecommunications company and our core group, we have an agreement that the company cannot touch the forest. To date the project has been put on hold because of so many concerned citizens.

It was a rewarding experience, and I am more motivated than ever to continue working in the community. I enjoyed working closely with the core group, which was made up of two engineers (environmental and electrical), a teacher, a project manager, and a business person. I was the observer during the mediation sessions, and I saw how the group negotiated with the company. I also enjoyed knocking on doors and meeting people in the community, and I will be doing it again when I run for city councilor next year. I have spent the past two years at all of the city council meetings, only to discover that our municipal government really needs to change. The job of a councilor is part-time, and hopefully that will be my sideline as I continue to work on my pottery. Now that I am more involved in the community, my studio has become my refuge.

This seems to have been a natural transition. As I get older, I am working at a slower pace, but I have a better understanding of myself and know what I want to do. It is exciting to pursue these new interests – and, as a very wise friend once said: artists and craftspeople should be more involved in politics.