

PHOTO: REBECCA UPJOHN SNYDER

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SUE WELLER: IMMERSED IN CLAY

Sue Weller takes a lump of clay and forms it into a vessel on her potter's wheel, her sure, patient hands making it look natural and easy. It is mesmerizing to watch. She laughs: "When I first started on the wheel, I can't tell you how many pieces flew off, how many were oddly shaped. I couldn't get the thickness of my clay walls even." Her adeptness, of course, comes from years of practice—from trials, experiments, mistakes, persistence—and from seeing opportunity where before she might have seen failure. And it comes from successes that validate her commitment to creating art.

All through high school Sue had taken courses in different forms of art-making, but it wasn't until college at SUNY Oneonta that she discovered clay. She started in sculpture and then was introduced to the potter's wheel, which hooked her. "It felt so familiar, like I knew what to do with my hands."

Sue moved to Harrisville in 1979 with her husband, Tom, and their baby when Tom took a job with Total Environmental Action—an alternative energy architectural and engineering firm founded by Bruce Anderson. At first, she was a work-at-home mom with one young child and then a second. She found it a challenge to take time to immerse herself in her art while giving her kids undivided attention and love. While Tom worked days, Sue worked nights as a typesetter for Wayne Green Publishing. As their girls grew, Sue worked in the graphics department at Yankee Publishing as a "four-color stripper"—part of the team assembling the colored pages of the magazine.



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Sue Weller in her studio.

In 1990 she began a 28-year career at Antioch University, working the first four years as administrative assistant in the Registrar's office. After acquiring a master's degree in Management & Administration, she served as the Director of Administration for the Department of Environmental Studies, a position that stimulated and engaged her. "I learned a lot about the environmental movement at Antioch and met



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Sue uses sodium silicate and an underglaze to give the crackle effect on this bowl.

so many interesting, motivated students and faculty who were deeply committed to making a healthier planet."

All along, she kept her hand in pottery-making. She credits two ceramics teachers at the Sharon Arts Center, Lulu Fichter and Genevieve Groesbeck Watson, as her biggest influences. She took classes at night, which was hard after long work days, but it allowed her to continue learning and practicing her art.

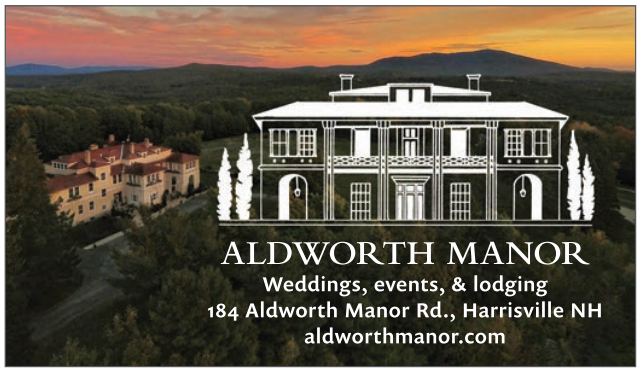
In 2016, thinking about retiring from Antioch, she felt some trepidation about how to replace the community she'd connected with at work. Tom, recognizing how important pottery was to Sue, built her the red studio on the hill behind their house. "In 2018 I retired from Antioch. I was ready, and it was relatively seamless to move from a workplace that I loved to doing my art full time."

She loves making pottery. "I love that I can make something that people will use over and over again. The best compliment I have received is someone saying, 'Oh, I use your mug every day.'" She connects strongly to the usefulness and functionality of the pottery she makes. "Pottery is an ancient art; it's how we've made our bowls and tools



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Sue's gallery is on the second floor of her garage where she features her finished work.









from the beginning . . . it feels like I've tapped into that."

Sue recently stepped away from her role at the Harrisville Community Fund because of her new responsibilities as president of Monadnock Art, but she plans to continue serving on the Old Home Days committee. She particularly enjoyed organizing the parade for Harrisville's 150th anniversary celebration. All the work in her head, on paper, making charts, then "suddenly everybody showed up. It was incredible!"

The administrative, organizational, and planning skills she honed at Antioch have transferred easily to her work at Monadnock Art. "That's the other side of me that feels good and important. I love organizing events and getting people together." And Monadnock Art not only gives her access to a community of dedicated artists, but it also validates her artistry as a potter.

Sue uses three kinds of clay to make her pieces: white stoneware, a red speckled stoneware, and porcelain, which is less forgiving if overworked. She knows what to expect from the clay and how to handle it. She talks about techniques for shaping a bowl versus a mug; for adding handles of wet clay when the body of a mug has dried "leather hard"; for the need to dry a plate more slowly so it won't warp or crack. She explains the process of trimming and finessing a piece, trying not to overwork it to the point of collapse.

When she is satisfied, she lets the pieces dry, then bisque-fires them in batches in the kiln—the process requires heating the unglazed clay to 1945 degrees F to achieve a vitrified state. After the fired pieces have cooled, she brushes on three or four coats of liquid glazes, one layer at a time, allowing them to dry overnight between each coat, and fires them again, this time to 2160 degrees F, for approximately 12 hours, followed by another 12 hours to cool down. It is a process that cannot be rushed. From her start of placing wet clay on the wheel to a glazed finished piece can take up to ten days.

Sue usually has an idea of what she wants to create before she begins, but she often experiments with shape, color, or form and sometimes includes "mistakes" in her batches. The learning and discovery aspects are part of how she savors her creative process.

Her connection to nature inspires patterns, color combinations, shapes, and textures in her work. Birchbark, leaves, and flowers have all found their way into her pottery, reflecting the natural world around us. Working with clay requires patience, time, and focus, and Sue is grateful she has the opportunity now to fully immerse herself in making art. The work "feels sacred because it slows everything down to the present, and that is such an incredible thing to experience and share. I get lost in it."

Her advice to beginning artists? "Don't give up. Stay with it. The joys are incredible. When it flows, it is magic."

Sue is excited to welcome visitors at her home (#8 on the tour map) during this year's Monadnock Art Open Studio Tours October 7, 8, and 9. (*www.MonadnockArt.org*). For other visiting opportunities she can be reached at *swellerberk@gmail.com* or through her website: *www.harrisvillepottery.com.*

Rebecca Upjohn Snyder

Common Threads Annual Appeal

Every October, we at *Common Threads* ask for donations to keep our newsletter going. Each year, it becomes harder to break even because costs keep rising. Postage has increased twice in the past year, and the rise in paper prices has made printing costs skyrocket. In addition, we have made colored pages a standard feature, which has been very well received but is also more expensive.

We need more donations to keep a printed version of the newsletter viable. We know from our readers' feedback that they do not want a solely online newsletter, although *Common Threads* is always available online on its website, *commonthreadsharrisville.com*, and can also be accessed on the town website, *harrisvillenh.org*. Scroll down the home page to the *Common Threads* link. Readers want to continue to hold a paper copy of *Common Threads* in their hands when reading about town events, happenings at the school, and profiles of Harrisville's accomplished neighbors. And every bathroom reading basket needs the most recent issue available for quick access to the websites of our loyal advertisers or the telephone numbers of our town offices.

Our newsletter receives no funds from the town government, and we desire to continue to be editorially independent so will not accept them even if offered. Please take this opportunity to make a donation toward *Common Threads*, either with the enclosed envelope or, if you are technically savvy, online. Thank you so much.

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