

Big Move, Little Studio, Tiny Vases

Story by Susan Lagsdin

Cashmere potter Beth Armbrust aptly described the start of COVID in her Seattle neighborhood. "Walking around outside, you felt like every breath you took had already been pre-breathed by someone else."

It was a good year to get out of town. And so, Beth, her spouse Merrick Richmond and their pre-teen daughter Tily (shortened from Tigerlily) took a major life leap and moved to a region they'd already been eyeing. They settled into a house surrounded by timber and native pasture grass on several scenic acres up Brender Canyon.

The isolated spot was both lovely and lifegiving. Sustaining them as they slowly eased into their new community were Tily's home schooling, Merrick's work from home (tech support for the Washington State Department of Health) and Beth's brand-new, fully equipped pottery studio.

How and why Beth left not one but two careers by the age of 43 to follow a quirky dream of making pots with her hands is a story about choice and tolerance.

Beth's Evergreen College biology/ecology degree led her to a few years of work in Leavenworth with the Forest Service and in Wenatchee with the Washington State Tree Fruit Center. Then, with a master's degree in entomology (that's bugs) from the University of Arizona, she took

a research position at the University of Washington School of Aquatics and Fisheries Science. Good work, analyzing fish habits and habitats.

But Beth disliked short-term grants and 6-month job security, and she also craved directly helping people. So back to school she went, for an Occupational Therapy degree from the University of Puget Sound. Her three years in that field were satisfying, but resultant layoffs from big changes in Medicare billing left her jobless in 2019.

"My father also died that year," Beth said, "and I was able to spend his last six weeks with him. I think that made me consider my mortality." She and Merrick had been swapping moves (he's in school, she works, vise-versa) since meeting at Evergreen, but the choice to leave Seattle was a particularly pivotal one. Beth decided it was time to capitalize on her creativity.

It had not lain dormant. In a winter break from her Forest Service job in Leavenworth way back in 1999, she'd taken a Wenatchee Valley College pottery course and discovered the sensuous joy of creating functional works of art from a lump of clay. For twenty years Beth took classes when she could at community arts centers in Tucson and Seattle.

When the family made the move to Cashmere in 2020, Beth



Photo by Mike Irwin

Beth Armbrust has used her three years as an independent potter to delve into her craft and find her artistic direction.

became a full-time potter, not just a hobbyist. She said, "I knew from the beginning that making pottery was something I could do every day without getting bored."

She set up a wheel, a kiln, worktable, shelving and tools in a side room of the new house, and that became the clean and well-ordered headquarters of Armbrust Pottery.

In the city Beth had enjoyed the camaraderie of a potters' co-op group – and would appreciate one here – but she is content to work solo. She's thrown clay on a wheel for 25 years, and since she's mastered the precision work on her popular mini-vessels she's also trying new techniques like slab building and making nature-themed stencils.

Glazing and firing are tricky

even for veterans, essentially experimental each time. "I love loading the kiln...It's pure joy when things turn out well," Beth said. "And I have enough experience now to calmly put broken or ruined pieces in the garbage and move on."

At art fairs and markets, Beth is quite accustomed to a new customer's initial reaction to her best-selling pottery miniatures: "Oh, they're so cu-u-u-te." She doesn't mind when the second comment is, "But what would you even do with one?"

At only one or two inches tall (designated "tiny" to "small"), her diminutive, glazed vases don't aspire to haul water or hold an armful of peonies. But, Beth suggests, you can put a tiny sprig of bloom in each, as she does in her market display. Collect your

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mer establishing the sites for three more spec homes and four custom-builds.

Hydroseeding those flat lots – think greenish foam on highway cutbanks – is standard practice for erosion control, Kyle said. “The neighbors like it because it keeps the dust down and it allows natural vegetation to grow before actual construction starts.”

And when that happens, he’ll see it through to the end. With the current housing market and several lots still available in Edgewood, “I plan to spend most of the next couple of years working up here,” Kyle said.

His company, founded in 2019, does all the work of building a house from initial permits and earthmoving to construction and interior finishes, using subcontractors for only a very few specific jobs.

Hard work suits his style. Kyle, 43, was born in Wenatchee and attended Wenatchee Valley College, served as a Marine in Iraq and is currently a Douglas County Commissioner. He said he’s been building homes since his youth, moving on to heavy equipment in later years.

KTS Development projects are

all hands-on for him. He said, “I like to be involved every step of the way,” adding that he’s passionate about attention to details throughout the entire process.

On an already-90-degree morning in August he was asked if, as head of the company, he still works outside. Kyle looked surprised. “Sure, all the time. I’m up on the machines, I’m on the site. I’d rather be outdoors anytime.”

As he’d hoped, his boys Kaden and Tyler both plan to be builders and enjoy working with their dad on weekends and during the summer. Teenagers now, they’ve been “fooling around on the heavy equipment since they were eight years old,” Kyle said.

He’s proud that his relatively new company will likely carry on in the future under his sons’ guidance.

On a short walk to a future home site on the western rim of the neighborhood, Kyle gestured to the wide expanse of city, mountains, river and miles of sky. The morning was silent, the breeze soft.

“It doesn’t get any better than this,” he said. “This is what it’s all about.” ☺



LEFT: Kyle Steinburg has entered this about-to-be-finished house in 2023 Tour of Homes. Two years ago, he received awards that included People's Choice and thinks visitors will also appreciate his company's new project and its much-enhanced outdoor living features.



ABOVE: A new owner can anticipate an active bathing experience in the primary suite's doorless, tiled shower with its five programmable faucets. Other luxuries are a WC room, heated floor, a free-standing tub and an extra-long quartz countertop with double sinks.

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cat's whiskers. Make a pendant. Or use them as urns for a loved one's ashes, as one buyer did, for distribution to her many relatives.

Or they can be loved for themselves alone.

She tells this tale of a potter friend, who hadn't yet seen one, expressing her skepticism about the new venture. So, Beth slipped a miniature into the woman's hand, made a fist. There was silence. Then the hand opened.

The piece of pottery was smooth, sensual, minutely detailed. A tiny bit of exquisite.

Her friend looked down at the little vase, smiled widely and said, “OK. Now I get it.” ☺

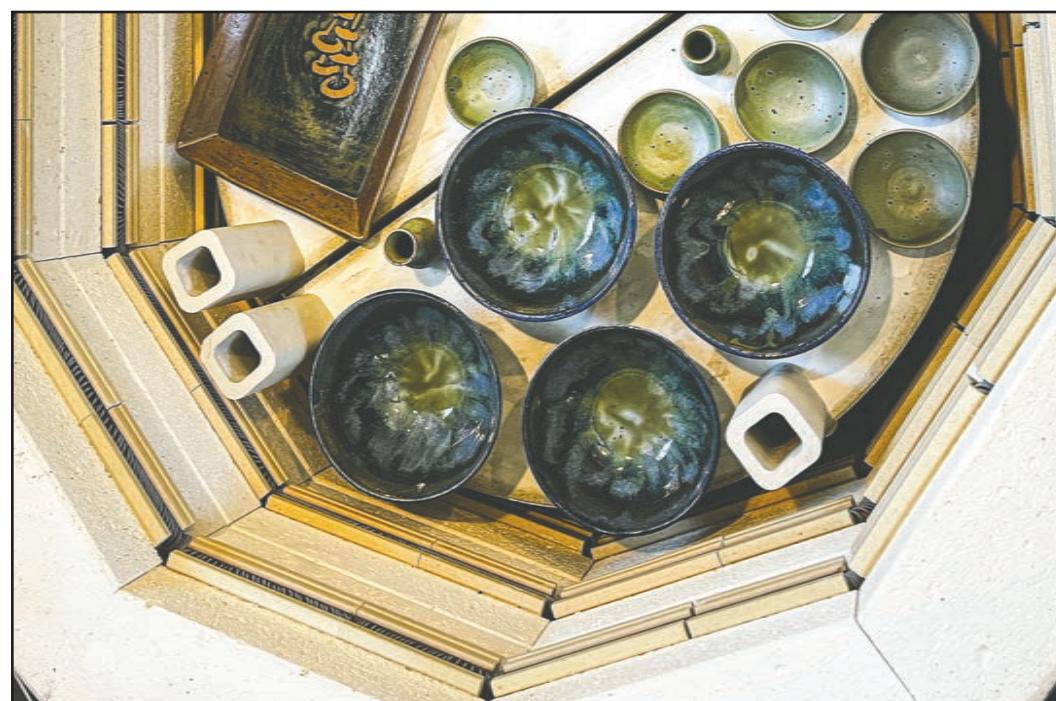


Photo by
Mike Irwin

The three-tiered kiln was just opened, the pots still warm, displaying this artful array of Beth's focused learning about slab work, glazes and stenciled designs. She said that potting solo after years of collective class experience has prompted creative problem solving.