

HEALDSBURG: Teacher devises project combining ceramics, ecology, photography, even performance art

Art students make, sow 'seed bombs'

By ANN CARRANZA
HEALDSBURG CORRESPONDENT

Linus Lancaster, the creative Healdsburg High School art teacher who brought a whale mandible to his photography classroom, is at it again. This time, he's guerrilla gardening with his ceramics students, asking them to mold clay harvested from Foss Creek into seed nurseries, producing flowers that can be photographed by spring photography students.

Lancaster, a soil ecologist by training, said he hopes the "trans-disciplinary" project will give students a sense of place and instill within them an appreciation for local materials.

The idea was hatched by last year's photography class, which took wildlife photos along the unused railroad tracks near the old railroad depot. Lancaster and the students discussed the role of art in effecting change. They decided to increase the bloom of wildflowers in the adjacent field by spreading flower seeds, but with no result. The voracious local birds gobbled up the seeds, leaving few to germinate. The lack of rain finished them off.

"We came up with the idea of seed 'bombs,' also known as 'grenades,'" Lancaster said. It is an ancient way to do distant gardening, but he was stumped by how to help the seeds germinate. "I gave up until I found



A seed bomb with pH tester is the product of a Healdsburg High School trans-disciplinary art project. Courtesy of LINUS LANCASTER

the missing ingredient, clay." The Russian River watershed has a great deal of Zamora clay loam, which has unique complexity. It's based on the St. Francis bedrock below, which was transformed as the Pacific shelf folded under the continental shelf. The clay holds the seed in place and contains enough water to help it germinate and grow roots strong enough to penetrate the soil. Because it also contains a lot of sand, Zamora clay loam

holds together well enough to sculpt and withstands several storms before disintegrating.

Photography students mined the clay, ceramics students molded it into seed bombs, and photography students will return in spring to take wildflower photos.

To enhance the likelihood of germination, the students changed the pH balance of the clay, making it slightly more acidic with plant food, biodegradable soap or coffee. They

didn't fire the pieces, simply air-drying them. The first week of December, they dropped the bombs in several areas, including one that had eroded after a fire burned off the grass.

Lancaster keeps his sense of humor when things don't go well. The first bombs were made in simple ball shapes. While they worked on the flat areas, they rolled back down the hill in the areas of erosion.

The second-generation bombs are more humorous to

look at. Many have a tripod spaceship quality.

"This is an art project, an ecology project and a performance art project, as well," Lancaster said. "When you do art-based projects, what you bring in the way of humor and absurdity helps to interest people in the project. It encourages buy-in."

Now they're waiting for rain and will return to document the results.

"It's a learning experience about what we can do with marginal spaces," Lancaster said. It's also an opportunity for the teacher to continue thinking outside the box.

"This project covered soil science, ecology, art, a wide range of knowledge about clay, its role in the environment, its properties, how seeds germinate and more," he said. "We work to broaden our programs and bring in trans-disciplinary work. No Child Left Behind is going away, allowing us to talk about education and to act upon creative and interesting ideas."

"These projects are engaging. The value of humor and creativity makes them memorable."

The lively teacher is working on his dissertation at the University of Plymouth in England for a doctorate in soil ecology. Meanwhile, his photography students continue with photogrammetry (computer modeling); he hopes to excavate a complete whale; and he's seeking permission to launch a high-altitude balloon.

TESSERAK: Prized vase 'is now stronger than it was originally,' restoration expert says

CONTINUED FROM PAGE T1

ago, Scherer didn't want to lose his favorite job, so he went into business for himself.

He opened a studio next to his Sebastopol home, calling it Tesseract Restoration, and brought Venerable Classics technician Brian Dhaze with him as an assistant.

Their skills have been used on a Picasso ceramic, a 2,400-year-old Nazca piece and the vase, made by Garnet "Flower Girl" Pavatea in the 1960s and purchased by Loxton in the 1980s for \$800.

The Pavatea vase was the prize piece in his pottery collection, a hobby he started while working on a Ph.D. in physics at the University of Arizona.

Years later, he gave up physics for winemaking and settled in Glen Ellen to establish Loxton Cellars. The vase came with him in a box, having fallen during an earthquake.

"I was so depressed, and I kept thinking I was stupid for not protecting it better," Loxton said. "I loved it so much, I couldn't bear to throw the pieces away. I put them in a box and thought I'd never see it again."



At left, Martin Scherer begins on Nov. 2 to reassemble the shattered 1960s Hopi vase that belongs to Glen Ellen vintner Chris Loxton. At right, Scherer polishes the refinished surface of the restored vase on Dec. 3.



Photos by ALVIN JORNADA / The Press Democrat

His significant other, Christy Thomas, read about Tesseract Restoration and took the box of pieces to see if Scherer could bring the vase back to life.

"It was in 30 pieces and some dust," Scherer said. He took photos of the pieces and began the work that took more than a month.

First came a "dry assembly," putting the pieces together with low tack tape to see what was missing.

Scherer found that the edges of the pieces had

eroded somewhat, and some pieces were missing altogether.

Using an epoxy putty used to repair swimming pools underwater, he bonded together the remaining pieces, plugging cracks and filling in the gaps.

Then he began a "fine fill" to make repair lines vanish.

"The vase is now stronger than it was originally," Scherer said.

Only then could he begin the delicate process of painting the restored vase, starting with the

background color and proceeding to the design. Scherer said that required him to sense the artist's spirit, what she felt while creating the piece.

"I definitely felt Pavatea's mojo," he said.

When Thomas gave the reassembled vase to Loxton, "tears came to his eyes," she said. "He couldn't get over it. He kept shaking his head, and when he went to bed, he put the vase on the carpet, he was so afraid of losing it again."

"It's the most meaning-

ful present he ever had, and he told me if I never got him another gift that would be fine."

Still recovering from the surprise, Loxton said, "I couldn't believe it. It's amazing what Martin did. It's so emotional to see it again."

Scherer's work can be expensive, from \$50 to \$8,000 for most expensive job he ever performed, but Scherer points out that the items he restores are usually expensive to begin with.

And not all of his work

involves major art pieces. Sometimes it is as simple as putting the handle back on Grandpa's favorite coffee mug.

"Sometimes it's the emotional attachment that gives something its value," Scherer said.

And when something loved comes back to the person who treasured it, adds Loxton, "it's magic."

Tesseract Restoration Studio is located at 5101 McFarlane Road, Sebastopol. Contact Martin Scherer at 824-8491 or visit tesseract.com.

CEREMONY: Seven Circles Foundation promotes spiritual practices of native peoples

CONTINUED FROM PAGE T1

as the most sacred item used in native ceremonies. Participants symbolically place their "prayers" into the pipe; once it's loaded, participants smoke the pipe to release those prayers to a supreme creator. (Smoking is optional.)

Wahpepah, a Korean War veteran, says participants have different versions of a creator.

"We all have ideas of what the creator is. It's open to interpretation," he said.

A drug- and tobacco-free "kinnickinnick" mixture of the inner bark of red willow and other natural herbs is used for the ceremony; nothing is hallucinogenic.

healing." Wahpepah was born on a reservation in rural Oklahoma, the first grandchild and, by tradition, chosen to study native customs and ultimately share that wisdom as a role model and tribal elder. He spent his first five years in a Native American village shadowing his grandfather.

With the given name of Thakito, "protector of the camp," Wahpepah's path included 10 years in the military before moving to California and working as an auto mechanic, forklift operator and long-haul trucker.

He says he developed an alcohol problem along the way, but "sobered up" in 1975 when he happened upon a Native American treatment center in Minneapolis. He met a native elder through the program and began studying with him and other native elders, a journey that took

him on the road for 16 years of study throughout North America. Wahpepah continues today.

"It's a never-ending learning process," he said. "Once you think you've learned it all, you're out of the business."

Today the father of five has 16 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren. He remains dedicated to sharing his culture and traditions, emphasizing respect for fellow citizens and Mother Earth.

His pipe ceremonies encourage individual expression in a supportive gathering, no judgments allowed.

"My individual point of view is respect," Wahpepah said.

He believes there is a connectedness between people, nature and the universe. Gratitude keeps people grounded, he says, and humor "is a wonderful medicine."

fibromyalgia have slowed Wahpepah, he still leads various sacred ceremonies and school presentations through the Seven Circles Foundation, a Lagunitas-based educational organization promoting spiritual practices of Native American indigenous peoples.

Foundation President Michael Stocker, 58, emphasizes the transformative powers of Wahpepah's teachings.

"It's been super healing. I've seen amazing stuff over the years," said Stocker, a marine bio-oustician from west Marin. "It's unequivocal."

Messinger has hosted four pipe ceremonies in the valley, each with Wahpepah introducing the ancient practice to friends and strangers alike.

"It's a chance to reconnect, regroup and remember," Messinger said. "It's the heart. It's the heart."

held from 5-8 p.m. Jan. 12 and Feb. 9 in Sonoma Valley; space is limited. Admission is free, with donations accepted for the Seven Cir-

cles Foundation. For reservations or information, email info@sevencircles.org or visit sevencircles.org.

PurlsofJoy

A Yarn Lover's Boutique

It's Knitting Weather! Why not take a class?

Visit us at
www.purlsofjoy.com
for a complete list of classes

429 Healdsburg Ave.
Healdsburg, CA 95448
(707) 433-JOYS (5697)