

Sister Jeannie coaches Julie Boland before she begins working.

Text by Sharon Darnieder
 Photos by Susan McKinney

Ceramics, a popular craft that keeps many people occupied in their spare time, has entered the convent.

For two Sisters of St. Joseph who use their convent basements to teach ceramics classes, the craft is part of the regular pattern of their days.

From fulltime cooking to fulltime ceramics might be a difficult transition for some, but not for Sister Jeannie Smith, Sacred Heart Cathedral.

For the past eight years she's cooked for the Sisters there, but now that a new cook has been hired she plans to devote all her time to what once was her hobby.

"I worked fast when I cooked," she explains, "and while I waited for something to finish I'd do ceramics."

She became interested when a parishioner introduced her to the craft six years ago.

"For two years I dabbled in it on my own," she said, "and then four years ago I started teaching."

Although she's taught only school children in the past, last year she began holding a class for adults. Now she does both and not only hopes to add more adult classes in the future but also plans to sell the objects she makes.

The adults meet Tuesday, at 7 p.m., and her class for seventh and eighth graders from Sacred Heart is held after school. Money from classes and the objects she'll sell goes to her religious community.

Sister Jeannie is unique in that many teachers often don't pour their own molds. They simply go to a ceramics store to buy the greenware (the unfired object already molded). She does both.

"I order and buy my molds at ceramic stores, and although I have quite a few, they're mostly for small items," she said. "The larger ones are too heavy to handle once they're full."

To make greenware, she pours slip (the substance greenware is made of) into a mold, leaves it set for "about 15 minutes" (large molds take longer) and then pours off the excess.

What's left adheres to the inside of the mold, which is then turned upside down, and allowed to harden.

She also fires her own items in the two kilns in her basement workshop, and noted that it took about 24 hours to fire a piece of greenware — four

hours for the actual firing and 20 to cool it off. The temperature inside a kiln goes over 2,000 degrees, she added.

She enjoys giving things she makes as gifts to relatives and friends, but she doesn't keep much.

"I think the only thing I've kept is a pencil holder for my room," she says with a laugh.

"I imagine I'll miss cooking," she says reflectively, "but ceramics is really in demand. People are under tension in many homes so it's an outlet for some and just an enjoyable hobby for others."

A group that enjoys it more than most are the fourth and fifth graders taught by Sister Mary Elizabeth, St. John's in Greece.

She began her classes in November at the request of the principal, Sister Anna Louise, and also "to give the kids an opportunity to make something for Christmas gifts."

She views her interest in ceramics as more of a hobby than a job, since she retired in September, but she still "tutors second graders in reading," the grade she taught during her career.

She teaches two ceramics classes a week, Monday and Thursday after school. Soon, she'll be finished with these and will begin classes for seventh and eighth graders.

Sister Mary Elizabeth began working with ceramics two years ago when she started her second graders on a project for Mother's Day.

"They were so good," she chuckles. "They didn't break a thing but I did. I put something on the ledge under the blackboard and it fell off and broke."

Sister Mary Elizabeth thinks parents are glad their children are able to learn crafts like ceramics and she finds a "general return to handcrafts in schools," in recent years.

There are girls and boys in her classes and although everyone enjoys making gifts for their parents or family, the boys "get very excited when a piece is finished," she adds.

Some class favorites are animals, candy dishes, vases and religious statues.

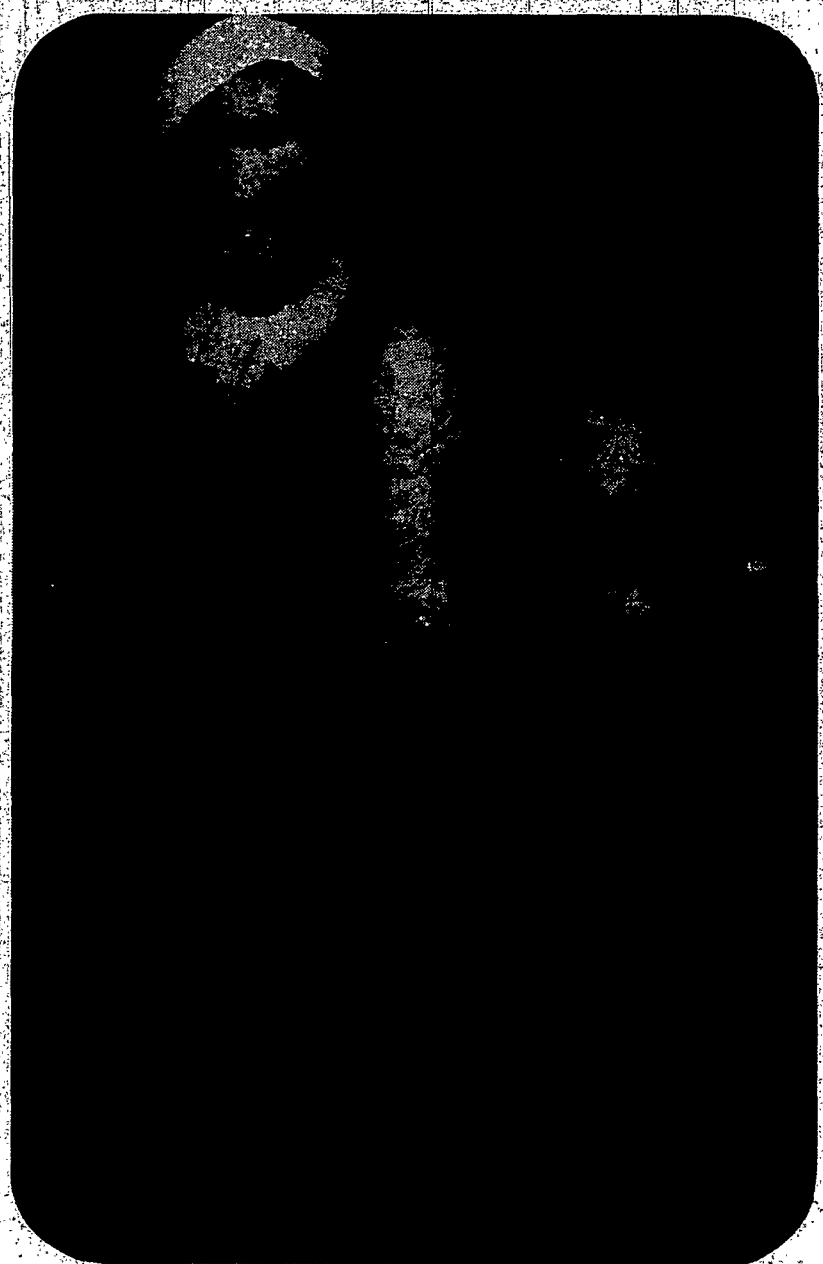
A kiln will soon be installed in her basement classroom, but she doesn't plan on pouring her own molds. Firing her objects at the convent will cut down on weekly trips because she uses a parishioner's kiln now.

"When I have my own, I'll only have to go out about once every two weeks for greenware," she said.



A large owl poses no problems for Aileen Connors as she prepares to p

Two Sisters I An Unusual M



Sister Mary Elizabeth explains how to start work on a tray to Maryellen Halloran.