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Beauty in the Unexpected

Jennifer Nice
Linfield University

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Beauty in the unexpected

Through twists and turns, ceramic artist Joe Robinson '09 carries on a Linfield professor's legacy



By Jennifer Nice

Dampness seeps into Joe Robinson's coat as night creeps toward dawn. It's winter of 2006 and the Linfield freshman has been up all night. His job is to stoke the flames and monitor the pottery inside a small wood-fired kiln at East Creek, an artists' compound near Willamina in the coast range.

If he does well, he'll graduate to a more challenging task: leading the firing of a massive kiln built into a nearby hillside. The kiln's name, anagama, means "cave kiln" in Japanese. Firing the 40-foot behemoth and the hundreds of pots inside will take at least five continuous days and nights, reaching temperatures hotter than lava.

Robinson slowly feeds firewood into the smaller kiln. Waves of escaping heat could burn his hair if he gets too close. The 18-year-old art student has learned to be careful after

many days as an apprentice to ceramics professor Nils Lou, who owns East Creek.

Because of its extreme heat, wood firing can be erratic and dangerous. But one of its benefits is the surprising results. The heat moves in waves, creating glaze effects and colors that aren't possible with a gas or electric kiln. The beauty is in the unexpected.

Robinson has learned that the key to the wood firing's magic is unceasing heat. Crew members need to feed the kiln every few minutes to keep its temperature at 2,400 degrees. They work alone and relieve each other in shifts.

Lou was set to take over from Robinson at 6 a.m. But minutes turn into hours. No one comes.

By the time his professor arrives, Robinson has spent 24 hours fighting fatigue to feed the kiln and tend the fire. When

Above: As a student, Joe Robinson '09 (left) found a mentor in artist Nils Lou (right, in front of the anagama kiln). A love of wood-fired pottery united the two, setting off a decade-long friendship between Robinson and the late professor. **Facing page:** Wood-fired kilns like the anagama use extremely high heat, with surprising results.





Nils Lou and two other Oregon artists, Tom Coleman and Frank Boyden, helped build the anagama kiln in 1983. When Joe Robinson '09 and Rick Robinson '75 bought East Creek in 2015, they made it possible for a new generation of Linfield students to experience the kiln's magic.

he asks where Lou has been, his mentor merely says, “Looks like you got it handled.”

It’s not the first time, nor the last, that Robinson will be tested and find comfort in clay.



Joe Robinson '09 is the only child of Rick Robinson '75 and the late Kit Robinson. His father was an adjunct instructor and visiting psychology professor at Linfield before moving on to a career in school consulting. His mother, a psychiatric nurse practitioner, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when he was a baby and took medical retirement when he was 15.

Much of Robinson’s childhood was spent helping care for his mother. But when he discovered clay in an eighth-grade ceramics class, he remembers wondering, “what is this magical substance?” From then on, he was hooked. “I became known as the pottery kid.”

Robinson chose Linfield partly because the small school offered greater access to art facilities. When he arrived in McMinnville, he sought out Lou because he’d heard about the outdoor kiln on the art professor’s property. Lou helped build the anagama in 1983, replicating a ninth-century Korean design. The first kiln of its kind west of the Mississippi, the

anagama’s arched brick tunnel can hold more than 1,000 pots.

A few weeks into fall term, Robinson and his fellow art students made the 35-minute drive from Linfield to East Creek. Lou required that his classes take part in a firing on the property at least once a semester, but Robinson resolved to spend as much time there as possible. He spent two days helping load pots into the anagama and another four days assisting with the firing. He crashed in a nearby bunkhouse to sleep between shifts.

As East Creek became his second home, Robinson’s family was struggling with his mom’s illness. She passed away after his freshman year. A year earlier, Lou had suffered his own loss, his wife of 50 years. Student and teacher spent hours side by side at the anagama, quietly doing the contemplative and methodical work of loading, firing and unloading.



After graduating with a double major in business and studio art in 2009, Robinson and a few of his Linfield buddies headed to Los Angeles with big city dreams. He worked as a photographer, in retail jobs and in club promotion before landing at DeviantArt, an online community for artists to connect and sell their work. In the span of a year, he helped grow the company from 30 employees to 130. But L.A.’s relentless pace

took its toll. The city was “changing me into a person I didn’t want to be,” he remembers.

Not sure what was next, Robinson quit his job in 2012. He spent more than five months hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. The 2,650-mile expedition, “six million steps across some of our country’s most beautiful landscapes,” was also a fundraiser for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society in honor of his mom. By the time he finished, Robinson had raised more than \$11,000 and his vision for the future was clear. He wanted to get back to his craft. He longed to return to East Creek.

His path wasn’t as linear as the PCT, though. Lou passed away on Christmas Day in 2013, after devoting more than 30 years to Linfield art students. With his death, East Creek fell into limbo. A community of artists and volunteers tried to keep it going but exhausted their resources.

In 2015, Robinson learned bulldozers were coming in 60 days to raze the kiln and studio. He turned to his father for advice. “This is a hard problem, and we’re really good at solving hard problems,” Robinson remembers his dad saying. Together, they decided to buy East Creek.



After managing the property remotely, Robinson eventually moved to East Creek and devoted himself completely to clay.

He enrolled in a joint MFA program of the Pacific Northwest College of Art and Oregon College of Art and Craft in 2017 while continuing to maintain and improve East Creek.

But after a year, he started experiencing flu-like symptoms, including extreme fatigue. One day Robinson was helping prep for a cement pour at East Creek when he was so worn out he had to stop and take a nap. He rolled over in bed and felt a sudden pop in his right side, followed by pain that took his breath away.

It was acute appendicitis. Robinson spent more than a month in the hospital, half of the time in intensive care. It took him another three months to recover. Once he felt better, he was even more committed to making East Creek an artists’ refuge — a place to build “wealth in something other than money.”



Today, Robinson has East Creek handled. The anagama fires five times a year, sometimes drawing more than 100 people to form a bucket brigade to unload the kiln. “The most important part of this process is the ‘shared work, shared result’ community,” he says. “We have this unique tool that no one person can use alone. We must come together and agree on decisions so that all of our art can come out in the vision that we share.”

In 2019, Robinson returned to Linfield to teach ceramics and mentor art students. Like Nils Lou, he gives his students space — literally and figuratively — to discover the power



East Creek by the numbers

20: Wooded acres on a property outside of Willamina

5: Days for a typical firing of the anagama kiln

120,000: Pounds of wood used per year

50: Volunteers needed for a typical anagama firing

6: Beds in the bunkhouse for artists to rest between shifts

4,500: Square feet of studio space

10,000: Pounds of supplies donated by Linfield and Oregon College of Art and Craft

\$25,000: Annual grant from the Ford Family Foundation to fund an artists-in-residence program

2: Cabins for rent, a 20-foot A-frame and an 8-by-12-foot tiny house

1: Wood-fired pizza oven

and joy of artistic expression. He carries on the tradition of bringing his classes to East Creek every term to experience the magic of the anagama.

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