



PHOTOGRAPH: © JAMIE GRIFFITHS.COM 2005

# POTTERY BARN

Henry “Blake” Hiebert on the healing qualities of clay

I LOVE THE WAY CLAY FEELS IN MY hands. Working with clay is very spiritual and therapeutic. I don’t know what’s in it, but clay makes you feel magical.

For 21 years I taught pottery at the Carnegie, a community centre at Hastings and Main, a rough area of Vancouver. It’s called the “living room” for the downtown eastside and it’s for low-income, marginalized people. But last year I left because everyone was passing away like flies in that area of town. I don’t have enough fingers or toes to count how many friends passed away. I was lonely and depressed.

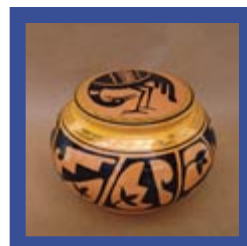
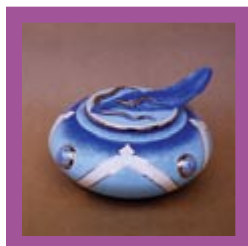
I don’t tend to make new friends now because I’m afraid they won’t live long. I spend most of my time at home doing pottery. This is my peace and quiet. When I get into the clay, I tend to forget about AIDS, it kind of just fades away.

In 1995, my partner, John, took notice of me having cold sweats, losing weight and being sick a lot. He diag-

nosed me before the doctor did. After my HIV test, I waited for two weeks on pins and needles because John already had it. When the doctor called me into the office, he told me my CD4 count was down to 40. I had full-blown AIDS and MAC (*Mycobacterium avium* complex). I thought that was the end of the road for me. But I took pills for the MAC and got better.

Back then with two partners in one household with full-blown AIDS, it was always something. Sheer survival took over. Now I’m on meds and I’m pretty active. I live with HIV, but I never go too far into the future. For years John and I were living in one-month intervals. Now with treatment and all, we have a three-month horizon. Every three months, you shed your skin, like a snake. I find this very optimistic.

Now I teach at the Gathering Place, across the street from BCPWA. We’ve



got a terrible crystal meth problem in Vancouver and this community centre is in the eye of the hurricane. It’s full of street people, and a lot of the students have HIV.

My students call me Blake, even though my real name’s Henry. A friend of mine, a numerologist who died of AIDS, once said to me: “Don’t ever go by Henry. They all die of diseases. Think of Henry VIII, he died of syphilis. Go with your middle name.” So my art name is Blake.

All my students know I have HIV. We have our own little support group.

We talk about our health, our meds, what we’re being diagnosed with. We share our stories. There’s lots of laughter and jokes. Clay makes you want to talk about things. There’s a lot of sexual talk some-

times, especially among the gay guys. I tell them to try to respect everyone in the class, because there are straight people, too. The only things I ask them not to discuss are politics and religion because things can get heated and there are people in the class from all different backgrounds.

When people come into the class, they’re usually depressed, but after three weeks they have this happy, beautiful face on them. Memories come up when you knead the clay. A lot of people think of their moms because when they start digging their hands in the clay, they remember their mothers baking, rolling out the dough.

When we do the glaze and kiln firings, everyone says it’s like Christmas. They’re like kids at a bakery. After their work comes out, I do little critiques, in a positive way.

Pottery has helped me grow and I like to see other people grow just as much as I have. That’s my reward. I have all these people around me who give me support, and it feels good to give something back. +

