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SJU Pottery kiln firing

Michael Hemesath

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu

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Quad 136

SJU Pottery Kiln Firing

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SJU Pottery Kiln Firing



Photo: Tommy O'Laughlin, SJU '13

I recently had the rare treat of observing a uniquely Saint John's event—the firing of the Johanna Kiln that is part of the Saint John's Pottery. While it is rare enough to have a Potter-in-Residence on any college campus, to say nothing of a small liberal arts school, our renowned potter, Richard Bresnahan, has combined an artistic and entrepreneurial spirit to make the Saint John's Pottery literally world famous. People who know little of the University will know about Richard and the Pottery. Richard and his apprentices work unobtrusively on campus throughout the year, welcoming knowledgeable visitors and outsiders lucky enough to be guided to the studio by insiders, but every two to three years all that changes when the largest wood fired kiln in North America is fired. Then we have AN EVENT.

The **Johanna Kiln**, named for one Richard's mentors, is the largest wood-burning kiln in North America. It was designed by Richard and constructed with the help of apprentices and volunteers. It can fire up to 12,000 works of pottery and sculpture. Approximately 10,000 of those were Richard's handiwork this year, but he shared kiln space with over 30 other artists in this firing. Local clay, natural glaze materials and sustainably harvested wood are used in the firing. The kiln takes about six weeks to load.

Hundreds of individuals from the Saint John's community—monks, laypersons, and guests – gathered on Friday, September 27 to take part in the lighting ceremony. Two representative from the Japanese Consulate in Chicago were also in attendance. Once the kiln doors were closed, the lighting ceremony began. After a short prayer, the kiln area was ritually purified in the Japanese tradition with rice, salt, and sake. The Johanna Kiln was then lit with a handmade torch.

For ten consecutive days, fifty volunteers gathered to stoke pieces of wood in several firing shifts that stretched around the clock. The many volunteers and a few groupies and hangers-on (like me) gathered throughout the ten days at the kiln and in the Pottery Studio to share potluck-style meals and fellowship. Upon completion of the firing on Sunday, October 6, the kiln was sealed with recycled

clay to slowly cool for two weeks. The kiln will then be opened and the ceramics carefully unloaded, cleaned, and prepared for everyday use.

The resulting art is beautiful and unique, and the logistics of the firing are fascinating to observe, but the most amazing part of a Saint John's Pottery kiln firing is the sense of community—stretching across time and geography—one shares at the firing. Senior Apprentice Steve Lemke '08 aptly describes this ambiance:

One incredible part of the communal aspect is how it includes such a truly broad scope of participants. Our volunteers come from all walks of life – it's intergenerational, intercultural, and interdisciplinary. We have doctors, engineers, artists, farmers, accountants, journalists, parents, teachers, and students present for the firing. They are all learning from one another and, in between stokes, having great conversations. For some of these people, this is how they first come to know Saint John's.

There are also the volunteer cooks who work just as hard to sustain everyone through each day. For example, the Rogers family, who are great supporters of Saint John's, share their special traditional Italian family recipe with us each firing. It's always very positive and familial. One of my favorite memories from this firing was meeting with Steve Nelson from the Collegeville Artisan Bakery early each morning to receive dozens of fresh pastries!

In short, we have a Benedictine kiln firing—truly an event in the spirit of Saint John's. There won't be another for at least a couple years, but I recommend that you put it on your calendar.

October 11th, 2013 | Categories: [Alumni](#), [Kudos](#) | | [0 Comments](#)

About the

Author:

Michael

Hemesath



Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).