NANCY GROCE (HOST):
Welcome to America Works, interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library's American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce and this America Works podcast features excerpts from a longer interview with the respected profession potter Dolores Fortuna, head of Fortuna Pottery, who was interviewed in her studio in Galena, Illinois by folklorist Meredith McGriff.

Fortuna, whose career includes teaching at the Art Institute of Chicago, talks about how she discovered her love of pottery as a student at University of Chicago. She recalls how she was instrumental in creating cooperative networks and studio spaces for artists in Chicago as well as working with colleagues to establish the well-known Torpedo Factory, an art space in Alexandria, Virginia. When she moved to Galena, Illinois, about 20 years ago, she worked with the area's large community of potters to establish "pottery tours." These popular annual tours bring members of the public—who are also potential customers--directly into scores of potters' studios. As Fortuna speaks, you can hear the gentle hiss of her kiln as it cycles on and off in the background.

INTERVIEW

Dolores Fortuna: In grad school my work was very sculptural, not functional. And, actually my first teaching job, when I got the job, the head of the program said, "Well, you know, you're going to be teaching beginning wheel." And I said, "Well, you know, I've never thrown!" And, so over the summer I would go in and work with him, and basically learned how to throw that summer. And it was a real shift for me because I actually really enjoyed it. And, in there was more of a directness about this hands-on forming process with the potter's wheel that was just so incredibly enticing and pleasurable that I really kind of just skipped into making functional
work very naturally. And I think that, actually, my first order was making planters for a plant shop. So you know, we all have to start someplace.

And then in about 2000; no, 1980, '82, I moved to Oak Park. And I bought--there was a couple that had started a pottery business. And they were selling it. And so I bought their business.

When I moved out here in about 2000, 1999, is when I really started to do my own work and to kind of push my own ceramics. And so I just taught at the Art Institute, and then I, gave me the opportunity, too, to apply to more competitive shows, and to kind of, you know, do like the Philadelphia Museum show or the Smithsonian show. And also just be more focused on kind of pushing my own ideas.

There were people that worked in clay, but and, they all knew each other, but we, the--and as I came out here and started to meet more of them. I think I'm kind of more of a catalyst kind of person. And so I just said, you know, you know, I started to kind of feel like I could do this. And, and, and I felt there was enough of a core, plus the quality of the work was really good. There were some people doing really good work. And I just kind of felt that if we did something together as an event, we would be much stronger than all of us individually just promoting ourselves. And so yeah, and it did work out, it has worked out that way. Our motto is: “Once a dirt, always a dirt.”

And I also liked the idea of the tour being having a lot of artists, but not having a real extensive geographical area. So that it would be easy to, you know, in one day, just see all the sights and I liked the idea, also here, that people were really having different conversations. You know, some people were doing this technique or that raku firing, wood firing. It wasn't like we were all doing the same kind of work. We were really addressing ceramics with, like, strong individual voices, which is what I really also liked about the group here.

For some of the people on this on our tour, this show is their only show they do during the year. And it's real significant to them, because, you know, they make work all year long. It's really important for them to interact with an audience to get feedback, to show their friends and family. So I think no matter what level you're working, a tour still satisfies a certain need that an artist has to find audience. So now we're more than 20 dirty hands!

**Meredith McGriff:** How do you select the art fairs that you try to get in to?

**Dolores Fortuna:** Well, I try to get into the best. So, what I do is I try and, usually I get into maybe the top, you know, rankings of art fairs. And, and I think that there are ways to do it, where you can, you know, there are sites where people rank art fairs, art fair review sites, etc. There's Sunshine Artists that rank shows. So, you know, over the period of time, you know, the shows that I've been doing are more competitive.
My sales are usually much better, or stronger, maybe to say it that way. And the other thing I like is, again, it's not just about making money. But that a lot of times when you do a more high-end show, you often find a kind of, more educated buyer. They may collect clay for a long time. They look at clay, they love clay. And so you have a more informed discussion often about your work.

I think a lot of times, usually my work kind of shifts out of necessity. Usually I just feel that I can't say anything more about either the, in the glaze palette or the forms that I've been using. And I really find that if I'm bored, that you're probably bored. So if I think, in my mind, I create my work in my mind before I physically create it. And a lot of times the new forms come from the fact that they're really responding to a surface idea. So to me, my surfaces and my forms are really interconnected.

I just kind of feel like, I have to kind of respond to those voices inside myself, and it gives, keeps giving, you know. And I feel like it gives my work integrity. And I kind of really, I want to keep you know, for me, I think as much as anyone object is important, that spirit of how you make things is also just really important. And for me, curiosity is one of them.

I get up early. I usually in the summertime, I'm in the studio by 7:30, 8:00. And I usually work till 7:00 at night. And my kiln is a 60-cubic foot updraft. And I, in the summertime, like to fill that every other week. And so I'll... and yeah, so I just basically work maybe like 60, 80 hour week, days, you know, hours in a week.

And I think that a lot of people are surprised the amount of time that art people work. And when I was teaching, I said, you know, I said to students that one of the big thing is don't work just when you feel inspired. And I have found the studio to be a great refuge for me.

END OF INTERVIEW


NANCY GROCE (Host): You've been listening to Delores Fortuna, a professional potter and craft shop owner in Galena, Illinois. She was interviewed for the American Folklife Center by folklorist Meredith McGill as part of McGriff Archie Green Fellowship to document Production Potters in the Midwestern United States.

To hear the complete interview with Dolores Fortuna well as interviews with other professional potters in the Midwest and hundreds of other contemporary American workers, please visit the Library’s Occupational Folklife Project at www.loc.gov/folklife -- or just search online for the Occupation Folklife Project.
This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce. On behalf of the American Folklife Center, and with a special thanks to AFC intern Camille Acosta for her help with this episode, thank you for listening to *America Works*.

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