

Traditional artist tells stories through earth, hands

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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Ingham Chapman Gallery takes part in Native American Heritage Month

The University of New Mexico-Gallup hosted an artist demonstration showcasing Pueblo pottery artist Clarence Cruz of Ohkay Owingeh Nov. 13.

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Ohkay Owingeh, also known as San Juan Pueblo, is one of the 19 New Mexico pueblos and is located 75 miles north of Albuquerque.

The pottery demonstration held in Gurley Hall Commons was part of Native American Heritage Month, during which the campus featured various events associated with Native American culture. The demonstration was free and open to the public.

Cruz, who is Tewa and a graduate of UNM with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in studio art and a Master of Fine Arts, is the Pueblo pottery instructor at UNM's Albuquerque campus.

Through his continued education, Cruz has had the honor of instructing graduate- and undergraduate-level pottery classes. He's also worked with two great potters, Juan Quezada from Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, Mexico, and Mary Lewis Garcia of Acoma Pueblo.

Cruz was awarded the prestigious Lifetime Achievement Allan Houser Legacy Award in 2012 for his traditional pottery work, and said he owes his talent to his family of artists.

"I come from a family of pottery artists — my auntie, my grandmas," he said. "When I was growing up, I would always hear them making out the clay to make their pots. I started out early, but it came together about 30 years ago. My sister Bernadette helped me get it to together [and] told me to not give up."

Cruz said tradition plays a large role in his pottery. He said he learned a lot under Garcia's mentorship, and his family members from various villages and pueblos were also important influences and sources of encouragement over the years.

Cruz said his pieces are not about him but are rather about representing Ohkay Owingeh.

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“I want to represent my tribe, Ohkay Owingeh, with my pottery — it’s very therapeutic,” he said. “It gives me a connection back to earth, a sense of the material and space where it comes from, who we are and how we tell our stories through the designs. Where the pottery comes from tells the story of where the potter comes from.”

For Cruz, pottery making is more than just handling clay. He said all cultures are tied to the earthen material through tiles, stoves, medicine, body paint. Clay is also part of the heritage of non-Natives, Cruz said.

As a traditional pottery maker, Cruz said he wears many hats, from storyteller to geologist, meteorologist and anthropologist. He said he finds his material throughout the mountains and his laboratory is outside — not confined within four walls.

Cruz, who currently resides in Albuquerque, said he travels to his Pueblo in order to participate in religious ceremonies so he doesn’t lose touch with himself. He said when he retires, he hopes to continue to share his expertise and serve whomever wants to hear, see and learn from him.

Visit: www.towa-artists.com

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