

The Intricate Process of Pottery Production

By Michaela Levy – Winston Churchill High School

Like they have countless times before, my hands push against the clay on the wheel with purpose as I apply the force needed to drive a boulder. This is the first step, centering the clay. Even after finding the perfect middle, the structure is precarious. If I'm not meticulous with my hands, the entire piece will be thrown off center, asymmetrical, imperfect, but everything else is still undetermined. What will it be? A cup? Maybe a vase? The spontaneous, ever-changing nature of clay makes the creation process so interesting.

When I was younger, I perceived myself as off-centered. My mother is single, I have no father, and I'm adopted from China. Life felt normal until I found out I had a unique family. I remember sharing my story with classmates for the first time. Their faces twisted into hesitant expressions, and one said my mother wasn't my real mother because we weren't bonded by blood. My mom was real; I came home to her each day, she made warm food and sang songs to me. For years, this comment stuck like a leech that I couldn't shake off, and deeply affected how I believed others perceived me.

In creating pottery, a wall can get too thin to continue throwing. At times, I have been hesitant to continue a piece out of fear that the structure could collapse. Fearing my own collapse in middle school, I became reserved about sharing my family origins, afraid to again feel vulnerable. Even after making friends with Chinese kids, I felt different, divided by our lack of shared experiences. Surrounded by people who looked just like me, I still felt like my walls would crumble at any moment.

Even after throwing the walls for height, the clay must be formed into a shape. To morph it into what it will become. Stepping into my first high school art class, the huge bucket of clay caught my attention. Some students gagged at the feeling and smell of the wet mud on their hands, but I was captivated by the potential of the sludge. I took in every moment as if I were consuming water after being deprived for days in the desert.

When drawing first lured me into the artistic world, I would cover my work with my arm like a wall to protect it from judgment. In my high school setting, however, I couldn't stop showing off my creations because I was surrounded by people who had the same passion for art. The newfound sense of belonging in my school's art community sparked a flourishing bud of self-acceptance toward my adoption. Our shared love of art held us together like a bandage, slowly healing my definition of what belonging means.

The final step in completing a ceramics piece before placing it into the kiln is to trim it. I'm still "trimming" my definition of belonging, and while I believe it will be ever-changing, with each refinement I come closer to discovering who I'll become.