

Tile Quilt:

A Memorial to the World Trade Center

BY MELISSA GREEN

The events of September 11 were particularly traumatic for more than 4,000 children who attended school in the shadow of the World Trade Center. Temporarily evacuated from their buildings, children from six elementary, middle, and high schools had to find interim quarters until safety and security concerns downtown could be adequately addressed.

La Mano Pottery, located in Chelsea, Manhattan, was in a unique position. The pottery studio was founded in 1998 and is owned by a diverse community of 12 potters — including myself, the mother of a middle school student directly affected by his school's proximity to the terrorist attacks. La Mano had always welcomed kids and teens, and now the partners found themselves in the position to offer some comfort and assistance.

Intermediate School 89 was relocated one block from La Mano for more than four months. At their temporary quarters, students shared space with students from two other middle schools. Although the environment was welcoming, the kids and teachers were truly displaced — no familiar meeting areas or lounges, new subway and bus routes to deal with, new lunch and after-school routines, and unprecedented changes in New York City life in general. Many of the children were also



A section of the Tile Quilt, created by La Mano Pottery and Intermediate School 89 in New York as a memorial to the World Trade Center.

forced out of their homes and were scrambling with their families for interim housing. Fortunately, the physical scars were minimal — the kids were all safely evacuated — but the emotional aspects of the tragedy were very real and disruptive.

La Mano Pottery offered a free after-school class for students, which was quickly filled. The pottery also offered teachers a free pottery “mini” class — a place to come and relax after school, be creative, and socialize with other faculty. During one of these sessions, art teacher Judy Kamilar and I began to discuss a permanent piece of artwork that could be created by the IS 89 children and the community as a memorial to the WTC and an expression of hope for the future. The Tile Quilt project was born.

To reflect the theme, “Rebuilding our Community,” kids, teachers, and staff painted and created mosaics on pre-made bisque tiles. Generous ceramic suppliers, including Ceramic Supply of New York/New Jersey and Mayco, donated materials. Labor, kiln space, lumber, and other materials were donated by La Mano, and additional kiln space was volunteered by several other neighborhood ceramics studios.

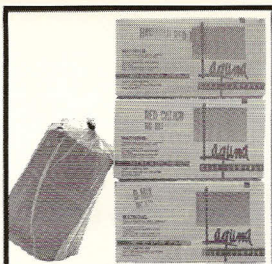
The participants in the project created 300 tiles. They were painted and crafted over a five-month period, both in school and at La Mano. Kamilar worked closely with her in-school art classes, creating drafts of designs and encouraging new ways of looking at the tragedy and its aftermath. Tiles were painted with Mayco Stroke ‘n’ Coat paints, were clear glazed, and simply fired to cone 05.

Mosaics were created from a variety of materials found at the pottery studio by the after-school participants and teachers. Due to various school regulations,

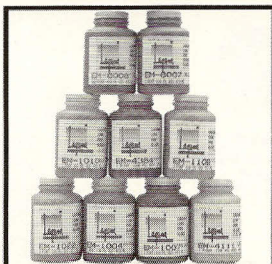


Clockwise from left: Les Taub; author and partner Melissa Green; partner Jennifer Vondrak; and Harlan Green-Taub mount tiles on plywood at La Mano Pottery.

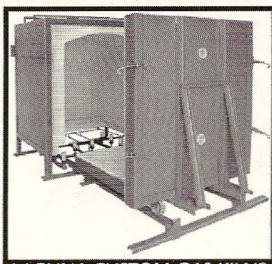
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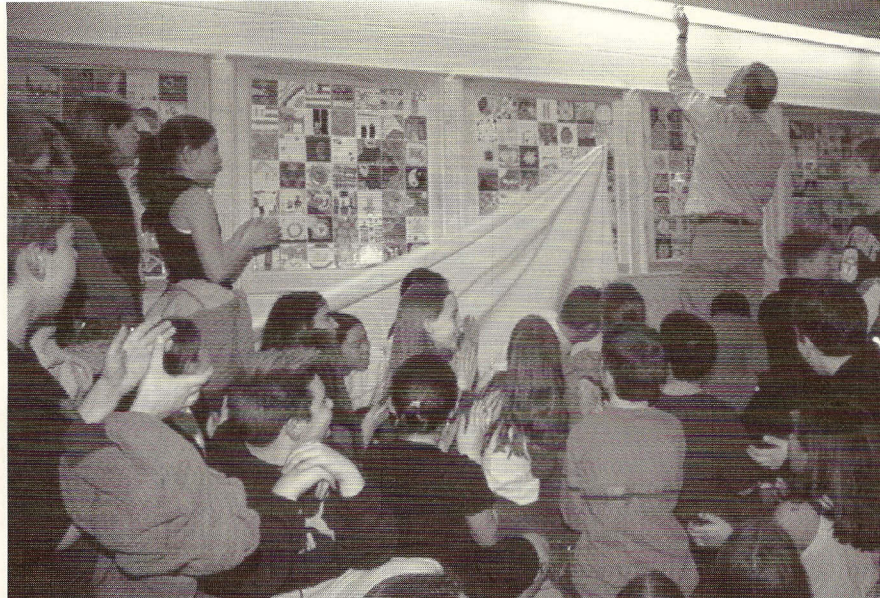
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Unveiling of the Tile Quilt at Intermediate School 89.

Tile Quilt.....

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the tiles had to be mounted onto plywood backing first at the studio, then transported to the school and drilled into a concrete-and-tile wall. The tiles were cemented onto six panels, approximately 3 feet square, with 49 tiles each (six tiles were received late and mounted separately). Kristine Welch of La Mano and my husband, Les Taub, put in hours of tile laying and design time on the project.

A common-area meeting wall at the school was chosen for the installation. Here, students could gather and view the work at eye-level for years to come. Initial plans were to place pre-cut framing around the exposed plywood border, but this proved troublesome as the plywood cuts were unintentionally uneven and the initial framing therefore slightly mis-sized. Kamilar's husband, carpenter Tim Britt, came to the rescue by designing a four-part framing system to surround each tile panel and create the illusion of uniformity. The obvious lesson for future installations: Level up the tiles themselves from the various panels; don't worry about leveling the actual backing material. It's easier to make adjustments if the tiles are even with each other — small mistakes in measurements can be hidden with framing material that is slightly wider than the plywood border left around the tiles.

The students returned to their building, located three blocks from Ground Zero, on January 19, 2002. An official dedication ceremony was scheduled for March 21. Generous donations were received for catering, flowers, and materials, and a message sent from

NYC Mayor Mike Bloomberg was read at the event. Colleen Carey, president of Mayco Colors, sent a particularly moving e-mail message that was circulated. She thanked La Mano and the school community for the opportunity given to Mayco employees to help out.

"Our employees are very happy to be a part of something so wonderful. At the time of the tragedy, we had a true sense of helplessness here in Ohio in that we were not close enough to help, except with prayers and donations. To know that we participated in such a wonderful project in memorial of those lives impacted and lost as well as in celebration of the spirit and hope your city and our country showed is gratifying," wrote Carey.

Although the tile dedication was attended by a number of local dignitaries, the real stars were the children and the tiles. The artwork speaks volumes about what the children and teachers went through as they were evacuated in the midst of chaos, and bonded together to form a stronger community. The south end of the hall, where the tiles are on permanent display, overlooks Ground Zero. As daylight fades to dark, two temporary memorial towers of bright blue light reach to the sky. The tile installation provides an emotional counterpoint of both memory and vision to those towers, as seen through the eyes of children and teachers who were witnesses to a moment when our world changed. ■

Melissa Green is a lifelong New Yorker and one of 12 partners at La Mano Pottery in Chelsea, Manhattan. Visit lamanopottery.com, or e-mail info@lamanopottery.com.