Germinating a Grassroots Movement: Pottery to Fire Social Activism for Childhood Cancer

“Seeds for sowing must not be milled.” ~ Kathe Kollwitz

Some cold hard facts of pediatric cancer:

- Cancer is the leading cause of death by disease for children under age 15.
- One in 285 children in the US will get cancer before they turn 20, and one in five of those diagnosed will not survive.
- Less than 5% of the National Cancer Institute's budget benefits pediatric cancers.
- Only three new drugs specifically for children’s cancer have been approved since 1980, and most children are treated with the same cancer drugs used in the 1970's.
- Each year around 13,500 children are diagnosed with cancer in the US, that's more than a classroom of kids a day.

These facts are shocking. But what’s even more shocking is that there’s so little activism for this horrible disease. Everyone knows the pink ribbon for breast cancer, but the gold ribbon for childhood cancer is almost a cypher. And pediatric cancers are “orphan diseases.”

By sharing the Pots of Gold idea with other art teachers, I hope to give you tools to galvanize your students, your colleagues and your community into action. Because of my passion for this cause, my approach as an art teacher and a potter was the creation of this project. In much the same way that the Empty Bowls events to end hunger have spread across the country, I hope that you can bring Pots of Gold to your schools, adapt it to your own community, and together we can grow a Movement!

How to get involved:

- First, involve your whole school.
- September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, but the events can take place anytime (just like, sadly, cancer can strike anytime).
- Pots of Gold is the perfect interdisciplinary project, so involve your colleagues:
  - Social studies classes can examine the effects of cancer on families and society.
  - Economics classes can research the diverse costs of this disease in children.
  - Science classes can study what cancer is, and does, and explore current treatments and promising research.
  - Language arts can delve into literature about and by cancer patients.
- But most importantly for OUR discipline, we can take action through art.

Most of the pots my kids make are done on the wheel, but a handbuilt version can be fun, easy and requires no special tools. The Pots of Gold can be any shape or size, but to “brand” my theme, I’ve chosen the traditional Leprechaun pot-o-gold style.

“The Pot of Gold at the end of the rainbow is the end of childhood cancer.” ~Lisa Sitz, Art Educator
Lesson Plan: Inflatable Pot (*Pot of Gold for Childhood Cancer Awareness*)

**Objective:**

To create a functional piece of pottery using handbuilt methods of pinch pots and coil additions, with air pressure as armature.

**Supplies:**

Pottery clay or self-hardening clay (such as Sculpture House Boneware)

Pencils, Floss, Paper clips, Popsicle sticks and Cloth or Canvas working surface.

For self-hardening clay projects, Acrylic paint is recommended.

**Procedure:**

1. View and discuss examples of pinch pots and finished product Inflatable Pot.

2. Each student divides a small block in half slicing with floss. Then from each of the two halves, slice off a little less than ¼ off the top and set aside.

3. Roll each cube of clay into a “roundish” ball—not so perfect that the surface dries out.

4. Open a hole in each ball by twisting it onto the thumb (like “screwing on a light bulb”). Using the thumb inside and 4 fingers outside, press the clay to make two pinch pots. Mouths of the pots should be about the same size.

5. Score the mouths of the pots well with paper clip, and gently but firmly join together at the openings like two halves of a plastic egg.

6. Using some of the set-aside clay, roll thin coils long enough to go around the seams of the pots. Flatten the coils slightly, score and attach to the seams. Smooth on so there are no gaps or holes.

7. Add a pea-sized piece of clay to the top of the pot and smooth in around the base to make a mouthpiece. Pierce through the mouthpiece into the cavity with unfolded paper clip. Put lips on mouthpiece and gently blow into the pot. You'll feel it inflate slightly, then pinch the opening closed.

8. Smear off the mouthpiece then gently roll the orb until its smooth on all surfaces. (If rolled too long it will develop surface cracks from compaction.)

9. Tap on the table to make a flat base, then roll a pencil-thickness coil to make the lip of the "Leprechaun" pot by scoring and attaching around the orb, about ¾ of the way up from the base. Smooth the seams, then cut along the top edge of the coil to open the top and make the Pot-o-Gold shape.

10. Smooth inside and add a Cancer Awareness ribbon from a coil of clay to the outside of the pot. Paint gold with acrylics.

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Germinating Your Own *Pots of Gold* Event

Begin by educating your students on the facts of childhood cancer. The statistics are grim, but the cause is important.

For example:

- Around the world, a child is diagnosed with cancer EVERY 2 MINUTES.
- The average age of a child diagnosed with cancer is 6, but all ages from newborn babies to young adults are affected.
- One in every 285 American children will be diagnosed before turning 20.
- Childhood cancers receive less than 5 percent of government research funding.
- Each year, for example, more funds are spent on one type of adult cancer alone (prostate cancer research) than the ENTIRE budget for all childhood cancers combined.

Research cancer organizations that are fighting these diseases, such as St. Baldrick’s, *Curing Kid’s Cancer* Research Fund or St. Jude’s. Let your students choose an organization they feel is the most worthy of their support.

If there is a student in your school who is a patient or a sibling affected by childhood cancer, respectfully enquire if they would like to be a part of the event.

Set a time and place for your event. Plan and create publicity, posters and handouts for your community. Enlist the help of community partners—if you don’t ask for donations of refreshments, supplies or giveaways, you won’t get any! Even if they say no you’re spreading the message.

Begin making your pots, by hand or on the wheel. The shape and size of the pots, while suggested to resemble the traditional leprechaun “Pot of Gold,” should be up to your own group. Pots could be made of gold colored clay, self-hardening clay that is painted or pottery clay that is fired and glazed.

At the event, spreading the word about childhood cancer is paramount, but the tangible item, the pot that each person takes away with them as a reminder, is really crucial. For every home, desk and office in the country to eventually hold a Pot of Gold is the goal, so that no one forgets.

Your group can charge a certain amount for each pot, or set up a free will donation system, with all the funds going to the research. Some groups (such as my school) are prohibited from asking for funds, but even just putting the information and the pots in the hands of the public is a great help in raising awareness. (At our hospital the “price” of the pot was writing a pledge to do an action for Childhood Cancer awareness, such as participating in an event, donating blood, etc.)

Your students can help other children, some they may know and many they will never meet, through this effort, and have the opportunity to turn their art into social activism. The true treasure is finding a cure, so that no child’s life will be cut short by this terrible disease.

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Childhood Cancer Awareness Organization Links:

“Like” the Pots of Gold Facebook page! www.facebook.com/PotsofGold

curechildhoodcancer.org

stbaldricks.org

alexslemonade.org

thon.org

mdanderson.org

curesearch.org

onestepcamp.org

familyreach.org

childhoodcancerguides.org

cac2.org (Coalition Against Childhood Cancer)

Childhood Cancer Statistics at Your Fingertips:

• Cancer is the leading cause of death by disease for children under age 15.

• One in 285 children in the US will get cancer before they turn 20, and one in five of those diagnosed will not survive.

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• Only three new drugs specifically for children's cancer have been approved since 1980, and most children are treated with the same cancer drugs used in the 1970s.

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