

CLARKSVILLE POTTERY
ESTABLISHED 1976

Clarksville Pottery started in 1976 as a small pottery studio in Arnie and Syd Popinski's historic Clarksville home. The Popinskis lived and worked there, selling the pottery from their front porch. Within five years it was something of an Austin legend, according to current co-owner Tom Quilter.

"People enjoyed the ambience of seeing something made before their own eyes," Quilter said.

In 1989 the Popinskis opened a second store in the Arboretum, adding additional products such as jewelry and art glass. By 1994, HEB grocers had approached Clarksville Pottery about opening a store in its new Central Market concept under development. The retail area quickly became successful, and today Clarksville Pottery enjoys its established community reputation at Central Market's North Lamar Boulevard and Forty-first Street location.

Tom Quilter and his wife, Connie Quilter, bought Clarksville Pottery in early 1999, when the Popinskis decided to retire. Tom Quilter had been a corporate chief executive officer and president and was tired of moving, as well as his lack of control. "We were on a mission to find a craft business to buy," he said. In Ohio, where the Quilters lived at the time, they received a prospectus for the sale of Clarksville Pottery and immediately knew it was the one.

"When people walk in, they see at first glance that it's unlike anything else. The products are superior quality and truly one of a kind," said Quilter. When I arrived to interview him, Quilter noticed the ring I was wearing, purchased in his store several years ago, and he immediately identified the artists who crafted it.

"That's David and Ronnie Karavanti from Las Vegas," he said. "They do great work." Quilter then offered to have my ring sent off for cleaning, at no charge except for shipping. "It'll look brand new," he promised.

Jewelry cleaning is just one of the many personal services Clarksville Pottery is known for. Serving their loyal



Connie and Tom Quilter

by Shelley Seale

customers on a personal basis every day, they realize their true reputation is earned with each purchase, whether it's an exquisite wedding ring set or a ceramic berry bowl for someone's kitchen. The store has many long-time customers, some of whom have been shopping there for twenty-five years. "We respect that; in fact we revere it," said Quilter. "We regard the store as a historic legacy for Austin—it's not just any old business. It's something to be treasured."

The customers are not the only ones Clarksville Pottery strives to treat with respect. Relationships with the artisans are also highly valued. Approximately one thousand artisans have been represented in the store's inventory throughout the years, and Quilter knows each one of them face to face. "We designed our entire business plan around them. We want to display their work with the highest integrity possible. When a gallery operates by these ethics, it forms a

bond with its customers, its artists and its community."

They even support the artisans' careers and livelihoods. When I visited, the store was in the middle of an annual silent auction benefiting the Craft Emergency Relief Fund (CERF), which provides loans, grants and equipment donations to help sustain artisans through times of emergency such as illness, fire or theft. Clarksville Pottery is the largest fund-raising gallery for CERF in the country. As a result of such commitment, Clarksville has been consistently rated one of the top galleries in surveys among artisans, selected as one of the top one hundred among three thousand stores for ten years in a row, and as one of the top ten twice. The business is also involved in the local community, participating in the Austin Fine Arts Festival and donating items to charities.


Clarksville Pottery prides itself on featuring only American crafted pieces, a position that also presents one of its

biggest challenges. Imports are always a difficulty, said Quilter. The import market is huge and price points and quality can vary considerably. Often customers aren't particular about where the products come from. "It challenges us to find beautiful craft of high quality at an affordable price. But we are committed to our niche of American craft."

The gallery showroom is a feast for the eyes, filled with an ever-changing portfolio of creative art glass, ceramics, woodwork, unique home accent pieces and one-of-a-kind jewelry from regional and national artisans. Jewelry sales now account for more than half of the business. One of the most popular items is handcrafted wedding and anniversary rings. Customers love having such an important purchase be one that is truly exclusive, as well as heirloom quality. "They can get something that speaks just to them," Quilter said. "We try to guide each customer in the selection of a unique item. This transforms it from a product to be sold into a handcrafted piece with a story and a personality."

A special treat is gift-wrapping with Clarksville Pottery's exclusive hand-painted paper, each package becoming an original work of art. Austinites have come to recognize a Clarksville Pottery-wrapped package and to anticipate a wonderful treasure inside.

Quilter pulled a new line out of the case to show me—rings crafted from meteorites four billion years old. His excitement and pride was evident.

"We want people to feel comfortable and happy when they come into our gallery, like they're in their own home. Even if they don't buy anything, we want them to be inspired." 

Shelley Seale is a freelance writer in Austin who left Clarksville Pottery with a newfound appreciation for her one-of-a-kind handcrafted ring. You may email Shelley at sseale@goodlifemag.com.

For more information about Clarksville Pottery, call 512-454-9079 or visit www.clarksvillepottery.com.