

*"My Dad taught me everything I know"*

# Will McCannless



THERE IS MUCH THAT IS UNUSUAL ABOUT potter Will McCannless. There is the unique blend of Italian Renaissance, exotic Asian and traditional Seagrove that characterizes his pottery. There is his music, the "first love" that so easily transports him from the solitude of pottery-making to the noisy pubs of Pinehurst and other musical venues.

And then there is his studio/gallery, an ultra-tidy combination of industry and display that looks more like the enterprise of a meticulous spinster than the workplace of a fun-loving bachelor, especially one who spends his days throwing pots and his evenings belting out Irish tunes.

The Chairman's Choice potter for the 14th Annual Pottery Plus Auction, McCannless has donated two of his colorful platters to the FirstHealth Hospice Foundation fundraiser that he has supported for several years. One was hand-painted with Chinese calligraphy brushes, and the other was decorated with zinc silicate crystalline glaze. Their images are displayed on all of the promotional materials for the October 3 Hospice Foundation event. "I've always loved the auction," McCannless says. "It's always a professional event, and we all want to be a part of it. It's a real honor to be part of that organization."

Auction organizers are equally pleased to have McCannless so visibly involved with their venture. "He is

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one of the faces of the next generation of Seagrove potters whose roots are deeply grounded in the original tradition of the art and the area,” says Southern Pines collector and Auction Committee member Holly Floyd. “We are very grateful for Will and all of the Seagrove potters who so generously support the Hospice Foundation.”

### A FAMILY BUSINESS

McCanless is the son of a Southern (Salisbury, N.C.) father and a Northern (Montclair, N.J.) mother who met while being educated in North Carolina universities. They fell in love with North Carolina pottery, according to their son, and started their Dover Pottery in Seagrove in 1983.

Mildred McCanless still oversees the operation, and sons Zeke (Ezekiel) and Eck (Alexander) produce the pottery that she sells. Only daughter Fiva (Frances Iva) strayed from the pottery influence and manages a restaurant in Pittsboro.

Will's father Al McCanless left the business a few years ago and now works full time as a pharmacist. He continues to make pottery from his home, however, and remains Will's inspiration for almost all that he does in life, music and pottery. “My dad pretty much taught me everything I know,” McCanless says.

The three McCanless boys grew up watching their parents make pots and were given increasingly progressive, often “dirty work,” tasks to perform. Although versed from early childhood in the pottery trade, Will dreamed of a career in music. He spent a year studying classical guitar performance at Brevard College in the North Carolina mountains before moving on to Pittsburgh's Duquesne University.

After returning to North Carolina, he taught guitar at a music center in Asheboro until deciding the golfing world was more to his liking. That epiphany led him to a job with the greens crew at a Pinehurst-area course, where the golf was free, but there was little opportunity for the future.



Later, while producing pottery for his father and saving money to return to school to study sports medicine, he rediscovered the family passion for pottery. “I had a new perspective,” he says. “At that point, I really got into it.”

### TIME TO TRAVEL

Finding that he had a talent for design and decoration, McCanless moved into that aspect of pottery and quickly learned all of Dover Pottery's design themes. Once he had them mastered, he left the comfort of home for the life of international ceramics student.

His travels took him to Italy, where he learned about the tin glaze of maiolica pottery; and then to the opposite side of the world to China – sometimes stopping off in places so primitive that potters still fire their kilns with rice husks. Subsequent trips took him to the great museums of England and France and eventually to Provence, in the south of France, where he found a style of country living that reminded him of Seagrove and home. “At that point, I felt like I had some good fuel for inspiration,” he says.

McCanless opened his McCanless Pottery, located just across the Randolph/Moore County line from Seagrove, in October 2006, and has since established himself as a potter with a talent for design detail and an eye for color.

“What comes to mind for me are Will's unusual glazes, their color and visual texture, which are a delight to the eye,” says Floyd.

Buying the land for his studio/gallery more than three years ago, he designed and contracted the building himself, and now puts his “heart and soul into pottery.” In the immaculate gallery, his work is grouped, almost compulsively, according to style: the zinc oxide and silica surfaces of his crystalline glaze in one area and the hand-decorated stoneware, including the Italian maiolica, in another.

Pieces featuring the cadmium-laced “Seagrove red” used by generations of Seagrove potters dominate the place. McCanless calls them “my tribute to Seagrove's tradition.”

Father Al's influence is apparent throughout – from the “fantastic chemical reaction” of Will's electric kiln, chosen for its cleanliness and the ease of its control, to the inspiration of his designs. “I take what he taught me and experiment,” McCanless says.

There is a paternal musical influence as well. Al McCanless is an accomplished fiddler who was featured on the Red Clay Ramblers' first album, the one appropriately titled “The Red Clay Ramblers with Fiddlin' Al McCanless.” Will himself plays tenor banjo, guitar and “a little mandolin.”

If not in his studio, he's probably playing lead guitar in a rock 'n' roll group with Zeke and Eck or joining good friend Rob Sharer for “a duet thing” of traditional Irish jigs and old-time music.

First and foremost, McCanless is an active member of the brotherhood of Seagrove potters known as the Seagrove Area Potters Association. The nonprofit group also includes good friends Ben Owen III and Fred Johnston, McCanless' co-chairs for the Celebration of Seagrove Potters, an annual showcase of traditional and contemporary Seagrove pottery. ■