Oregon Coast School of Art offers art and community in tiny Gardiner

Two potters have turned an abandoned middle school into a center for art classes serving adults and Reedsport School District students.

FEBRUARY 19, 2022 |

DANITA CAHILL(HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/AUTHOR/DANITA-CAHILL/)
COAST (HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/CATEGORY/COAST/), LEARNING (HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/CATEGORY/LEARNING/), OREGON / NW (HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/CATEGORY/OREGON-NW/), VISUAL ART (HTTPS://WWW.ORARTSWATCH.ORG/CATEGORY/VISUAL-ART/)

On a hike along the Oregon Coast, Emily Free Wilson and her husband, Matt Wilson, looked up a hillside scattered with houses and saw the old Gardiner middle school. The school, built in the 1950s north of Reedsport, was abandoned, spacious, and perfect – for its location and its rows of windows looking out over the Umpqua River. Artists would love it, they thought. Matt first noticed the building. Emily first noticed the sign out front: FOR SALE.

“I’d been trying to figure out a way to get my family moved over here for four years,” said Emily, 43, who grew up in Roseburg and whose father had retired to Winchester Bay. The 45,000-square-foot building was the key that unlocked her plan. “It was like our future was all laid out.”
Overlooking the Umpqua River, the Oregon Coast School of Art is in an unincorporated community of Gardiner, across the river from Reedsport. Photo by: Danita Cahill

Two years later, the building, now known as the Oregon Coast School of Art
Two years later, the building, now known as the Oregon Coast School of Art (https://oregoncoastschoolofart.org/), is a thriving art school and community center. It hosts art classes for students from the Reedsport School District (https://www.reedsport.k12.or.us/), as well as home-schoolers, and provides space for a local radio station and a food bank. At Christmas, the tiny community of Gardiner, hard hit by the decline of the lumber and fishing industries, gathered for a holiday gala. The couple’s down-the-road plans range from making the gym available to the community to adding a café and coffeehouse.

Reedsport School Superintendent Jon Zwemke says the district is working on plans to send students to school to learn from local artisans and experts “to provide enriching opportunities for our students.” He added, “We’re very thankful for the partnership with Matt and Emily Wilson in this work and look forward to a great future moving forward.”

THE ART OF LEARNING: An Occasional Series

The couple are no strangers to this kind of project. Both are potters; Matt, 51, has a construction background and Emily taught art classes for 20 years. When they first spotted the school building, they were visiting from their home in Helena, Mont., where they had turned an 8,000-square-foot building into the Studio Art Center. It was attached to a community center with spaces for artist studios, live music, and events. They dreamed of opening an art center in Oregon, but on a grander scale.

“We had it in us to do this,” Emily said.

They returned home to Montana, told family and friends about their vision, and asked for help. Help came, by way of 3-year pledges from 45 people across 17 states for a total of $24,000 each year. They paid $475,000 for the building.
Matt returned to Oregon several times to check the building for mold, rot, and other issues. He found a few small leaks, but no major damage. “I crawled down every black hole this place had,” he said. Engineers looked at the school and assured Matt it was well built.

Matt and Emily pulled the trigger. As it turned out, the day the deal closed on the school building was the same day Emily found out she was pregnant with their second child. In the fall of 2019, the family relocated to Gardiner.

Emily, Matt, and their son, Clayton, immersed themselves in the Gardiner and Reedsport communities – school and sports, Boy Scouts, Rotary Club, and the Gardiner Fire Department Board. They also immersed themselves in the work of getting the building ready to open as the
Oregon Coast School of Art. Then COVID-19 hit, followed by the lockdown.

“We were all in,” Matt said with a dunking hand gesture. “And then we were all out,” he said, springing his hand back, palm up.

“Art is a common link“

Over the next two years, Matt continued remodeling the building, which was last used as a school – W.F. Jewett Middle School – in 2003. (Jewett bought a sawmill in 1880 and was the only mill manager to live in Gardiner. He took pride in the town and had all the buildings painted white, leading to a town nickname of White City.) Renovating, Matt ran into the usual suspects: pipes and electrical wiring in inconvenient locations and small roof leaks. He and Emily got their studios and classrooms ready. They navigated the voyage to set the school up as a nonprofit.

“We wanted to do it right, with a board and rules,” Emily said.

Last June, the first three students walked through the door. It was the first class taught at the Oregon Coast School of Art – the adult beginning ceramics class. Throughout the summer, students attended a summer art program twice a week.

The school partners with the Reedsport School District, which serves around 600 students in Reedsport and Gardiner. Students are bused to Gardiner for art-project classes. Emily teaches them painting, ceramics, and sculpture. Classes are one-offs for specific projects.

A group of home-schooled high-schoolers takes ceramics classes. They started last fall with the basics of throwing and hand-building. The students are moving up to raku firing and image transfer with underglazes. Emily is working with Superintendent Zwemke to offer a ceramics class to students at the public (charter) high school through their curriculum as an accredited class.
Students in an intermediate ceramics class at the Oregon Coast School of Art – (from left) Kathy Booker, Sue Olinger, Robin Powers, and Randi Braaten – work on pots in a ceramics class. Photo by: Danita Cahill

Seamstress Peggy Ross started teaching fabric arts to third- and fourth-graders in February. The week before Valentine’s Day, fourth-graders sewed heart pillows. The day before, third-graders were bused from Reedsport to the school for a weaving class. Painter Janne LaValle will teach beginning painting classes to adults starting in April, with plans to add kids’ classes soon after. A dance teacher is interested in teaching at the school. She’d like the Oregon Coast Big Band to provide the music.

“We’re starting to get more artists involved,” Emily said.

Besides education, Matt and Emily offer inspiration and creativity to local youth. “We want to build a vibrant community,” Emily said.
“Art is a common link,” Matt added.

Emily said she is trying to keep class sizes small because of COVID. She has potential students interested in beginning ceramics classes, but her teaching schedule is full. “I might have to start a waiting list.”

In mid-January, six women attended an intermediate ceramics class. All live in Reedsport or Florence. One student, Carrie Oldright, attended sixth and seventh grade at the school in the early 1980s. One metal music stand left from middle school days still bears witness: “Carrie ‘85” is etched into the paint.

Although Carrie doesn’t remember scratching her name onto the stand, she’s certain it was her. She pointed to a sign “Snarski” above the classroom door. “Mr. Snarski was my teacher,” she said. Oldright now serves on both the Reedsport School Board and the art school board. “We have to think creatively for opportunities for our kids.” she said.
We have to think creatively for opportunities for our kids," she said.

Oldright’s daughter is a third-grader. She took pottery last summer at the art school and came back this month for a weaving project.

“I’m really just excited to have an art school in our immediate area,” Oldright said. “Being creative is pretty fundamental to the human experience.”

The intermediate students made pots for a raku firing, using special clay with grog – fired and ground-up clay. As pottery wheels whirred, musical strains from the Oregon Coast Big Band – made up of local residents – practicing in the auditorium drifted into the classroom. There was an excited air and a relaxed camaraderie among the women.

**Lumber and fishing center**

Gardiner has always held a tight sense of community. Indians from the Lower Umpqua tribe traded with other Indigenous villages and joined together for social events. With white settlement, Gardiner became a bustling lumber and fishing community. Ships carried lumber and logs to San Francisco and brought goods back. Returning home, if the tides and winds lined up just so, sea captains rounded the bend of the Umpqua River in full sail. The first resident to spot a sailing ship hollered, “Sail ho!” and the children dashed down to the docks to cheer as the five-masted schooner pulled into port. When the sea captains and their crews arrived safely back home, the local long-timers’ grandparents held big celebratory gatherings with food and card games.
Art by past W.F. Jewett Middle School students decorates a wall at what is now the Oregon Coast School of Art. Photo by: Danita Cahill

From 1880 to 1916, Gardiner boasted many businesses: lumber mills, stores, hotels, a movie theater, fish canneries, a hospital, bank, creamery, cheese factory, and tannery. The Douglas County Historical Society (http://www.douglascountyhistoricalsociety.org/2011/01/04/the-gardiner-that-was/) records that passenger boats steamed up and down the Umpqua River, shuttling Scottsburg residents down to Gardiner for dances, big band summer concerts, community Christmas Eve celebrations, and summer picnics. Gardiner had piano and art teachers, a Lady’s Guild, a Shakespeare Club, and a Women’s Literary Club.
Long-time local Jon Williams worked at International Paper mills in Gardiner before they shut down in the late 1990s, throwing the area into economic hardship. Photo by: Danita Cahill

By the late 1990s, International Paper in Gardiner was the biggest employer on the South
By the late 1990s, International Paper in Gardiner was the biggest employer on the South Central Oregon Coast, providing several hundred jobs. But in 1998, the mill, like many others in Oregon, shut when environmental protections led to sharply reduced federal timber harvests. Many Gardiner residents lost their jobs, including 68-year-old Jon Williams, whose grandfather settled in Winchester Bay in 1923.

Williams, who worked both in the sawmill and as a security guard at the paper mill, found other work when International Paper closed. Some long-time residents are still bitter about the mill closures; others moved away. Williams said he has tried doing that, but the area keeps calling him back – the ocean, bays, and islands; the Umpqua running full and wide next to the highway; the mist floating peaceful over the hilltop trees.

“It’s pretty here,” Williams said. “It’s about the prettiest place on the Coast.”

**Multi-use community center**

Gardiner now has around 250 residents and perhaps 10 businesses. Among them is a shipyard and a welding shop. A third of the businesses are art-related. Besides Free Ceramics (https://freeceramics.com/), Emily and Matt’s family business located in the school auditorium, there are two galleries: Three Rivers Gallery and Tsunami Gallery.

Mack Holman, the bronze sculptor who owns Tsunami Gallery, says the couple has been a welcome addition. “The Gardiner community has certainly been happy to see Matt and Emily come in and use the old school building. Everyone is very positive about them being here.”

Matt, Emily, and their kids, 14-year-old Clayton and 2-year-old Elsbeth, live temporarily in the school building, but they’re renovating a historic house in Gardiner. They hope to move in within six months.
Free Ceramics sells Emily Free Wilson’s ceramics from retail space in the auditorium, while members of the Oregon Coast Big Band practice. Photo by: Danita Cahill

As for the art school and the community, Matt and Emily are all in. In December, they hosted a community Christmas gala with the Oregon Coast Big Band and several Gardiner artists, including a painter, a photographer, and a woodworker. People gathered, danced, and bought art.

Local radio station KDUN 1030 AM (https://www.kdunradio.com/), silent for two years, was purchased by syndicated radio show host Delilah Rene (https://www.delilah.com/) and is back on the air. The recording studio is housed in a renovated classroom at the school. Five people work there.

A Boy Scout troop actively uses the building. Scout leaders and mentors teach the scouts woodworking skills and how to operate a forge. A food bank stores canned goods in a back
The Wilsons have plans and projects in various stages of completion, including studios for artists-in-residence and a fiber-arts room. High on the wish list are getting the gym ready for community use and creating an indoor theater.

“Puppet theater!” Emily said with a happy little wriggle.

Matt laughed. “You can tell where her heart is.”

“That’s our passion, teaching kids,” Emily agreed. “It’s a big part of what we do here.”

They are excited about the upcoming artist-in-residency program. They hope to entice multi-media artists from all over to come and stay at the coast for anywhere from two weeks to two years to create, collaborate with other artists, and teach. Further down the road, the couple sees a café and coffeehouse overlooking an art gallery, and an outdoor theater. They’d also like to offer accredited classes.
Matt Wilson, Emily Free Wilson, and their children, Clayton, 14, and Elsbeth, 2, are living in the Gardiner school while Matt renovates a historic home in Gardiner. Photo by: Danita Cahill

In the meantime, the school recently received its first grant: $5,000 from the Oregon Community Foundation (https://oregoncf.org/?utm_source=SEM&utm_medium=&utm_campaign=&utm_content=digital&gclid=CjoKCQiApL2QBhC8ARIaAGMm-KHtjsRw5I8bFjMLcS8FaAoAYN1K8o6NVzeV59ZU_QH8tlHEOdN1a_saAigCEALw_wcB). “We’re hoping, eventually, to be self-sustaining and not depend on grants,” Emily said.

They say they plan to stay in Gardiner, well after their status as newcomers changes to long-timers.

“We like the idea of building things bigger than ourselves,” Emily said. “We want to leave something behind when we’re gone.”

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18 Responses

Kyril Calsoyas

says:

Well done Matt and Emily, you are great contributors to our community life. Wishing you great success on your journey.


Emily Free Wilson (http://www.oregoncoastschoolofart.org)

Thank you Kyril! It’s really wonderful to get the positive feedback—thank you! 😊

Peggy
February 19, 2022 at 7:51 pm
What a great article! Thanks for the mention. I’m so excited to work with Emily & Matt and to be a part of this arts community!

Emily Free Wilson
February 21, 2022 at 10:49 am
It’s getting momentum with you involved that’s for sure! Woohoo!

Judy Andrews (Thompson)
February 19, 2022 at 9:33 pm
So proud of you Matt and Emily. We will be making a trip out to wonder at all you have created

Emily Free Wilson
February 21, 2022 at 10:48 am
Thanks Judy! Can’t wait to have you visit! YAY!

Mark Pullam
February 20, 2022 at 12:23 am
I would love to do Native American storytelling here. I’m a Elder in the Confederated Tribes of Siletz. I love Gardner and have driven by it for years.
Emily Free Wilson says:

Hello Mark!
That would be so wonderful. We would love to host you here for Native American storytelling. I’ll try to find you online, but hopefully you see this and reach out. My email is oregoncoastschoolofart@gmail.com. Thank you! -Emily

Kenneth Sikes says:

What an incredible endeavor. If anybody can pull this off Emily and her family can. You can rest assured that this is going to be one of the most prominent Art schools on the West Coast.

Emily Free Wilson says:

That is so kind of you to say! Wouldn’t that be incredible? Anything is possible! THANK YOU!

Penny Chamberlin says:

So glad I read this article. I’ve heard bits and pieces of what’s going on in Gardiner; but reading about all of it is so exciting and hopeful for our small community. All four of our children went to school at Jewett. It’s always sad to see a building sitting empty and not being used for so long. Great job Matt and Emily thank you 🙏

Emily Free Wilson says:

We are excited to get more programming started—especially for alumni! It is such a loved building that’s for sure! Thanks Penny!
Eliane Jamot says:

Great article. So happy to hear the good news

Reply

Emily Free Wilson says:

Thanks Eliane!

Reply

Kathy M says:

Wonderful!!! You’re amazing! We miss you and your energy here in Helena but you’re a super asset for Oregon!

Reply

Miranda Howe says:

Hey Emily! What a fun read! Loved getting a better picture of what you and Matt are up to. Great job!!!

Reply

Georgia Sligar says:

‘Em and Matt, this is such a great article. Looking forward to seeing you soon. Love and hugs, Aunt Georgia

Reply

Barbara Holmes (http://www.wolfwoodscandleco.et sy.com) says:
I can’t wait to stop in, meet you two, take a class and maybe even teach there someday! We are moving to Florence in June. I’m a mixed media artist, I’ve been doing BATIK art for 17 years and have taught it to kids in my boys schools a few times. It’s so fun, so many things can be made. Thanks for keeping art alive in our sweet little Oregon towns, hope to see you soon!

Intisar Abioto – Black Artists Gathering
Dmae Lo Roberts | February 22, 2022

McMinnville Short Film Festival: Women and trauma onscreen, new leadership ahead
David Bates | February 21, 2022

Cassia Dawn: And the show goes on
D. "Bing" Bingham | February 21, 2022
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