

Willamette Art Center seeks new home

by [Abbey McDonald](#) on February 6, 2025



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Doug Dacar, studio manager at the Willamette Art Center, loads work into a large kiln. (Abbey McDonald/ Salem Reporter)

Peering into an open kiln, Willamette Art Center Executive Director Lisa Joyce can tell who made what just from looking at the ceramic pieces, everything from bowls to a dappled horse sculpture.

She shared her excitement over the pieces with Doug Dacar, the studio's manager, who was working to load up a gigantic kiln nearby. She held up a bowl for him to see, smiling.



“She is really good at glazing,” Dacar said, and the two began reminiscing about the artists’ past work, including for a Willamette Art Center fundraiser.

For the past two decades, the Willamette Art Center has been building a community in Salem through art classes and events, including low-cost

wheel access and a major fundraiser for Marion Polk Food Share. Now, it’s looking for a new home.

The nonprofit has been tucked away in a small building within the Oregon State Fairgrounds since 2006 Joyce said. It saw about 10,000 visitors last year.

On Jan. 10, Oregon State Fair and Exposition Center CEO Kim Grewe-Powell informed the art center that their lease would not be renewed. The art center has until the lease ends on June 30 to find a new building that can fit their classes and kilns.

Grewe-Powell, in a Thursday email to Salem Reporter, said that the Oregon State Fair and Exposition Center is committed to supporting the arts.

“However, with the continued growth of our organization, our business model has evolved. As a result, our relationship with the Willamette Art Center no longer aligns with the needs of either party,” Grewe-Powell said.

Joyce agreed that the location has posed issues, especially with access to the building. The art center is open to anyone, but sits within a maze of gates and paid parking signs made more confusing during events. The art center has seen attendance drop during major fairground events.

“We’re not mad, we understand,” Joyce said of the decision to end the lease. But, they’d hoped for a lease extension, she said. “It’s a very compressed timeline to do all these changes, particularly an organization that doesn’t have a culture of leaning on donors.”

The Willamette Art Center currently pays about \$1,200 a month for rent, including electricity. Joyce said a new location will likely cost more than four times that, plus potentially major renovations to house specialty equipment.

“So this transition, it’s going to be a big move,” she said.

Studio Manager Doug Dacar experiments with glaze varieties, bringing fresh color and pattern combinations to buckets at the Willamette Art Center. (Abbey McDonald/ Salem Reporter)



The Willamette Art Center’s biggest source of revenue is a cultural and tourism grant from the city of Salem, which provided \$53,000 this year

according to the [city budget](#). The money comes from the city’s hotel tax. Joyce said the grant allows them to offer affordable classes to anyone interested in ceramics. Other existing income includes tuition for classes and charging for equipment and materials.

Their artists spend much of the year creating art for the Empty Bowls annual fundraiser, which donates money raised from selling over a thousand unique ceramic pieces to the Marion Polk Food Share. It raised over \$30,000 last year, Joyce said, around \$18,000 going to the food share and the rest going to support the art center.

They have reached an agreement with the fairgrounds, Joyce said, to leave large equipment in an outbuilding until they have a space for it, including a nearly 1-story tall kiln requiring specialty disassembly.

Aside from the headache of moving, Joyce said she’s looking forward to the next chapter. Currently in a former FFA building, there have been quirks like having to wheel finished pieces outdoors in the rain to a separate building housing kilns.

“We’re really excited about being in a place where we can design it to meet our needs, and that’s a facility built out with the ceramic studio in mind,” Joyce said.

Their ideal location, she said, would be over 4,000 square feet with accessible parking, space for their equipment and good ventilation. They’re also looking for somewhere with access to an outdoor space for raku firing, where ceramics are taken from a kiln and placed in another container, such as a metal drum filled with paper, to create unique crackles.

Last Friday, students in a beginner wheel class focused on perfecting their pottery and in an adjacent room an artist listened to music and worked on a piece.

“It’s never been more important, in my mind, that people have a place they can go and just feel safe and supported, no matter who they are,” Joyce said.

Joyce said one of her favorite programs is Family Clay Sunday, a drop-in program the third Sunday of each month where for \$5, everyone will follow an art lesson and have their pieces fired.

The instructor has a degree in special education, and Joyce said she’s excellent with young kids, people with disabilities and people who speak English as a second language. Recently, a lesson on perspective yielded miniature houses and Pokémon.

“What I really love about that program is that it’s truly no age limit,” she said. The class brings in everyone from babies to grandparents with dementia. “It’s not anything that any other organization in town offers.”

They’ve also done school partnerships. She recalled a Washington Elementary School student, a recent immigrant from Mexico, who was still learning English.

“He made the most beautiful boat. It was another language for him to communicate,” Joyce said, tearing up. “It was very moving to see that what we were able to offer here was a chance for him to express himself and to be seen for how talented he is.”

The Willamette Art Center is asking for community support with the transition, including tips on available spaces, [online donations](#) for moving costs and [volunteers](#). Send tips by email to info@willametteartcenter.com.



Art made during Family Clay Sunday lesson on perspective at the Willamette Art Center. (Abbey McDonald/ Salem Reporter)

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Abbey McDonald joined the Salem Reporter in 2022. She previously worked as the business reporter at The Astorian, where she covered labor issues, health care and social services. A University of Oregon grad, she has also reported for the Malheur Enterprise, The News-Review and Willamette Week.

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