



Chiles art teacher Teresa Coates get a hand from students Nathan Stratton and Cody Rising. KELLY LITTLE

# RAKU RESILIENCE

*Chiles students embrace unpredictability of metallic glazes*

Amanda Karioth Thompson | Council on Culture & Arts

“Sometimes you stumble upon something and you don’t know where it’s going to go but you just risk it.” These wise words from Chiles High School 12th-grader Katie Parmalee would make raku masters proud.

A Japanese ceramic technique, raku originated in the 16th century. Though the western version differs from the traditional eastern practice, the guiding philosophy remains intact – embrace the unpredictable.

Chiles art teacher, Teresa Coates, explained that in art, “a lot of times the process is more important than the product.” Raku is one example and she wanted her students to experience it first-hand. She applied for and received an Arts Education Grant from the Council on Culture & Arts. With the grant funds supplied by Kia of Tallahassee, she was able to purchase the necessary tools and equipment including “raku glazes which are very expensive.”

After Coates presented the background and fundamentals, her students researched raku on their own and created hand-built pots. The pots were bisque fired in a traditional kiln to drive off the moisture in the clay, then they were ready to accept the glaze. “The most dazzling glazes have copper in them and the higher the copper content the more metallic and mystical looking it is,” said Coates.

Twelfth-grader McKenzie Teems experimented with a resist glazing technique. “I taped off two strips,” she explained. With the tape in place, she glazed her bisque fired pot. “Then I peeled off the tape,” revealing the unglazed areas which, when put through the raku process, “would become black where I had taped it off.” Even with this forethought and planning, McKenzie acknowledged “you never really know



McKenzie Teems used a resist glaze technique seen on her finished raku ware, left. KELLY LITTLE.

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# Raku

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what you're going to have in the end."

Nathan Stratton helped facilitate the raku firing, an endeavor requiring focus and an understanding of safe procedures.

The 11th-grader explained the set up of the outdoor raku kiln which was built upon several layers of concrete. "Heat bricks made a platform, then we used more heat bricks to create a funnel shape. On top of that was the large stone plate where we put the pots. The propane torch was aimed underneath that plate and the actual kiln was then placed over the whole assembly. The heat would circulate around and build up inside."

The pots can be viewed through three strategically placed venting holes. Nathan knew when they were hot enough by watching the glaze which he said should "be visibly shiny and molten. It can be hard to tell so you've got to do a little bit of guess work but it's better to err on the side of caution and wait a little bit too long than not long enough."

He continued, "at this point you have to work relatively quickly. You pull the pots out and put them into the metal trash bins with the newspaper clippings. The lid goes on to prevent them from flaming up and getting out of control. It traps the air in so we get nice smoke on the sides of the pots." This

also reduces the amount of oxygen, leading to more lustrous surfaces.

For the pots, this is a violent change. They careen between a kiln temperature of more than 1800 degrees to an ambient temperature in a matter of seconds. This rapid cooling results in thermal shock and may destroy the artist's work.

But this is where Coates hopes her students find the most meaning. "Often, the more beautiful something is, the more fragile, the more ephemeral it is. If you want that beauty, you have to take that chance. Everything is fragile in life and they need to know that everything is a learning process, not everything is going to work out."

Though Nathan didn't make a pot, he found this to be true in the firing itself. "We ran into trouble with some little things, but nothing we couldn't figure out," he said.

"In life, you're always going to encounter issues and things won't always go as you expect. The ability to analyze those problems, come up with solutions, and work effective with other people is what sets those who are very good in their respective fields apart. It's not necessarily having a lot of raw knowledge but being able to adapt and figure things out. That's applicable to basically anything you do."

*Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*



**McKenzie Teems and Katie Parmalee clean their pots after they've been bisque fired at Chiles High School. AMANDA THOMPSON**