

**John Nelson, Chairman of the SAPG Empty Bowls Committee**  
**Interviewed by Linda Perez on May 17th, 2021**

Twenty two years ago, at a meeting of the San Antonio Potters Guild, it was decided that the Guild should expand their activities to include a service project that would benefit the community of San Antonio. Someone at the meeting suggested the project be similar to the popular Empty Bowls Project in California. It was a perfect fit: bowl-makers, aka potters, helping to fill the bowls of the hungry in San Antonio. Members voted in favor of adopting Empty Bowls and the corner-stone project of the SAPG was born.

**Kevin Finnegan** and **Lyn Woods**, members and past presidents of SAPG, are credited with organizing the Empty Bowls event from the start, including getting various restaurants on board to donate delicious soups, organizing SAPG members as volunteers to make bowls, solicit donations for a Silent Auction, and provide all the nitty gritty labor required, and making arrangements with the then Southwest School of Art and Craft to provide their grounds as the venue for the event.

**John Nelson**, a core member of SAPG, volunteered that first year to make bowls and to help in any way needed. He has continued as a mainstay of Empty Bowls to the present. During the past ten years, John has ably served as Chairman of the Empty Bowls Committee and has been instrumental in its rise to one of the most anticipated, loved, and successful fundraisers in San Antonio. The following interview recaps the history and highlights of John's twenty two years of service with Empty Bowls.

LP: John, what do you remember about the first Empty Bowls?

JN: It was a remarkable success! We sold about 500 bowls, raised about \$5,000, and were greatly inspired to continue the work. We selected SAMM Ministries as the recipient for the funds raised because they were doing such a good job of helping the homeless and people in need.

LP: What were your main duties and did they change over time?

JN: At first, the Empty Bowls Committee was responsible for organizing all of the associated activities, from Bowl-a-Thons, i.e. full weekend sessions with SAPG members making bowls in the Ceramics Studio at Southwest School of Art to soliciting soup donations from area restaurants, collection and delivery of soups, and serving of soups at the event. We also had a silent auction with members donating and seeking donations of ceramic works of art from established and up-and-coming ceramic artists throughout Texas. A few years ago we also decided to sell Celebrity Bowls, i.e. bowls made by members and decorated by some of San Antonio's political, athletic, musical, TV, and other celebrities. SAMM gradually became more involved in putting it together. They now do most of the organizing and preparatory work leaving the SAPG with the fun part of making bowls and handling the Silent Auction. Regarding the Silent Auction, we are greatly indebted to our friends who participate in the Texas Clay Festival in Gruene every October for generously donating many of their beautiful and popular pieces to the Empty Bowls Silent Auction and to the SA Glass Art Guild and Alamo Wood Turners whose members also substantially contribute their bowls and other works of art.

LP: Were there any surprises, good or bad, that you experienced in your many years with Empty Bowls?

JN: The main surprise, and it happened every year, was opening the doors at 10:00 am and seeing the unbelievably long lines of people wrapping around the building anxious to enter and

begin shopping for bowls. The immense support we got from the community was more than enough reward for all the hard work that went into organizing the event. It was wonderful! People come to buy Christmas and holiday gifts, stockpile birthday gifts for the year, and search for works by their favorite ceramics artists.

LP: What relationships did you establish for Empty Bowls over the years in your role as Chairman?

JN: Many of San Antonio's top restaurants have been very generous and reliable in providing good soups year after year for Empty Bowls. Also, a branch of **The Culinary Institute of America (CIA)** that opened at The Pearl about ten years ago partnered with us for a couple of years with their students preparing and serving the soups during the event. The CIA Director himself told me that it was a great learning experience for the students to find out first hand how much can be done in a small space. **SAMM Ministries**, for whom I have great admiration and respect, keeps helping expand Empty Bowls through their good work and connections. Recently, SAMM has involved **H.E.B.** who now provides a truck to help with transport of equipment and supplies. One of the most enjoyable relationships has been with the **San Antonio Glass Art Guild** and the **Alamo Wood Turners**, whose members now contribute bowls and auction items. By including artists of various genres Empty Bowls is made more diverse and the local art community is strengthened and enlarged.

LP: Are there any changes that you would like to recommend to your successor?

JN: I think it would be good to share the production of bowls for Empty Bowls with other ceramics studios and colleges in the area. We've had a few Bowl-a-Thons and other SAPG events at Northwest Vista College and Sunin Studio. Sunin, by the way, has a new venue and new name and should be a great place for a future Bowl-a-Thon. The same goes for the Alamo City Colleges. The Southwest School of Art has been our rock for all the main activities associated with the EB event and we are forever grateful to them. Now it's time to share the load with other institutions.

LP: What was the most valuable lesson learned over the years that you would like to pass on to your successor, Kathy Mitchell?

JN: Face-to-face! When asking anyone to do anything to help Empty Bowls, your chances of getting them to agree is greatly increased by asking them face to face. It is very easy to say no to a request by phone or e-mail. If you want results, ask someone face-to-face.

LP: As we have all personally witnessed this past year, times have changed rather abruptly. How do you think EB will adjust to and handle this change?

JN: Well, this past March Empty Bowls was held completely by SAMM with SAPG supplying bowls from their stored stock. It was a two day event, publicized mainly through SAMM's extensive mailing list that reaches over 30,000 people. Sales were selected and transacted online and then SAMM volunteers prepared the parcels for curbside pick-up, in keeping with pandemic safety regulations. Over 500 bowls were sold and almost \$40,000 was raised! I am hoping we will soon be back on track for our traditional public sale. In the meantime, plans are underway to organize a couple of Bowl-a-Thons to build up our reserve of bowls.

LP: Speaking of reserve of bowls, what are the numbers that you think are needed and feasible?

JN: In the past we've held two to three Bowl-a-Thons every year and made an average of 400 bowls at each Bowl-a-Thon. In addition, **Dudley Harris**, to whom we are ever grateful, has generously contributed hundreds of his much sought after bowls over the years. I think we need to aim for 2,000 to 2,500 bowls every year. The public want our bowls and want to support the good work of SAMM Ministries!

LP: John, are there any thoughts or memories that we have not discussed that you would like to mention?

JN: You know, one of the most feel-good things about Empty Bowls is the incredible support shown by so many toward this effort. There are SAPG members, all with varying skill levels, who show up consistently and dependably to sit for hours making bowls for the event and some come fairly great distances to participate and give their time and talent. It takes the work of everyone committed to help to have our super successful Empty Bowls events. I want to give the biggest thanks possible to everyone who has pitched in and helped over the years. Thank you San Antonio Potters Guild and all your members. Thank you SAMM Ministries for your excellent programs that help the destitute find jobs and homes and for your leadership and volunteers. Thank you Southwest School of Art for making your lovely facility and well equipped ceramics studio available as the perfect venue. And thanks to all the restaurants, to Alamo Wood Turners and SA Glass Arts Guild for your collaboration and support, to clay artists from all over Texas and especially the San Antonio area, and of course Dudley Harris, and so many more. It has been a pleasure!

LP: Thank you so much, John, on behalf of myself and the SAPG. You've done a truly great job of building Empty Bowls into the important and cherished event it is. By handing the reins over to Kathy you insure the continuity of its future. I know we'll see you at a wheel during the future Bowl-a-Thons and we wish you the best of health and joy in your own future.