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## Moulding young minds for success

DC | Conan Mendoza | 12th Feb 2013



She's crossed all barriers and boundaries, from Tamil Nadu to Udupi to Gurgaon, to places that we've never heard of, simply for her desire to give pottery its due recognition. A skill that lies within the heart of rural India, Malini Kalyanam a HR consultant in Chennai who found her calling as an artist and set up the Artistic Pottery Training Academy (APTA) has been using her talent with clay to reshape the future for autistic children across the country. We talk to her about her work with autistic children.

About the organisation she set up, she says, "I had my eyes on pottery since the time I saw a few potters churn out pieces on a wheel when I was five. I wondered if it would be as pliable as that, when I got to put my hands on it. The longing was intense and I realised my dream when I was 40. I am in fact a HR professional-turned artist, but I continue to address B-schools, and corporates on soft skills training and the HR front."

She adds, "A pottery studio was something that fascinated me, so I ventured to build one thanks

to the divine grace of APTA. The response initially was slow, but of late, there has been a surge in enthusiasts and reputed schools have risen to the demand, realizing the value of pottery and the ways it helps in leashing the child's potential which was hitherto untapped."

On what motivated her to start working with children, she says, "I knew nothing of them until I met Gita Srikanth and her colleagues in 2008. They approached me for their trust which works with autistic children, especially boys in the age of 7-14 years, at Neelangari in Chennai. It was a rich experience, and made me look at devising modules as vocational training for them.

Subsequently I met Parvathy Vishwanath who runs a center in the city for autistic children, and I also take one-on-one classes at home for these special children, Since then there's been no looking back."

How do pottery classes help them? "Pottery helps these children as they learn to play in a sequence of one, two and three to make an object. By indulging i this activity, their eye-hand coordination develops and their reflexes and muscles improve over a period of time. While they learn to squash the clay, it enables them to be ambidextrous as invariably one has to use both hands during clay play. It isn't just eco-friendly but also soothes the frayed nerves," she remarks.

What do you have your eyes set on next? "Empowering children to learn with the touch and feel method, and making them realise that they shouldn't just learn to copy or imitate, but instead give them the freedom to express, imagine, create, and this paves a way for an internal sense of direction as they are creators in their own right. It's quite a good feeling."

Why not potter about combining fun with some skill-set building too?

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