

THE ACCIDENTAL POTTER

If not for a freak accident, Curt Hammerly wouldn't have the career he does today

BY SARAH PROTZMAN HOWLETT

In September 2011, while biking in south Boulder, Curt Hammerly was struck by a car that was traveling at 30 miles per hour. Among his many injuries: several broken ribs and a broken neck. He spent two weeks in the hospital and wore a traction halo for three months to hold steady the pins placed in his skull, which scarred his forehead. Doctors told Hammerly he's lucky to have survived.

During the first month in the halo, Hammerly could make simple meals and do his laundry, but he was on prescription painkillers, so the bulk of his days were spent on the couch watching TV. About six weeks post-accident — for his mental health — Hammerly returned to work at the lab he ran in CU's environmental design department.

Once the halo was finally removed, Hammerly went looking for other ways to get out of the house. On a lark, he enrolled in a class at the Boulder Potters' Guild. He was still in a neck brace at the time. "They put a mirror in front of me because I couldn't tilt my head down," he says, "so I had to learn to throw while facing forward, only seeing the reflection of what I was doing." The class turned into a form of art therapy. "It helped me more than I could possibly imagine," he says. And then it inadvertently turned into a career he might never have otherwise discovered.

Molding a New Life

Anyone who has taken a pottery class knows there's a rather steep learning curve. Vases collapse. Bowls wobble, then fall. Art can be heartbreaking, but Hammerly was unrelenting; his own body had already endured all the smashing, cracking and breaking that could ever faze him.

He became endlessly curious about all aspects of clay, spending most of his spare time at the Guild. A clay candleholder, first drawn in 3D software, was an early experiment in marrying his knowledge of design with his fast-growing interest in clay.

He began selling so much pottery online and through social media that he no longer needed to work at CU. Hammerly, 34, has been a full-time ceramicist for nearly two years now. And in November of last year, he opened a storefront in Broomfield with a studio in the



Clockwise from top: Curt Hammerly in his pottery studio. One of his \$80, flies-off-the-shelf mugs. Hammerly in his halo shortly after the biking accident that changed the trajectory of his life.

back. As business thrived, he invested in a \$50,000 kiln and a 3D printer that prints in clay.

While he could ramp up production and make more money, right now, he only sells what he needs to get by. "This is how I've decided to do it because it gets me the most hours with my hands on clay," he says. "It's all about hours of practice. Selling eighty-dollar coffee mugs is amazing, but I would love to sell ten-thousand-dollar sculptures."

Hammerly's current production rate is possible because he amazingly sustained no significant lasting ailments from the crash, and he feels fortunate to have emerged from tragedy and found his way into art. "A lot of people had similar accidents and worse outcomes than I did," he says. "I'm so incredibly lucky." *