

hopeful birds

by Wendy Redal

What started as a creative way for one artist to uplift a neighborhood has spread across the country, brightening spirits and reinforcing connections despite the isolation of a pandemic.

Last spring, much of the world grew quiet when an unexpected pandemic changed life in an instant. As people quarantined at home, many became more aware of the birds in their own backyard, including Colorado ceramic artist and instructor Rita Vali. Watching robins and listening to meadowlarks inspired her.

Launching the Project

In April, she launched the Hopeful Birds Project, conceived as an uplifting neighborhood outreach effort, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Vali sought to use her creativity as “a way to bring art, kindness, and smiles to one another during a tough time.” In the months since, other clay artists have become involved and the project has taken wing across the country, furthering hope as the pandemic drags on.

Vali crafted the first flock of 21 colorful clay birds, each a unique creation, to scatter throughout her suburban neighborhood in Louisville. Families were invited to take a walk in search of a bird, care for it for a few days, then return it to rejoin the flock. Once a bird was found, its guardians were encouraged to have fun with it—make a nest for it, entertain it, take it for a bike ride—and to send photos to Vali to share online.

The Hopeful Birds Project is meant as a metaphor for what people are experiencing during the pandemic. As the birds regather, it’s a reminder that friends and family, classes and choirs, sports teams and wedding parties will ultimately gather again, too.

The second time Vali distributed the flock, she invited finders to pay the hope forward: to give their bird to a friend, or to keep it and make a donation on its behalf to a local food bank or community arts organization. Word of the project spread, and Vali began to get requests for flocks to disperse elsewhere.

Enlisting Others

Ramping up production, she was assisted by her 19-year-old son, Max, who was quarantined at home from college. Her husband joined the family effort, creating the Hopeful Birds website and social-media pages. Momentum grew.

Vali enlisted fellow Boulder County artist Arabella Tattershall to help make birds, and the idea to expand the project to additional communities formed. More artists came on board, including Caroline Douglas, a member of the Boulder Potters Guild along with Vali. Douglas invited neighbor kids over to make and glaze birds that they would in turn hide for others to find. Lynda Ladwig made birds with her neighbors, while Margaret Josey Parker distributed kits with baggies of clay and posted a how-to video so others could learn to make birds at home.

Soon, flocks had fledged to a local senior center and the music program at Ryan Elementary School in Lafayette. Music teacher Teresa Himel hides a flock each month, inviting students to search for the birds, then return them to the nest on the music room step. “Parents send photos of their student with the bird they found.



1 Clay artist and potter Rita Vali takes a moment with a flock of *Hopeful Birds* destined for Jackson, Wyoming. **2** A flock perches before taking flight in Vali's neighborhood as the pandemic hit hard in March 2020.

It brings a smile, every time,” said Himel. “I liken this to the notion of all of us having to fly away from school, but we will return safely to sing together again.” Ultimately, the flock will be installed as a totem pole of stacked birds in front of the music room once school reconvenes in person.

In Gunnison, Colorado, Kristin Gruenberger is making flocks at the Gunnison Art Center to distribute around this small rural town. She aims to partner with Gunnison’s Center for Mental Health to help the community navigate their emotions during COVID-19 through art.

The head of public health nursing in Teton County, Wyoming, also caught the vision, adopting a flock to bring levity to nursing staff who have been treating COVID-19 patients in Jackson since March.

To date, 10 different clay artists have crafted more than 400 birds, and flocks have fledged to both coasts and multiple states in between. Along with Vali’s son, who has crafted dozens of birds, other local young people have helped with the effort. Parker’s two daughters have made at least 50 birds.

The Impact of Collective Efforts

Seeing each bird as part of something bigger is an important element of the project. In addition to her 30-year career as a professional artist, Vali teaches ceramics in various settings in the Denver-Boulder area, including workshops in public schools. There, she has seen the impact of collective creative efforts. “I’ve done several elementary school projects where kids made components that became part of a large mosaic or installation that an individual could not have done alone. Seeing their little piece of art as part of something much larger can be powerful for children.”

Vali was slated to teach ceramics at the Jewish Community Center of Boulder, but her classes were canceled due to COVID-19. She is working with the JCC director on an alternate plan, which may include individual contributions from community members toward a ceramic installation for the center’s garden. Vali and Gruenberger are also volunteering to teach bird-making workshops through the Art Students League of Denver. Flocks produced in these workshops will be donated to Denver-area communities.

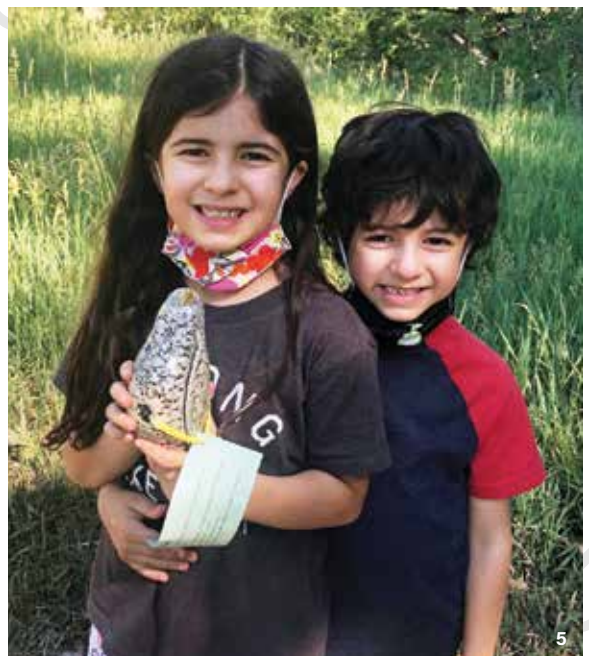
The Hopeful Birds Project has demonstrated that a single ceramic bird can extend goodwill more widely when it migrates. Vali has received plenty of testimonials to that effect as the birds have flown far and wide.

Lisa Samuelson, a Louisville pediatrician, said, “I read about the Hopeful Birds Project during a time when I was feeling overwhelmed and isolated. It warmed my heart to see how creative this was to touch people in an artistic way. I happened upon a bird in a park and reached out to Rita. I wanted to adopt my own flock to send to my family and friends in other states. My 100-year-old grandmother was so delighted. She says she shares the bird with others in her community to make them smile and have some hope.”

“Having the birds be part of the flock is an important component of this project—to share the gift, to connect us, and spread the kindness,” said Vali.

For more on the artist, visit www.ritavali.com. For more on The Hopeful Birds Project, visit www.hopefulbirds.org.

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3 Cara and Aiden bring the bird they found back to their classroom at Ryan Elementary School. **4** Caroline Douglas glazes birds with neighborhood kids. Once fired, the girls hid the birds in their Boulder neighborhood. **5** Penny and Jack work together to find a bird along the Coal Creek Trail near Ryan Elementary School.