

Cathleen Kardas

Casually dressed in blue jeans, denim shirt & hand-painted vest, Cathleen Kardas is seated behind the long work table in her family room. The table is laden with pens, brushes, paints & small round gourds in various stages of decoration. More gourds spill from boxes stacked on the floor. Dyed penguin & bottle gourds wait their turn beneath the pink azaleas on the round, glass-topped table.

While talking about her projects and her life, Cathleen's hands are busy marking sections on the gourd she will decorate next. Cathleen's enthusiasm for her art is contagious.

Sitting amid this organized chaos, my first question has to be, "Why gourds?" "They're fun," Cathleen replied. "I've always liked tinkering with crafts."

Many years ago, a gourd caught her attention at a craft show. Although she didn't buy it, the idea of gourd art



languished in the back of her mind. Cathleen & her husband, Gerry, moved to Albuquerque in 1973 when he left the Navy. He started a CPA firm, & Cathleen stayed at home with their two sons. Her time for exploring art projects was limited.

When she took a job at Lee's

Country Crafts, her proficiency in crafts increased.

Working there, she learned a little bit of everything & taught classes in tole painting, macrame & quilling, a craft that uses curled paper.

Cathleen volunteered in the school library when her oldest son, Mark, was at Albuquerque Academy. "You work in the library, you look through books," she said. "I found this wonderful book that had pages & pages of designs. I still remember that it was called The Pottery of San Ildefonso Pueblo."

Walking to the school across uncultivated mesa, she noticed small gourds littering the ground. Using her artist's eye, Cathleen realized, "I could put the Indian designs and these gourds together." She thought decorated gourds would make good Christmas ornaments. "I love Christmas ornaments," Cathleen said. "They are one of my passions."

"The buffalo gourds I paint grow wild. Nobody wants them," she explained. "When they're green, they smell awful. Luckily, once they're dry, they're fine." Cathleen starts collecting the gourds in late spring.

"Often I'll find a rabbit hole next to the gourds," she said. If I go out to collect them later, many will be broken into and the seeds will be gone."

One of her first errors occurred during the drying process. "I picked a lot of gourds and left them in a paper bag. The bag was full," she said.

"I came out about a week later & the whole thing was nothing but mold." Gourds are approximately 90 percent water. As they dry, the water evaporates. If they aren't in open air, they mold. Now she dries them on racks so the air circulates around them. After the drying problem was solved, she faced the difficulty of removing the gourd's skin

"I didn't know how to get the skin off," she laughed. "It's nasty skin." She attempted to clean them with a small dry knife until she learned an easier way. "I wrap each gourd in a wet paper towel, put them in a plastic bag for 24 hours, then scrub them with steel wool under running water. The skin comes right off.

Her husband is involved in this whole process. "Gerry is the quality control person. He does the cleaning & the drilling. Before he cleans them, he tries to break them. Buffalo gourds are very thin-shelled, so there is a lot of breakage. I paint 1,000 to 1,200 ornaments a year. But to paint that many, I have to collect 3,000." Once cleaning is finished, Gerry drills a hole in each end for the hanger. The gourds are set out to dry again. From collecting the gourds to the finished product takes almost a year. When the gourds are dry & ready to decorate, Cathleen

separates them into several groups. The best ones remain their natural color. Some are painted white or orange, others are dyed.

"I like to stay with the colors of the Indian pots, the terra cottas and the blacks," Cathleen said.

