

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) defines disability as a "physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities." A person has a disability if s/he has difficulty walking, talking, seeing, hearing, lifting, carrying, and/or climbing stairs; if s/he has difficulty performing activities of daily living (bathing, housework, dressing, etc.); or if s/he has difficulty performing social roles (working, interacting with other adults, etc.)

A person is said to have a severe disability if s/he has difficulties performing more than one of these activities, if s/he uses assistive devices or mechanical assistance to get around, or if s/he needs personal assistance to perform activities of daily living.

According to the US Census Bureau, one in five Americans have a disability of some kind, and one in ten have a severe disability. Anecdotal evidence reveals similar statistics within the polymer clay community. Many internet discussion postings contain brief references to disability. Even the [National Polymer Clay Guild](#) recognizes that many of its members have accessibility needs, and is building a physical needs database in response to a growing number of requests for accessible conferences.

However, until now, there has been no place for clayers with disabilities to discuss issues specific to the world of disabilities and clay. Although folks may briefly mention disability in the context of a discussion, they never really discuss how these disabilities affect their roles as clay artists.

I am particularly reminded of this every time I get into a discussion about attending craft shows. Folks are zealous about their favorite display materials, the best canopies, or the best way to weight their tent on concrete. Inevitably, the "best" systems are bulky and/or heavy. But the other crafters don't want to hear that a discussion participant can't lift more than 10 pounds, so soup cans filled with concrete are not a practical solution for weighting the disabled crafter's tent. In many discussions, the attitude seems to be "if you can't take doing heavy work, you have no business doing shows." This is not very helpful to the disabled crafter, especially if s/he has managed to successfully show for years without fifty pound tent weights. It is even less helpful to the disabled crafter trying to break into the show circuit.

Most polymer clay artists have devised ways to keep their disabilities from impacting heavily on their claying. Many have also discovered tools that make claying with a disability a lot easier (for example, a clayer with hand problems might not be able to clay without such tools as a food processor and a motorized pasta machine). Others have devised their own clay handles for tissue blades that make the blades much easier to use. But how do others gain access to what clayers with disabilities are doing? [Glass Attic](#) includes disability-related tips and adaptations within its numerous resources. However, they are buried within the thousands of general tips and resources delineated on the site. Previously, there was no central resource for disability-related clay information, nor was there any specific place to direct disability-related questions about polymer clay. The Clayers with Disabilities Discussion List hopes to begin to fill that void.

It all started with an innocent comment I made on a discussion list: I referred to myself as a member of the "clayers with disabilities" group. I meant I was among the many clayers out there who had a disability, and wasn't actually referring to an organized group. Still, I received a flurry of e-mails in response from folks asking how to join this group. I began to realize I wasn't the only one who would benefit from such a forum.

I realized clayers with disabilities wanted a place where they could discuss how their disabilities affect -- both positively and negatively -- their claying. Clayers wanted a place that was part support group, part newsletter, part information exchange, and part tip central, where they would be free to discuss their disabilities, ask questions about how others handle certain issues, exchange tips and techniques, and kvetch about their disabilities acting up. We needed someplace where folks with arthritis, fibromyalgia, CFS, developmental disabilities, spinal cord injuries, chronic pain, and all other types of disabilities were welcome to discuss their issues.

I also realized that this community could also act as a resource for folks without disabilities who looking to share in or add to our collective knowledge. Folks such as occupational therapists, recreational specialists, art therapists, teachers, disabilities professionals, art instructors looking to accommodate students with disabilities, special educators, camp counselors, and anyone else who needs ideas or has questions about polymer clay and disabilities could tap into this resource so that they could more effectively use clay in their therapeutic activities.

Thus, at the end of July, I started the clayerswithdisabilities@yahoo.com discussion list. The community is just starting to grow. But in order to be successful, it needs to get as many clayers with interests in this area involved as possible. PC Polyzine generously offered us this space to begin spreading the word. If you are a clayer with a disability, or have an interest in claying with a disability, we need you. Additional information about this group, why it formed, and how to subscribe can be found at [Artist Crafts](#) or at the Yahoo Group site [Clayers With Disabilities](#). Also, you can read my own [background with disabilities](#).

Many polymer clay artists have disabilities, and others would like to better accommodate clayers with disabilities in their classes and guilds. Many disability professionals would like to incorporate polymer clay into therapeutic activities but are not quite sure how to do so. Many people with disabilities are new to polymer clay, and would like to learn how to clay without being restrained by their functional limitations. Clayers with Disabilities is for such people. It is a place for clayers with disabilities to gather and discuss claying with a disability, either on a professional or hobbyist level, and how disabilities positively and negatively effect clay-related activities. And we invite all interested clayers to come and join us. To subscribe, send a blank e-mail to clayerswithdisabilities-subscribe@yahoo.com. © Laurel Nevans 2002