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Elgin Artspace helping single mom make a life in ceramics



Tania Gonzalez is the owner of "Ceramica an Art Affair," a studio and gallery that opened a few months ago at 51 S. Spring St. in Elgin. She will offer pottery painting lessons Feb. 1. (*Brian Hill* | Staff Photographer)

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Tania Gonzalez said she never thought she could make a living off art. Now, that goal is inching closer. (*Brian Hill* | Staff Photographer)

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Tania Gonzalez, 31, fell in love with the pottery wheel when she took a class at Larkin High School in Elgin. (*Brian Hill* | *Staff Photographer*)

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Tania Gonzalez sells her pottery in her Elgin gallery and out of a gallery in Chicago's East Pilsen neighborhood. (Brian Hill | Staff Photographer)



Elena Ferrarin

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The pottery wheel cast a spell on Tania Gonzalez the second she laid her hands on it in high school.

She was drawn in by its slippery, spinning motion, and the way clay shapes took form slowly, almost hypnotically. So powerful was the experience that it even felt like her everyday worries faded away, she said.

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"It was very relaxing and therapeutic. After I got on the wheel, I couldn't get off. I just kept going back to it," said Gonzalez, 31, of Elgin. "You're so concentrated when you do it. It's like doing yoga -- you can't think of anything else."

Gonzalez never believed she could turn ceramics into a living, her own insecurities compounded by her parents' warnings of the perils of becoming a starving artist, she said.

After graduating from Larkin High School, she got an office job while getting "wheel time" by taking classes at Elgin Community College and renting space by the hour at local art studios.

That all changed a few months ago when she opened "Ceramica an Art Affair (<https://www.facebook.com/Ceramica-an-Art-Affair-499399196925820/>)," a gallery and studio at 51 S. Spring St. in downtown Elgin. The space is on the first floor of Elgin Artspace Lofts, affordable apartments for artists where Gonzalez lives.

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Gonzalez has been giving private classes by appointment in English and Spanish, and she will debut pottery painting and wheel throwing workshops and classes starting Feb. 1.

None of this would have happened, Gonzalez said, if not for the traumatic events of a two-month stretch in 2013, when she lost her job, her car irreparably broke down, a cousin died, and she and her fiance broke up.

That's when she decided to get into dancing, a job that ended up being the perfect choice because it appeals to her creativity and love for

costumes while allowing more time for her artwork during the day, she said.

She was living in South Elgin when someone told her about Artspace, where she and her nearly 8-year-old daughter eventually moved in. Last year, she was offered rental of the first-floor studio space and decided to take the plunge.

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"I would have never thought all this would happen," she said, "but I am really happy it did."

While she's not making a full-time living off her art -- she works as a bartender and gogo dancer in Chicago -- she is inching her way toward that goal, which now seems attainable, she said.

Ceramics and sculpture teacher Sean Murray said Gonzalez stood out among the hundreds of students he's taught in his 12 years at Larkin High.

"She was a quiet student, but she definitely took to the wheel more so than the other kids. She definitely had a knack for it," he said. "Every once in a while you get a kid that picks it up right away, and she was one of them. She was always eager to learn more."

Murray heard Gonzalez opened her own studio in Elgin and got in touch with her recently, he said. Now, the two are discussing doing a show together, possibly in May, in the Artspace gallery.

"It's hard, especially for ceramics artists, to find areas to continue to work," Murray said. "I'm not surprised (Tania is making it), though. She

definitely seemed to love it."

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Gonzalez, who also paints, sells her work in her Elgin gallery and out of a gallery in Chicago's East Pilsen neighborhood.

"I like a lot of smooth pieces," she said. "A lot of my work is very decorative. I feel like it has to look nice. It has to look beautiful."

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