Raised in a tiny Illinois town, Walgreensâ?? pharmacy tech never imagined the life of travel, arts and culture heâ??s established in San Francisco

Description

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When the Loma Prieta earthquake hit San Francisco in 1989, Mack Dudley, a Walgreenâ??s pharmacy tech, was at his post: the pharmacy counter at the Ocean and Mission store.

â??I wasnâ??t sure what it was, but my coworker panicked, and took cover in this empty cabinet we had. The only part of him that fit in was his head, I was like, whatâ??s that gonna do?â?•

Luckily, there was no damage to either the panicky worker or the store, and Dudley notched his first San Francisco earthquake and a good story.

When asked how long he has worked at Walgreens, Dudley answers with a wry smile, â??Only about a thousand years.â?•

Though it might feel like a millennium, itâ??s actually closer to 42 years. Dudley is both loyal and security-minded, and his first San Francisco employer has been his only San Francisco employer since he arrived here from Illinois after college. He balances the stress of a demanding customer service career with the calming peace of his artistic avocation â?? pottery crafting â?? in a routine that keeps him balanced and content.

Dudley Mack with his works of pottery at Rubyâ??s Clay Studio and Gallery in the Castro district. (All photos by Colin Campbell)

Dudley, who admits to being â??a few yards south of 70,â?• was born in the very small town of Danville, Illinois, and raised in an equally small Illinois town, Georgetown. He first lived in an Airstream trailer behind his grandmotherâ??s house, then in a cinderblock house his dad built for them.

Though an only child, he had many cousins and was the first male in his family to graduate from college: Illinois State University in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, where he studied biology and chemistry. Then he was done with the Midwest.

â??I knew since I was 11 years old that I was going to leave that little town. My father was hesitant to travel too far; his military experience in the Jim Crow South had shocked his system.â?•

His dad, also named Mack Dudley, worked as a nursing aide in the nearby Veterans Administration hospital, and sparked his sonâ??s curiosity about the wider world, bringing home National Geographic magazines and talking about the news. The elder Dudley, a member of the NAACP, encouraged his son to think about social and political issues. He was, said Dudley, a great influence on my life.

After college, San Francisco

His mom, Nacolia Dudley, now 87, stayed home in Georgetown when her son was young, then did cleaning jobs and worked in a sewing factory. He moved her out to San Francisco when his dad died in 1992.

Growing up, Dudley never felt poor, but he knew his dad had to supplement their food with hunting and fishing. â??My dad shot rabbits and pheasants and quail on the farmlands west of us. On the eastern side of our place was woods and forest; thatâ??s where we hunted squirrels and picked morels and berries.â?•

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Curious about nature, Dudley experimented with planting Indian corn, â??cause I was fascinated by the different colors that would come up.â?•

After graduating college, around 1980, he came to San Francisco on a Greyhound bus â??with my suitcase and a mimeographed sheet of paper that had the name of a hotel in the Western Addition. I came out here to see the mountains and the sea.â?• He had only enough money for one week at that hotel.

Luckily, a cousin stationed in the military in Sacramento invited Dudley to visit, and he ended up taking over his cousinâ??s one-bedroom apartment. â??The rent was $75 and to me Sacramento was a big city. I got a job at McDonaldâ??s; it was enough to pay my rent and survive. I am low maintenance.â?•

Dudley is still low maintenance. He owns no cell phone, not a flip, not a smartphone. He said he has a home phone and a phone at work but sees no need for another number.

Heâ??d been in Sacramento for a few years when he heard that a college friend needed a roommate in San Franciscoâ??s Mission District, so he moved to the one-bedroom apartment on 25th Street, sleeping on a Murphy bed in the living room.

â??Died and gone to heavenâ?•

â??That allowed me to get a foothold in the Mission, where I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Three different kinds of bananas at the fruit stands! And everywhere you turned was an adventure: different languages, cultures, food. And then the museums, the libraries, the music!â?•

Dudley Mack arrived in San Francisco on a Greyhound bus around 1980.

He walked into the Walgreens at 4th and Howard one day in 1980 and was hired to stock shelves.

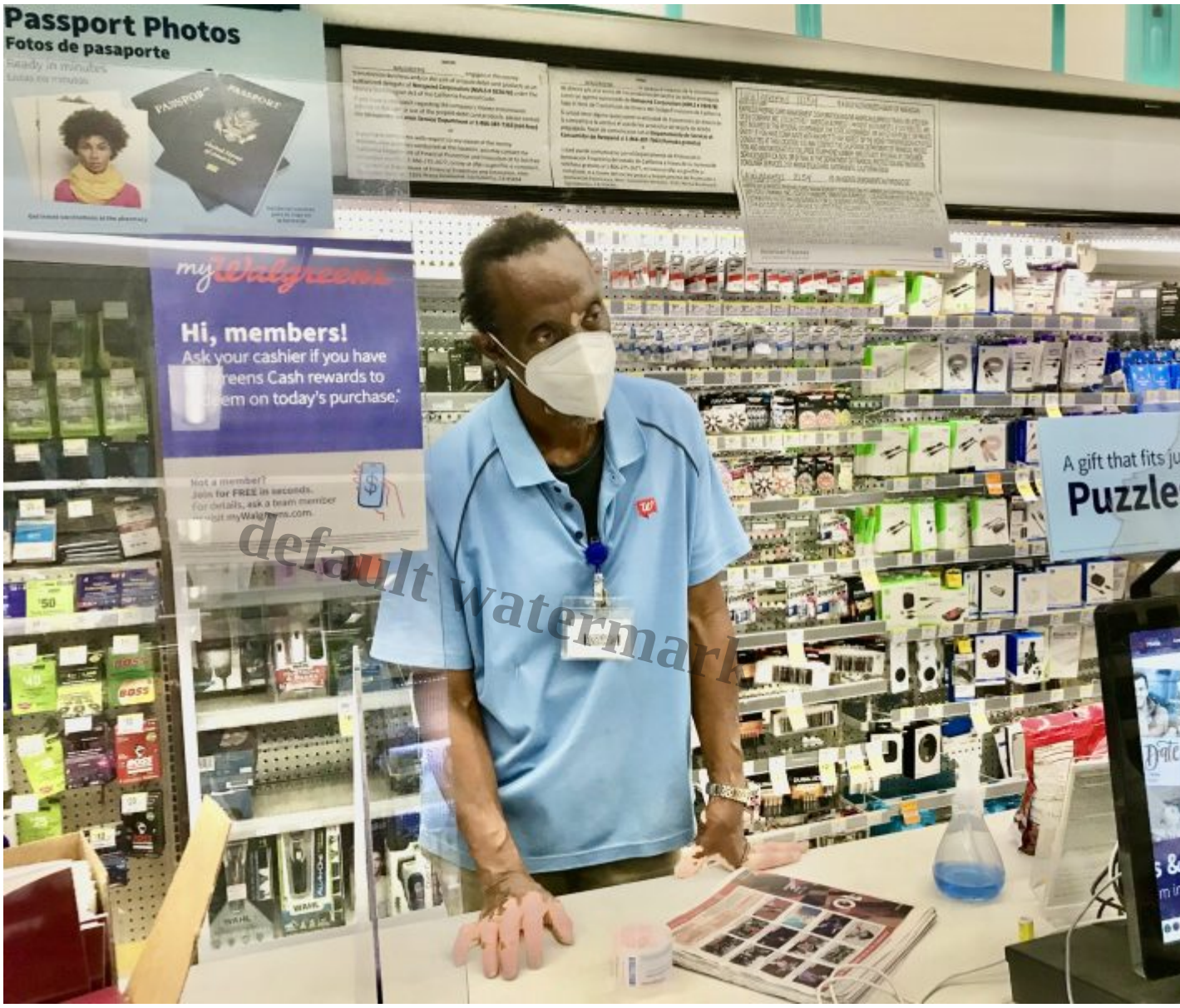
Dudley is soft-spoken, tall and fit, and carries himself with calm dignity. He rarely loses his cool, even when dealing with marauding shoplifters, said Anne Whiteside, a longtime Walgreens customer who witnessed the confrontation at the companyâ??s 30th and Mission store earlier this year. He is â??unfailingly gracious, even elegantâ?• in his interactions with his customers, she said.

Unsettling as the incident may have been, Dudley said it did not make him fearful. â??Well, I am not small, and I am not female, and for the most part the people who are stealing donâ??t even look at me.â?•

Once he started working, he never thought to leave San Francisco. â??What I love about this city is I am exposed to people from all the corners of the earth.â?•

Forty-two or so years after he started stocking shelves, Dudley still appreciates his employer, particularly Walgreensâ?? willingness to train him and promote him to management, even though management â??was not for me,â?• he said.

Instead, he became a pharmacy tech, the position heâ??s held the longest. Itâ??s been a stable, steady gig. â??This job gave me security enough so I could sleep every night. Maybe having a steady job made me too complacent.â?• His real concern was bringing Covid home to his mom, who shares an apartment in the Lower Haight with him and his partner, Daniel.



Dudley Mack started stocking shelves at a Walgreens at 4th and Howard streets 42 years ago. Heâ??s worked for the company ever since at various locations. For the last 15, he has been at the Mission Street store at Ocean Avenue, where he is a pharmacy technician.

â??Knowledge is power and so I read everything I could about Coronavirus transmission, even back to SARS, and I felt confident that I could protect myself and my little family and continue working.â?•

What also kept him working was his feeling that he was part of an historic moment.

â??In the fightâ?? against Covid

â??I wanted to be part of the fight against Covid. When I got the opportunity to be a front-line vaccinator, I can say that is one of the best things Iâ??ve done in my life.â?• People were appreciative and thanked him profusely after every jab. â??You felt like you were in the fight, doing your part,â?• he said.

Dudley has used his job as a secure jumping-off point to see the world. He has visited England several times and journeyed to Sweden, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada and Mexico.

He plans to go more places when he retires but isnâ??t sure when that will be. â??I feel like I am in a race. I used to run the 400-meter in high school, and I could quit three-quarters of the way through or run through the tape. As of now, I plan to run through the tape and work until 70.â?•

When he does retire, he knows one place he will spend more time: About 20 years ago he was walking past Rubyâ??s Clay Studio & Gallery, a nonprofit ceramic art studio in the heart of the Castro, and saw that it offered classes.

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Dudley spends â??every spare minuteâ?• crafting pottery.

His partner encouraged him to go in. Recalling that moment, he shakes his head with wonder at his luck, â??When I was a child, I saw someone throw a pot on a TV show and I always wanted to try. But in our small tow,n there was nowhere. I thought I would just finally check that off my bucket list.â?•

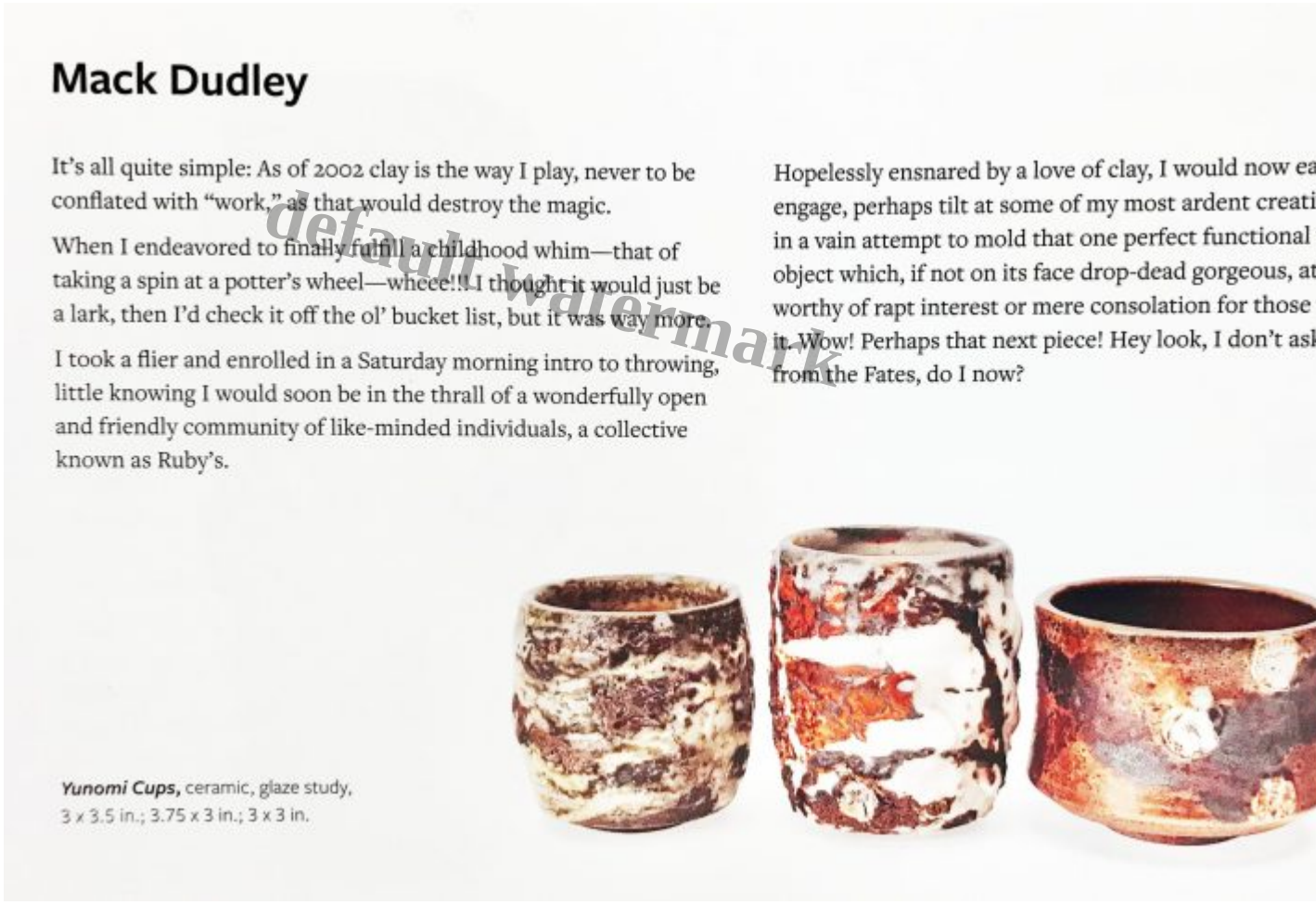
A second home and passion

It has been his second home ever since.

â??Every spare minute, if I am not working, and have nothing I have to do, every spare moment I am there at the studio.â?•

There cannot be a place more unlike the chaos of a Mission Street Walgreens than the serene and welcoming calm of Rubyâ??s Studio, where Dudley, on a recent afternoon, was making four delicate goblets.

Sitting at the potterâ??s wheel, heâ??s absolutely still. His focus is complete. His large hands (he could palm a basketball) first make the clay supple as he adds water to the spinning disc. Then his long sinuous fingers fashion the shapeless hunk into a cylinder as he pulls the clay upwards.



Mack Dudley

It's all quite simple: As of 2002 clay is the way I play, never to be conflated with "work," as that would destroy the magic.

When I endeavored to finally fulfill a childhood whim—that of taking a spin at a potter's wheel—wheee!!!—I thought it would just be a lark, then I'd check it off the ol' bucket list, but it was way more.

I took a flier and enrolled in a Saturday morning intro to throwing, little knowing I would soon be in the thrall of a wonderfully open and friendly community of like-minded individuals, a collective known as Ruby's.

Hopelessly ensnared by a love of clay, I would now ea
engage, perhaps tilt at some of my most ardent creati
in a vain attempt to mold that one perfect functional
object which, if not on its face drop-dead gorgeous, at
worthy of rapt interest or mere consolation for those
it. Wow! Perhaps that next piece! Hey look, I don't ask
from the Fates, do I now?

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Yunomi Cups, ceramic, glaze study, 3 x 3.5 in.; 3.75 x 3 in.; 3 x 3 in.

A page in Rubyâ??s Clay Studio catalog dedicated to Dudleyâ??s glazed Japanese tea, or â??Yunomi,â?• cups.

Working with clay, he said, is a secret pleasure. â??At work,â?• he confides with a grin, â??No one knows what I do in my time off.â?•

He sells his work at the studio but also gives a lot away to family members. â??When they see me coming, they head in the other direction these days, thinking â??oh no, not another pot from Wade!â??

â??I am a bit of an oddball, for better or worse, and I have a unique life that works for me.â?•

His hands move like fluttering birds around his clay creation as he talks, in part about the unique life heâ??s made.

â??Never in a million years when I was back in my little Illinois town, did I think I would get to travel, learn about art and science, attend a symphony or an opera, go to great museums like the de Young and the Asian Art Museum, much less make my own art.â?•

Category

1. All Posts

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