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Creation is a function of effort multiplied by a little bit of heart.

Ben Kendall

Wild at Heart

Glass artists take every shape

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By Ben Kendall

Wild at Heart: Special Needs Glass Art



Standing in front of the giant gas-powered furnaces, the heat is oppressive; it's just shy of pain. Large metal rods lay in wait, partially inside the cooking monstrosities, flames licking out from the front. Two welding torches sit on custom settle stands on opposite sides of the room. Bustling amid the scorching workspace, Patrick Morrissey, co-owner/operator of Prairie Dog Glass, moves from the magma-like mixture of molten glass in one furnace, collecting it on one of the rods and turning it over and over in his hands to keep the blazing sludge from cooling to the point of immovability or dropping to the floor. But there's somebody unexpected within this dangerous conflagration of fire and art, situated inside the Jackalope campus (2820 Cerrillos Road). Seated in a wheelchair just outside the perimeter of the furnace is a young woman with a brain injury, nonverbal and immobile, aside from one barely functional hand. She stares out over a score of ceramic bowls containing crushed glass in a multitude of colors, waiting with anticipation to be handed the metal pole with a softball-sized glob of liquid glass on one end. It's the step that adds the spark that will become a heart-shaped paperweight or a vase—blue, pink or purple.

"I feel like it's something I oughtta do," says Morrissey. "That's the beginning. You're trying to keep them motivated, trying to help them pick colors, and then their face lights up, and their fear begins to melt away. That's when the warm feeling really starts to grow inside. I

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April 27, 2016 by Peter St. Cyr

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say warm, those furnaces are 2,000 degrees; it's pretty warm in there.”

His is one of the largest glass-melting furnaces in New Mexico, and it runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 11 months a year. “When you open the door, it gets pretty hot for a second. You don’t want to spend a whole bunch of time asking questions,” Morrissey says. Despite the obvious danger, the shop is actually quite controlled. “Safety is always an issue. The funny thing is that the really hot glass isn’t as dangerous as the hot steel pipe that they hold in their hands. The tools, when they touch the glass, also become hot. The trick is to help them relax enough so they’re not nervous. Because nervous people do silly things; you don’t have to be handicapped for that to happen—it happens to everybody.”

Although the studio is open to the public for a variety of classes, most of the visitors blowing glass this day are the clients of Community Options Inc., an agency that provides services for adults with disabilities. They’re always accompanied by one or more direct support people. Today, it’s Rorie Hanrahan, a former PR professional whose job fell prey to the financial crunch of 2008. After finding herself in social work, the notion of exposing glass-blowing to disabled individuals intrigued her.



“We’ve seen it be a transformative process. They come away with something that they’re able to show people and be proud of,” says Hanrahan. “There’s something about being in the hot-shop. It’s not only about the finished process, but they feel trusted enough to be in a real working environment like that. The biggest difference is how it’s spilled over into other aspects of their life. It gives them a higher level of confidence about their place in the world. We’ve seen improved hygiene, improved communication and increased sociability.”

There’s an exchange of ideas happening among Hanrahan, Morrissey and those from the “dayhab” programs at Community Options. “When I first started learning glass-blowing, I was really concerned with being precise,” Hanrahan says. “But the person I was with had this wild creativity—he was just like, ‘Woo hoo!’ And, I liked his pieces better than mine. When I began to mimic the things he did, my pieces became more beautiful.”

Once a week, program participants show up to Prairie Dog Glass to create pieces of art that are completely singular. Community members mingle outside the furnaces, awaiting their turn to learn how to bend and shape glass. Crouched on a slab of wood between two steel arm rests, one client cries out, “Yay, art!” as she claps in joy.

Metal tongs pull at the bottom end of a piece of glass that slowly, under her fascinated gaze, takes the shape of a heart. Some visitors have developmental disabilities; others, conditions such as autism, Down syndrome or the effects of a traumatic brain injury, but despite the differences in ability, one thing connects them all: the desire to express themselves.






“As unique as their perspective is on life, honed by whatever challenges they’ve had, they bring their perspective to that art. I believe that everybody adds up to 100 percent. If somebody has a deficit in one area, I mine for gold in another,” Hanrahan adds. “All of this has been a gift for me. It helps me to not take my life, my body, for granted. I wake up in the morning, and I’m grateful that I can step out of bed on my own, eat breakfast on my own, and be independent and have a job. All these things feel like gifts that I’m aware of.”



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