

A Glass Artist's Story

Making Dreams Come True

by Ann Potter

I discovered glass art later in life after exploring and working in other areas of art. Glassblowing was at the bottom of my list of creative mediums to try. It almost did not happen because of personal health reasons that make using a wheelchair a necessity for me. Even living in Seattle, Washington, one of the major centers of the glass world, finding a studio that was willing to let me try the medium was a challenge.

I finally found a hot shop that was willing to allow me in, Seattle Glassblowing Studio. I had the good fortune to connect with Bill Passmore, an instructor who was not intimidated by a person in a chair. His attitude was, "We can do this." It was in the fall of 2016. I could not imagine that the journey I was embarking on would be so challenging, so beautiful, and in many ways healing.

Hearing Glass Speak

The first time I held the blowpipe and connected with that molten mass that was at the end of the pipe, I found my artistic creativity come back with a force that I had never experienced before. If you asked what that force was, I know I would not have been able to tell you in those early days and months. It is only after many months that I fully understand what that connection was.

Glass, for me, is the ability to connect with a material that is alive and speaks to me. Learning to understand the language that is glass and how to heed its message as it is transmitted through the pipe, tools, and especially the wet newspaper used in forming the molten glass was a challenge.

Discovering the rewards and fruits of my labor came when I started to comprehend the bold and fine nuances that glass expressed as I worked. Despite what my design might be on paper or in my mind, an awareness and an awakening transpired that this medium will at times dictate what the final form will be. It is an experience much different than my work with other materials. This wonderful, yet demanding, molten material also has offered me a chance to work in tandem with others who share the same passion as I do.



Learning from Failure

In early 2017, after experiences in several weekend workshops, I knew I wanted to learn glassblowing from the basics on up. I was no longer satisfied with just making various shapes and forms and wanted to study all aspects of this medium. Again, I was blessed to find a person who was willing to start with me doing the basics—jack line, caterpillars, and all of the other elementary steps a person must learn to become a glassblower. Phillip "Swede" Hickok worked at the studio and took me on as a student.

Phillip, who trained in Sweden at Orrefors, also undertook the tasks of discovering the modifications necessary for me to do the many steps that I had initially believed I could not achieve due to my limitations. We realized that many of the Swedish techniques are well suited for someone like me who is basically confined to the bench.

The hardest challenge was finding a way to blow a bubble. Phillip's incredible patience in dissecting the steps in blowing a bubble and watching my actions allowed the development of a different but functional way to do it. I can still remember the excitement and sheer joy when that first bubble appeared on the end of the pipe! As studies moved forward, he allowed me to test my limits. Failure occurred, but then I discovered ways to accomplish those tasks that failure had produced—the ones I had seen as barriers.

Learning to gather when I was unable to see into the furnace was another milestone for me. Discovering that I could "feel" the glass on the end of the pipe was a miracle, and most of the times I can pull a proper gather from the furnace. Almost all of the steps I work with require a partner, either to check the glass level of the furnace or completing pipe or punty moves that would otherwise be a safety hazard.

Success through Teamwork

As I worked to learn all I could about glassblowing, I also noticed how that medium is most often performed as a team. I quickly discovered that working with another person was something I missed in the past. I no longer needed to find solutions to an immediate problem on my own. Instead, I had another person with whom I could quickly discuss the problem and just as quickly find a solution. Teamwork is always going to be a necessity, since some tasks simply cannot be done with my limitations.

I found great joy in this medium that is based on the teamwork approach. My tag, or *tagliol* tool has become the marver, the shaping tool in my hand, and I have learned to do many of the steps that are usually done standing from a seated position. Reheating glass for work that I am doing is not possible. However, I have been able to do reheats for others, since I can be relatively stationary in front of the glory hole. Never conceiving that I would be able to assist anyone, as I worked with Phillip, I learned that with some forethought I could be an assistant for many tasks that I formerly saw as impossible.

Star Fish from the continuing series Exploring the Acquatic; *Plate and Vase* from the continuing series A Study in Materials—Frit v. Bar.



One of the highlights of working with glass was getting a chance to go to the Pilchuck Glass School in the fall of 2018. Pilchuck had never had a student come before me who was disabled, and their campus was certainly not originally designed to accommodate a wheelchair. Nevertheless, it seemed that the stars aligned when the staff at Pilchuck embraced the challenges of having me on campus. Phillip was able to come as my assistant and the instructor, Ed Schmid, was willing to have me in his class. It certainly helped that I had worked with Ed in the past, and he was aware of the limitations I have. It was five of the most magical days working with glass that I had ever experienced and reaffirmed my desire to continue working with glass as long as I can.

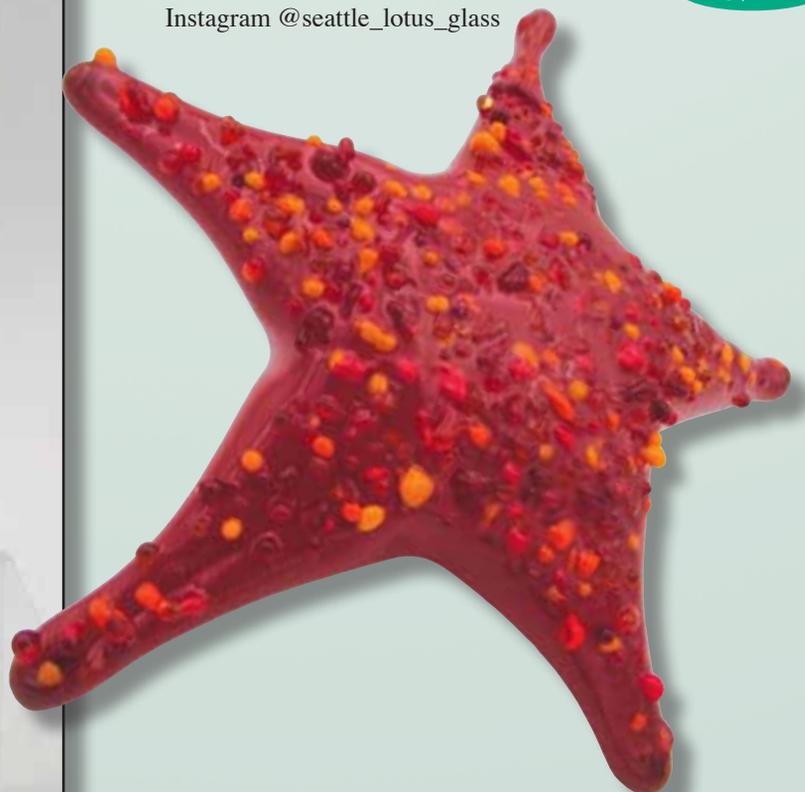
A Continuing Evolution

I recently had a change in the teacher/partner I work with. Hugh Willa has become the next person in my evolution, since Phillip is off to Denmark to pursue the next stage of his glassblowing career. One of the first things he told me was that I was the gaffer, and I could assign tasks as the work proceeded. This statement resonated with an earlier conversation I had with Richard Marquis in early September. He told me that I needed to embrace the role of gaffer, since it appeared that I had a handle on the fundamentals.

The word *gaffer* means the person who is on the bench and is controlling the production of the piece. It was and still is a word that carries a bit of awe with it. I had been more accustomed to following directions than giving them, even though I was on the bench. I now understand that this responsibility and opportunity is part of the stage of growth in the work I intend to do. Leaving behind the role of the dependent student and taking more control of the working process and creative aspects of the art is clearly my path forward.

In closing, the initial thought behind this writing is twofold. First, I want to let other people know that anything is possible as long as they are willing to work at discovering ways to achieve their goals regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Second, we all need to find and live with the fact that it is the *doing* that is important and not necessarily the *how*.

This molten form of silica has made a lasting imprint on me and my life. Creating works of art from hot glass so intimately using my hands, my breath, and my sense of wonderment has allowed for forms of expressions that I did not have in the past, and the journey has allowed for the healing of a stagnant creative process. The healing comes from the fact that even facing health issues, working with glass leaves me feeling alive in the present moment, all of which is priceless and timeless.



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Jellyfish and Star Fish from the continuing series Exploring the Aquatic.

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