

Glass artist crafts career by following his dream

By Nancy D. Borst

Glass artist Rollin Karg is living his dream, crafting unique pieces of art from liquid glass.

But he also knows what it's like to have a dream put on hold. His father was a carpenter and his grandfather was a contractor and they wanted a "better life" for Rollin.

"They wanted me to go to college. When I wanted to work with my hands, they sort of discouraged that," he recalled. "I grew up with them telling me I was going to be head of a company of business. They didn't want me to work as hard as they did."

So he set out as a young man to follow their dreams for him by studying business administration in college and working for various companies, including Cessna. His last "job," as he calls it, was in sales and it allowed him control over his time. That gave him time to tinker with his dreams.

He tried pottery, photography and woodworking. But two things fueled a fascination with glass art: an acquaintance with Richard Stauffer, who taught glass art at Emporia State University, and a trip to Corning, N.Y.

"If you were looking for the Mecca of glass works, it's Corning, N.Y.," he said. While on a family trip, he toured the glass factory there and saw glass blowers at work.

"I watched them make that stuff and

the next year in Wichita, I talked to Stauffer about it and said that looks like a lot of fun," said Karg. "I said I'd like to learn to do that."

He recalls how Stauffer gave him a discerning look and then made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

"He said he only had one spot left in his fall class," Karg recalled. "I heard a voice a lot like my own say, 'I'll take that spot.'"

He made the 190-mile round trip drive three times every week for a semester to study with Stauffer. In the second week of class, he made a paperweight.

"I had told myself this was just going to be a hobby thing," he said. "I made that first paperweight and I was just gone. I dreamed about this stuff. I talked to friends about it until their eyes rolled up in their heads."

He had invested his resources in woodworking and then had to tell his wife that he wanted to become a glass blower. Thankfully, she and his family supported his decision.

Today he owns a studio and gallery in Kechi, where he creates and sells his work. His art also can be found on the World Wide Web and at galleries across the country. After more than 30 years, he says he still learns something about his craft every day.

"I'm still learning. It doesn't get easier but you get better at it," he said.

So what is it about the art of glass



Glass artist Rollin Karg works on a large display piece in his Kechi studio. A glass artist for more than 30 years, Karg mounted an exhibit of metal and glass sculptures on the grounds of Larksfield Place in northeast Wichita. You can see the exhibit through the end of December.

Photo by Terry Asla

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blowing that makes it okay to put your mouth to a five-foot blow pipe and stick your head in a hot oven every day?

“It’s sort of a hot, gooey thing. Things that sparkle and shine appeal to me,” he said. But he acknowledged the sheer magnitude of the heat.

“You’re punished so badly by the heat when you first start. It’s almost criminal,” he said. The glass must be at 2,250 to 2,350 degrees F. to melt.

“We had an oven early on that you had to put stuff in left-handed. Your head almost went in the oven and you were constantly burning the hair off your forehead. When I started I had to learn how to do this stuff. There’s nothing easy about this work. It’s in my nature to take challenges.”

His most recent challenge is an outdoor display of large steel and glass sculptures on the grounds at Larkfield Place in Wichita, which will remain there for viewing through December. He called the project “totally out” of his regular comfort zone but something he wanted to try.

He has developed a system to channel ideas, which just “roll out of me,” he said. He has gone away from making detailed drawings but he still always has a small book handy to jot down ideas. He wants to be more spontaneous.

“As we were building this, I like to be

spontaneous,” he said of the Larkfield exhibit. One of the pieces does not include any glass, for example, because Karg realized he liked the silhouette as it was.

“Sometimes you’ve got to know when to quit,” he said. “Sometimes it’s good to leave a little tension.”

He admits to being a “pioneer” in the sense that glass artists today can buy ready-made furnaces and start with better materials.

“I don’t want to say the young artists getting into it are not tough or smart but they don’t have to fight the battles we did,” he said.

He routinely works with and mentors a group of four to eight other budding artists. The only requirement is that they be creative.

“I train them to be more than just a guy that sits at the bench and makes (glass),” he said. “I teach them about dealing with vendors, design, personal discipline, work ethic. It’s much easier to teach them how to thread a pipe than to think like a designer.”

He knows now that toiling through more traditional jobs proved to be a great asset to the business side of his art. He considers himself lucky to have found his true calling while he was still a young

man (in his early 30s). But he also said the transition to pursue a dream calls for careful planning.

Nobody said chasing – and catching – dreams was easy.

“When you stand for something, you put yourself at risk emotionally,” he said. “With kids who say they think this is what they ought to do, it might not look good to co-workers or yourself. You have to get by that courage thing. If you’re going to be an artist for a living, there’s an issue of having to come face-to-face with who you are and have the guts to stand out. It’s risk taking. The fear of failure is pretty big.”

But, he is quick to note, the payoff is equally big.

“I started working with my hands over 30 years ago. I’m 66 now. When you can make something and people will pull money out of their pocket and give it to you, that’s pretty special. If a rich man hands you \$100 for a piece, that’s good. But if somebody had to work hard for that \$100, that’s even better.

“You’re not going to live forever. You get one shot at this or you might have several shots to find your thing. If a chance comes along, you’d better take it.”