

Art Glass Association 2008 Retailer of the Year

by Randy Wardell



The motto of The Art Glass Association (AGA) is to continually strive to “create awareness, knowledge, and involvement for the growth and prosperity of the art glass industry.” One of the ways that the AGA has accomplished this is the initiation in 2007 of an annual award to recognize the accomplishments of a retail storeowner who they feel best exemplifies the spirit of the association’s statement of purpose. The 2008 award was presented to Karen Carney, owner of Custom Stained Glass in Southgate, Michigan (near Detroit). Karen and her husband Tim were present to receive the award on April 5 at the annual AGA banquet, which was held during the Glass Craft & Bead Expo in Las Vegas, Nevada. We recently caught up with Karen to find out a little more about how she arrived at this moment in her career.

Let’s start at the beginning. When you were growing up, what direction did you think your career would take?

Frankly, as a kid I don’t think I ever gave it too much thought as to what I’d do for a career. I went to high school in the early ’70s, and the choices [for girls] were to either prepare to be a housewife by taking home economics classes or prepare for college and plan for a career. Anything in the medical field was considered a sure bet for women at the time, so I went into nursing.”

Give us some examples of the jobs you had prior to starting your stained glass career.

I am the oldest of seven children and was always considered a responsible kid, so I was the neighborhood babysitter because, well, I could change a diaper! In my mid to late teens I did telephone soliciting for a vacuum company—yeah, I was one of those intrusive people that called at dinnertime—but it turned out I was good at it, and I became a top earner for the company. It was there that I learned to listen to the customer—not to be too pushy but always get the appointment and then ultimately close the sale.

After I started my nurse training, I worked for various medical concerns and eventually found myself in a bacteriology department at the age of twenty. I was surprised when my boss left me to run the whole department on my own for two weeks! I ran every medical test and reported to many doctors, and it went off without a hitch. As I think back, I was

fearless. If that happened today I’d probably be a nervous wreck! There is no question that the lessons learned on those early jobs were invaluable in preparing me for my career in the art glass business.

How did you get the idea to venture into art glass?

I have always enjoyed art, even winning some awards during my school years. My only thought about stained glass was dreaming during church services and getting lost in the colors of the windows. Many years later I saw stained glass classes offered through community education, and I signed up. Soon all my windows were covered in suncatchers, and my standard gift was some sort of glass item.

What gave you the confidence to open your own glass art business?

After crafting for only a few months, a friend asked me to share a table with her at a local craft market. My items proved to be very popular, and I guess that’s when I saw a moneymaking opportunity. Then the school where I had taken my first glass class was looking for another instructor. I schlepped a few projects to the interview and talked myself into the job. I really enjoy teaching, and many of those original students are friends and customers to this day.”

A while later I decided to take a break from the nursing profession and started crafting daily, showing my wares every weekend at the market and advertising my classes. Pretty soon, my students made it clear they wanted to buy their supplies directly from me, so I established discounts with some local glass stores and started



selling supplies. When a few of my friends from the weekend market rented space in a local strip mall, I took the leap and rented a 600-square-foot space. Every dime I took in I reinvested, and I used every negative comment as a catalyst to improve. My husband Tim was very encouraging, and he has always been with me every step of the way.

When did you move into your current large-scale enterprise?

I worked eight full years without an employee. (Of course, Tim was there whenever possible.) I'd run the store, unload a shipment of glass, go teach an evening class, and then come back to finish the books in the evening. At first I hired part-timers who eventually became full-time. I kept picking up spaces in the strip mall, ending up with four out of the six units. Then in 2001 we finally decided to buy our own place. In August of that year we moved into an old bank building with 4,000 square feet and parking for fifty cars. It still has the original vault with a megathick vault door. I like to tease our dichroic glass manufacturers by telling them that we use the vault to protect our dichroic inventory.

What have you learned along the way that could help struggling retailers succeed today?

I would say to never let your personal opinion influence what products you bring to your customers. You must have products you can stand by and products that are supported by the manufacturers. But don't second-guess your customers. They don't care if you don't like the person who owns the company or where the product is made. Carry the products your customers want and leave the politics alone. Don't be mean-spirited and don't burn your bridges. Treat others as you would like to be treated. It's really very simple. Share your knowledge and it will come back to you a hundredfold. And network, *network*, **network!**

What do you consider to be the most profitable sectors of your business?

I love the fact that I can be a decorator, teacher, crafter, artist, mentor, supplier, boss, and therapist. The beauty of this business is that when one facet of it is down, another part will pick up the slack. The diversification of services and products is the key to a profitable and interesting business.

What value do you find in your membership in trade associations such as the AGA?

I enjoy and benefit greatly from my trade group memberships. I served on the board of the AGSA (now the AGA) and I hold this group in high regard. I was one of the few retailers in that group when it started. I also am a member of SGAA, IGGA, and RAGS, and I'm with the Better Business Bureau along with several chambers. It really kicks your business up a notch to belong to the professional groups. Gets your name out, validates your organization, offers network opportunities, and is recommended all around.

Please share some of the most effective marketing tools that you have found.

I try to spread the word on my business whenever I can. I utilize the *Stained Glass News*, Spectrum postcards for mailings, standard newsletters, and Constant Contact (through the AGA) for e-mail newsletters. I send personal cards and thank-yous to customers to let them know that I know they have many shopping choices and that I'm glad they choose us.

Three years ago I started Fusing Fridays—not a formal class or club, just encouraging people to meet a few times a month and play with fusing products and continue in the process. We don't promise a project, but we do promise an "experience." Same goes for the "Thursday Club," around twenty-five members who meet one Thursday a month for camaraderie, show-and-tell, video viewing, or demonstrations. When we get them in the store, they make purchases. So I think one of my most effective marketing tools has been to truly want to assist my customers whenever they need help.

Finally, every effective entrepreneur has long-range plans. Please tell us what the future looks like for Karen Carney and Custom Stained Glass.

After many years of growth, I think I'm where I want to be in business and in life. Certainly, receiving the AGA Retailer of the Year award is icing on the cake. After seventeen years of building my business, I had my first child and then my second child four years later. (They are now 16 and 12.) Like every parent, I struggle with balancing family life with the business.

My long-range plans are to continue to serve as many consumers in my market as possible and reap the benefits from those efforts. I don't ever see the day that I don't do some form of glasswork, but if it ever becomes a drag and not fun anymore—I'm outta here! My children have not expressed an interest in the business but they're young yet, so who knows? When the time comes, we'll just sell or liquidate, but that's still a few miles down the road. In the meantime I'm enjoying the run and thank all of those who were involved for the wonderful recognition as the AGA Retailer of the Year.

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You can find out more about how Karen and Tim Carney have developed their retail glass business in the AGA News section of the Fall 2008 issue of Profitable Glass Quarterly.

