

Glass Delights—Navigating Turnabouts

by Colleen Bryan

Pris Haug first approached stained glass as a hobbyist in 1975, and until the early '90s earned her living in a corporate career that took her away from home a lot. "In my travels I got to pop into glass shops all around the country. I made mental notes about what I saw as problems with attitude, lack of supplies, inconsistent service, et cetera. When I opened my own glass business in the mid '90s, I built my business plan around the reverse of that problem list. Whatever I didn't like as a customer in another shop I won't allow to happen here."

Pris Haug found, however, that making a career transition is not the simplest thing to pull off and may require burning some bridges. "In my original career I was on the road 70 percent of the time wearing three-piece suits and high heels and doing a host of un-fun things. I decided to start a consulting firm, which was almost as much fun as the twenty-five years of corporate work. Finally, my husband Berny asked me, 'What do you really want to do with the rest of your life?' When my response was, 'Open up a glass shop,' we took the furniture out of the living room and opened a shop in our house. The day I decided to open the business I donated all of my suits and high heels to Goodwill."

Opening a Home Studio

Soon after Pris opened her Glass Delights studio on the Delaware River outside Pennsville, New Jersey, the home shop grew to overwhelm every room in the house except the bedroom. "People were cutting glass on my kitchen counters. Let's just say it was not ideal." The studio took over her husband's garage for sandblasting. "My husband would come home from his real job that paid the bills and be unable to park in his own driveway or use his own bathroom. That got old."

Next the couple decided to bulldoze a little cottage on their riverfront property and construct a purpose-built glass shop in its place. They located the shop ten feet away from the house. "Getting the business out of our home was our best move. Beyond that, we've had to learn to roll with the punches." The new shop, affectionately known as the compound, was booming shortly after it was built in 2000, but after 9/11/2001 the economy went dead. "All of the sudden there was no business."

Starting Over

The Haugs considered what to do and decided to create the business anew. "We got the business thriving again, but that wasn't the end of drama. In 2003 Berny was downsized—given two hours notice after nineteen years as an engineer in a nuclear plant." So the husband and wife teamed up to operate Glass Delights, with Berny specializing in sandblasting and decorative etching and their friend, Delfea, specializing in glassworking and carpentry.

These experiences convinced Pris that the most important trick in being an entrepreneur is finding the ability to bounce back and respond to what life deals. "Every time you get a tough hand you just have to be creative and work your way around it and stay positive."



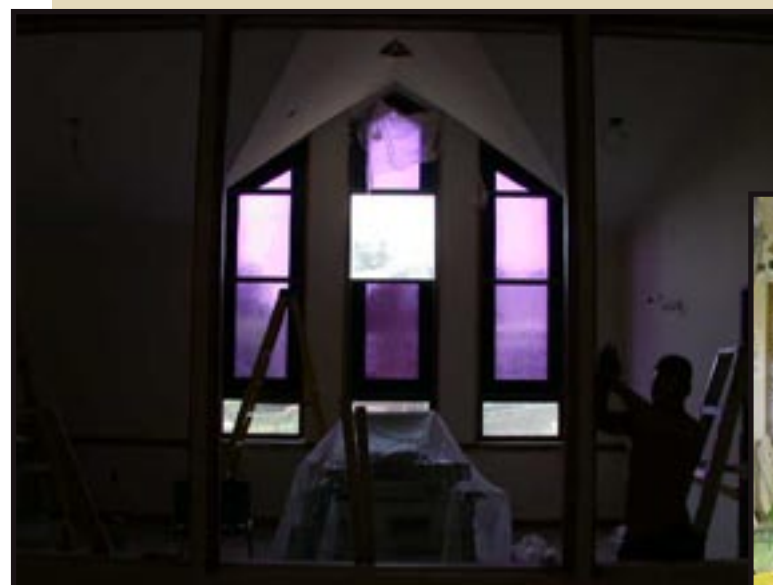
Priscilla and Delfea in a restaurant entryway with many of their beveled windows



Our Lady of Peace Statue



Fund-raising mementos



Student work

Priming the Economic Pump

These days, the economy is on everybody's minds, and the Haugs face yet another challenging business environment. "It has definitely affected our business; commissions are down." But Pris thinks the situation is temporary. "A month ago I was totally caught up on commissions, but now I have two or three starting to filter in again."

She primes the pump by keeping an eye out for new and innovative projects. "We started making jewelry a couple of years ago, and that is now very popular. When I go to RAGSFest I take as many classes as I can and bring the information back to my students. I take classes all over the country from the best instructors I can find. To be state-of-the-art you have to constantly hone your own skills." Pris finds that RAGS is a wonderful resource for solving problems, brainstorming, and finding new inspiration for her shop.

Sustaining Sidelines

Pris and Berny have developed peripheral products to help them span the tough economy. They engrave bricks for memorial walkways as a natural application of the studio's sandblasting equipment and also make commemorative mementos. A metal artist named Charles Parks makes giant stainless steel statues of religious subjects that are placed around the country. One is at the base of the Delaware Memorial Bridge, six miles away from the Haugs. "They called us to make miniatures of the statue as mementos and as part of their fund-raising efforts. I sketched a freehand photograph that we etched onto four-by-six-inch bevels, wrapped in a ladder chain, and put onto a hanging chain. Berny made 1,660 of them. By the time any of these orders are finished, he is less than enthusiastic. When I delivered the order on the statues, I came home and told him, 'Great news! We've gotten an order for 500 more.' And without missing a beat he responded: 'Get another husband.' Thankfully, I'd been teasing."

Retailers definitely want to balance how much of this tedious, tiring work they take on. Still, mementos for a church's hundredth anniversary or other major event can bring in needed revenue during slow periods. The Haugs have produced these mementos for seven churches and organizations and find that it gives their studio excellent exposure.

One of Pris' strongest considerations is deciding how much she really wants to grow. "I don't want to deal with a lot of employees and the business aspects of growth. My prior career was being an employment law specialist in human resources. I don't want that in my life anymore." So Haug tries to walk the fine line of taking on only what she, Berny, and Delfea can handle working together. "I think you have to recognize what you really want. I'd like more customers and money, but I really like having my own life as well." **PGQ**

Learn more about the techniques that the Haugs use to keep their customers coming back in the Winter 2009 issue of Profitable Glass Quarterly.



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View of the Delaware river out the back door of Glass Delights