

Covenant Art Glass— Keeping Customers Satisfied

by Colleen Bryan

Colleen and Stan Price work hard to assure that their customers are “thrilled with their experience in our store.” The retail owners of Covenant Art Glass in Everett, Washington, weed their way through the thicket of big-box stores and Internet competition with a confidence born of having wrested a living solely from glass through every industry and economic cycle since 1979.

Neither Stan nor Colleen brought a business background or business sense to their enterprise: She trained in home economics and he had a master’s degree in art with a concentration in glassblowing and some years plying the craft at Pilchuck. The couple did have a reservoir of creativity and native frugality that served them well when, in the autumn of 1979, they opened their stained glass store.

“The economy then was as miserable as the one we’re in now, with high inflation and mortgage interest rates between 13 and 16 percent,” Colleen remembers. “Our accountant gave us the usual caution that we wouldn’t make any money for the first year. A month after opening our doors I became pregnant. Stan worked at the store while I taught home economics at a junior high school. When we made a profit the first year, the accountant was shocked.”

Within a year, Colleen quit teaching as the couple poured themselves into the retail operation and care of the new baby. Colleen concentrated on book-keeping and tasks she could perform from home. They kept the store open six days and taught glass classes three evenings every week.

Guiding Principle

The Prices named their store Covenant as the touchstone to the foundational tenant of their business enterprise. “We agreed from the beginning that we would treat people honestly and fairly and see what came of that,” Stan recalls. After thirty years in the business, neither partner finds reason to rethink this basis for their operations, though they have had to learn and grow in their understanding of it.

“We had the most trouble with underselling, especially in our early years,” Colleen recalls. “We steered people away from buying oil cutters, for instance, because we knew we could never afford them. We’d strongly advise customers to start out with less expensive tools first to get accustomed to a process, and then sell them more expensive versions later if they still wanted them. Finally a customer told us that we’d never make any money if we wouldn’t let people buy the merchandise they wanted.” In this manner they stumbled onto the epiphany that many of their customers may not be as restricted in their budgets or their ambitions as the Prices themselves. With a lyrical laugh Colleen admits, “There are probably lots of people who are better at running a business than we are, though we’re still learning.”



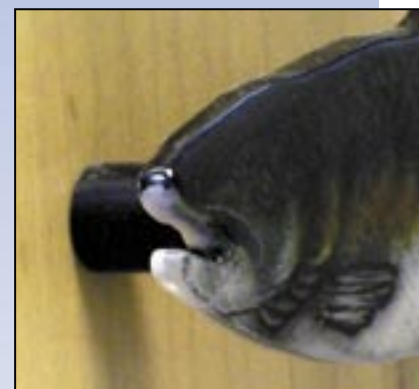
Fish Ladder, 32”h x 51”w



Lured, 26”h x 20”w x 5”d



Against the Grain, 17”h x 17”w x 3-1/2”d



Detail of Fish Handle



Fly Knob, 2”h x 2”w x 1”d



Fish Handle, 2”h x 6”w x 1”d

One of the couple’s more successful innovations was assembling a tool kit for all beginning students. “We discount everything in the kit by about 20 percent and ask them to buy it the first night of class.” The students have what they need to do the work. They aren’t out on the Internet buying inferior products, and Covenant staff are not scrambling to assemble and sell a range of tools at the last minute before class starts. The approach also proved a boon for gift givers: “Husbands come in to buy their wives a present. If you give a gift certificate for a class, it is just a piece of paper. A tool kit, on the other hand, gives the recipient something to unwrap and look at on Christmas morning.”

Their “customer is always right” orientation occasionally meets customers whose demands are unrealistic for a brick-and-mortar retailer. Some customers want to talk glass and learn from staff at the retail store before buying the merchandise on the Internet. Colleen addresses these situations with pragmatism and diplomacy. “I let them know the reasons that we charge our rates and reassure them that we work hard to please every customer. Then we all jump through hoops to demonstrate that commitment.” At the extremes she finds it sometimes useful to draw out the economic realities for the browsers. “I sweetly observe that they may be able to find a better price from a place that doesn’t bear the cost of a storefront, but I pose the question of whether they want a world with no local presence where they can take classes, browse racks of glass, or consult on the problems they encounter with their projects. That added value is often something people haven’t thought about when they’ve focused solely on price shopping.” In the end, many people shift their strategy given this perspective. Some don’t, and the Prices move on with their mission to deliver excellent service to the next customer.

Manufacturers and wholesalers periodically offer deals that help small retailers compete. “Gemini has a deal on ring saws where you can buy four and get one free. That allows us to match prices. Sometimes I ask people to bring me in ads from the Internet to see if I can match them. It may mean I make ten dollars off a deal rather than getting nothing.” It also helps her stay on top of a dynamic competition. Despite shifting positions among manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers, the Prices remain intentional about not undercutting any of the respective roles as they do business. “We think the industry is best served by respecting the positions and viability of each player’s role.”

Educating customers on the use of their own tools and equipment is one way that Colleen and Stan drive home the added value of a neighborhood art glass store. “This Saturday I’ll work with customers from nine to noon showing them how to use their own Morton boards to cut shapes. Teaching people how to use their equipment, helping them be successful, and find easier ways to work makes it more likely that they will come back for future projects.”



King Salmon, 21”h x 32”w x 1-1/2”d

The artwork on this page is created with fused and patined glass.

Hiring Talent

A huge part of Covenant's secret to long-standing success as a retail entity is its stable crew of talented staff. Stan and Colleen recruited each of their three full-time employees from among their most talented students, and part-time workers now help cover Saturdays and evenings. While all the employees are capable across glass processes, Stacey King is expert in fusing; Tami Bogdanoff specializes in lamps, mosaics, and solder sculptures; and Robin Johnson runs the store, managing everything from e-mail to purchasing and pricing as well as teaching cabochon jewelry classes. Nancy Alexander, Carol Doherty, Chris Duke, and Jamie Rau provide part-time support.

Colleen has taught stained glass at the local high school but does not attempt to fill that role at her store. Rather, she focuses on payroll and bookkeeping and covering whatever bases need covering at the moment. "All our employees are skilled and talented artists. They work on the store's commissions, but they also display their private work at the store, which takes a 25 percent commission on private sales." One staff person is incredibly tech savvy; another is a mosaic master who also knows a good deal about soldered sculpture."

Stan's master's degree and experience in hot glass give him an edge that many art glass retailers would covet. Stan generally comes up with ideas for Covenant's classes and commissions, and the store's artists put their heads together as a group to generate and implement solutions. "Sometimes the ideas work, sometimes they don't." Stan says. But the approach fosters a lively, creative, generative business culture that feeds long-time employees. The tenure of full-time employees runs to eighteen, twelve, and seven years respectively. "We try to hire for life," Colleen affirms.

Assessing the Economic Climate

Even as class enrollments have held steady, Colleen reports that Covenant's commission orders have slowed since the first quarter of 2008 to the lowest point in ten years. "We weren't even getting inquiries on commissions." As October 2009, that trend is beginning to shift, giving her confidence of a recovery on the horizon.

Overall receipts at Covenant dipped 30 to 40 percent in 2008 from the previous year, and the relationships between business lines shifted. "For the previous decade our revenues held steady at about 70 percent retail and tuition plus 30 percent commission work. Over the past year, 80 percent of our receipts relate to retail and less than 20 percent to commissions."

Nonetheless, Colleen Price is scarcely unnerved. "We know how to go on a budget. We understand frugality. This period resembles the economic climate that prevailed when we first opened the store in 1979. People couldn't afford to go out and buy things, so they tightened their belts and made things. And we have enough breadth in our business plan that when one area is down, another area strengthens."



Anchored, 31" h x 46" w



Yacht, 16" h x 20" w



Totem, 60" h x 20" w

All of the pieces have etched Fremont Flashed glass in the leaded glass projects.

Moving from Sidelines to Front and Center

Stan loves teaching and traveling around the country and producing fused and painted artwork. "We're pretty happy with the retail store location and emphasis and plan to keep it open for years to come. We'd like to grow the Stanprice.com aspects of our business."

In 2006 when Stan was named artist of the year for Snohomish County, he filled a gallery with his designs—sinks with swimming fish and bowls with fish swimming in them sitting on a base of soldered fish hooks. These designs now fill his www.stanprice.com website, which is geared toward gallery distribution. Reaching back to his glassblowing youth, Stan continues to look for ways to incorporate fusing and blowing in his current work. For the last several years he has combined painting on glass with fusing, a technique that allows him to create without the restrictions inherent to stained glass. Stan collaborates in sculptural work with another artist, Jim Duncan of Duncan Glass, to combine glue chipping (a textural technique) with fused and painted glass. He takes fused pieces to be blown into vessels. Covenant also incorporates more kiln work, fused elements, painting, and tempered work with traditional leaded glass in its commissions. He has taught his class called Detail in a Day at glass stores in Deland, Florida; Denver, Colorado; Omaha, Nebraska; Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; and San Luis Obispo, California, and at the RAGS convention.

Beyond the current economic recession, Colleen and Stan anticipate more kiln work and kiln classes in deference to the strong preference for the quick turnaround characteristic of today's hobbyists. As the economy recovers, he hopes to be able to do more of his traveling classes and gallery artwork to move these activities from the sidelines to front-and-center of his artistic production. "When I'm able to spend significantly more time on these ventures I'll feel like I've died and gone to heaven."

Meanwhile, Colleen and Stan strive to have fun and make sure their employees are having fun. "Our industry is a lot about entertainment. Customers may face some depressing realities at home, but they are drawn to a place where they can have some fun and laugh with friends. So show up with a smile on your face and a gleam in your eye. Laughter does good like a medicine." **PGQ**

Discover how Colleen and Stan Price are able to take advantage of free advertising opportunities in their community for Covenant Art Glass in the Spring 2010 issue of Profitable Glass Quarterly.

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