

# Alan Toy— Retailer as Educator

— by Colleen Bryan

Alan Toy, owner of the retail glass store Stained Glass Connection in Sarasota, Florida, is not the sort of educator or glass school that *PGQ* usually covers in this column, but he certainly approaches the goal of art glass education in a strategic and systematic manner and on a significant scale. From Toy's point of view as a retailer, the enterprise may be all about selling more products. But from the perspective of the larger glass industry, this aggressive approach to crafts education is important to growing the next generation of glass crafters and artists. Toy's approach tackles head-on the dearth of art classes and money for art materials, and it does so in a way that helps sustain his retail operation. The key to Toy's approach to advancing glass education in the schools is to anticipate and overcome all obstacles.

### Hand-Tailored Education

Toy volunteers as an artist-in-residence at several elementary, middle, and high schools in the Sarasota area. He has template glass projects that he uses to teach fusing to children at each level of school. The elementary school projects involve creating individual fused cabochons with most of the glass precut, while the middle and high school projects are designed with the specific teacher and usually result in multilayered fused plates or bowls or platters. At the college level, Toy provides students at the local colleges with advice and a wholesale discount. Some of these students have done incredibly unique work.

Given the ubiquitous nationwide shortage of art class resources, Toy provides a sample grant template that has been successfully used to secure funds to purchase midsize kilns and supplies. He helps teachers prepare the grant proposals using the educational discount pricing from his store. Stained Glass Connection donates scrap glass for mosaics as well as kiln time. Alan also works with teachers and students to produce auction and raffle items for school fundraisers. "Four items raised as much as \$14,000 at one recent event. These are high-quality art pieces that the kids design and their teacher and I fire."

As Toy helps build these glass craft resources in the schools, certain teachers go on to create after-school glass hobby clubs that send business to his store. "Even though it is small potatoes, I welcome it. An eight-year-old may only spend four dollars per week now, but it sows interest for the future. I sell at an educational discount that still allows for incremental profit. The teacher responsible for the club helps by giving specific lessons, and I am called on at the end to critique final projects. The kids are so excited to get professional input. At the high school level, many significant artists are coming up, and what I give them is the ability to have glass as part of their repertoire."



Alan takes obvious pleasure in recounting the example of one young man who is now a junior in high school. Toy started teaching him as an eighth grader, and the boy is now accomplished in every aspect of glass. He produced a stained glass three-dimensional piece for a sophomore English paper that both Toy and his teacher thought incredible. He purchases materials and supplies to make gifts at every holiday. He now is working on an Eagle Scout badge and hopes to incorporate fused glass into his public service project.

### A Teacher Helping Teachers

Alan Toy offers free tuition to teachers for classes that are certified for continuing education credits. These classes can be used to complete their annual training requirements in art. Toy works with local school boards who handle all the advertising. The art teachers all sign up, purchase supplies at an educational discount from Stained Glass Connection, and thoroughly enjoy each other's company. Many of these teachers are very gifted and qualified. "One of the teachers I work with has just been accepted by the University of Florida's Masters in Fine Arts program with a full scholarship."

Alan also makes sure that Stained Glass Connection gets on the bid list for the local adult education program, which frequently has to go out for bid for supplies and equipment. "I pursue this business aggressively. Sometimes I have to make certain financial sacrifices in order to keep the name of my company in the forefront, but I try to remember that it is possible to be too proud and end up too poor. The key, I've found, is to sell against the competition [from other stores and the Internet] by providing high-quality service and meeting every reasonable request."

Since Florida is full of retirement communities with their own craft studios, Alan volunteers, in exchange for lunch, to give free beginner and advanced classes at their locations. "It makes the classes more convenient for them, and they thank me by shopping at my store." He maintains a discount program for repeat customers and volume purchases at the store.



## Learning to Use Materials Well

Toy feels that the rising cost of glass is one of the biggest threats to the future of the industry. He focuses his technical classes on helping people work more efficiently. "One of the principle barriers to having people stay with glass as a hobby is the cost; its raw materials are too expensive to waste. Students who learn to cut glass perfectly 95 percent of the time—by whatever method—stay with the craft and get more involved than people who cut correctly less than 80 percent of the time. I teach a very efficient way of cutting with very little waste." Alan spent hours with Don Able, President of Morton in Miami, and is convinced that The Morton System can make anyone a better fuser by first making them a more accurate glass cutter. He tries continuously to tie new technology in with old methods to result in greater efficiency.

Alan has worked with a lot of glass over a long period of time. He has a curious personality and is willing to try different methods. In the end, he tries to develop logic behind why he does things and to communicate that logic through his teaching. "Having an underlying logic makes it easier for people to remember why they should do something a certain way. It also gives them a basis for judging when another approach might actually be an improvement." And that is, after all, the very heart of learning. **PGQ**

## Navigating Political Shoals

Toy recognizes that there are many glass teachers in the surrounding area who teach standard techniques in many different ways. And predictably, that raises questions from students about what constitutes the *right way*. "I never want to step on toes; it is not good for business. I tell my students, 'There are many ways to climb the mountain. The method your other teacher taught you is fine. That is one valid way to do it. As a professional artist and commercial studio, this is the way we do it.' It is their choice whether or not to use our tip."

Students receive a recommendation from Toy to use his techniques at least during the class. That way they will have a fair basis of comparison between the methods they have already learned and the new ones to which he is introducing them. "The usefulness of a given method sometimes relates to differences in personal size, mechanics, and brain processing that people aren't aware of. If a student isn't cutting straight, he may not recognize how eye dominance is affecting him. When I tell him he is using the wrong eye for cutting, he can switch eyes and the improvement is immediate. But other problems can take more experimentation. I always tell students to develop their own eclectic styles, collecting the methods that suit them best. The more classes they take from different people, the more able they will be to pick and choose which methods work best for them."

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*You'll find more about Alan Toy's retail operations and his participation in a farmer's market artists' cooperative in the Fall 2008 issue of Profitable Glass Quarterly.*



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