

Dennis Brady

A Curious and Generous Glass Educator

by Colleen Bryan

Photography by Jason Brady

Of all his many skills, Dennis Brady from Victoria, British Columbia, is least good at retirement. A full decade after his website asserts that he is supposed to have retired, the energetic Brady highlights the configuration of the family businesses and zeroes in on his current passion for glass education. He has dabbled in art throughout his life, paying for his university education by doing caricatures, and he credits acquired skill more than innate talent for most of his artistic success. "Every kid draws. Some stop; some don't. I dabbled in sculpture, carving, and painting. I love glass, because it is a very physical and scientific art form. I'm fascinated by the physics of glass."

The artist started his adventures in stained glass while helping his eldest son Brant with a school art project. "He asked me to help him draw patterns, and I quickly discovered that just because you can draw a design doesn't mean the solder will hold that design together." Lured to glass in pursuit of a practical solution, the father saw an opportunity to teach his son how to create a business. Thus was born DeBrady Glassworks, which means "of the Bradys." When Brant died in a car accident a few years later, Dennis sank into glasswork as a refuge. Now his two younger sons Dane and Jason have emerged as owners and operators of the family business.



*Dennis Brady,
Virginia Clipper
stained glass model,
24" high x 24" wide.*

Four Lines of Business

In all, Brady's family runs four separate businesses, which at one time employed 16 people in production. Now only Dennis and his two sons remain. DeBrady Glassworks, the primary enterprise, sells finished glass art and specializes in large, intricate stained glass model ships that sell through galleries and fine art shows across North America. The company also does a fair amount of commission work.

Brady's team also designs, prototypes, and tests steel molds and tools for glass weaving, screen melts, and similar glasswork under the brand name Master Artisan. They contract with a manufacturer to fabricate the tools, which then come back to Victorian Art Glass for distribution.

Victorian Art Glass was created to sell supplies and tools. The impetus behind it was the observation that professional artisans were not getting a discount from any level in the supply chain. "I always thought that was a poor situation, so I set out to provide full wholesale pricing to professional artisans." Brady created Victorian Art Glass with the motto: "Helping aspiring artisans establish – and established artisans expand." Eighty percent of the business takes place over the Internet. The company recently even shipped an order to Russia. "We will ship to anywhere on earth," Brady quips, "but off-planet only by special order."

Glass Campus is the latest of Brady's enterprises, a free educational resource for aspiring glass artists. He remembers the guild-like secrecy he encountered when he decided to work professionally in glass and wants to honor those who helped him pierce that secrecy. His Glass Campus website links to 150 technical video and educational clips and is an ongoing growth project.

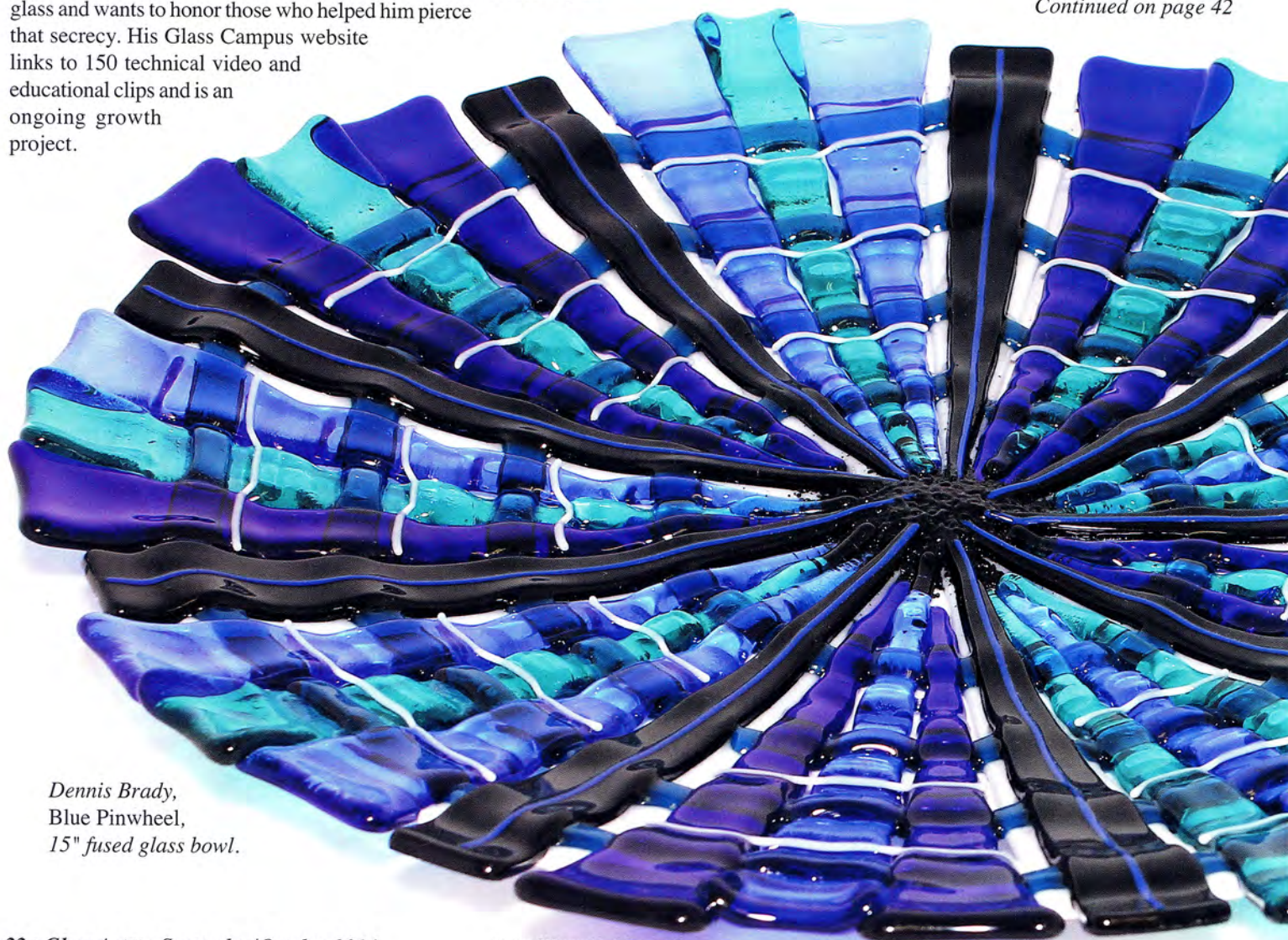
Letting Curiosity Lead

After beginning his exploration in stained glass, Brady has migrated to warm, sandblasted, torchworked, cast, and blown glass. "If there's anything I'm not playing with, it is because I haven't heard of it yet," Brady boasts. Currently he experiments with silk screening and ways to set up a glassblowing operation with nothing more than a pottery kiln and a big torch. "I'd like to make furnaces obsolete." He takes pleasure from turning his experimentation into the education of others.

Brady is convinced that more people from around the world are becoming interested in glass and realizing greater success with it. He points to the many people who come to the Las Vegas, Nevada, Glass Craft & Bead Expo as evidence of a huge and steadily growing interest in glass arts. This rapidly expanding interest in glass has created a need for more and better teaching, both in the technical aspects of the trade and in its business implications.

A gifted teacher, Brady conducts Glass Expert Webinars™ for *Glass Art's* sister publication, *Glass Patterns Quarterly*. He also hosts YouTube videos, offers an extensive library of tutorials on his Glass Campus website, and maintains an informational Glass Campus Facebook page. Brady is most interested in teaching at his home studio. Still, he manages a growing schedule of international workshop engagements. He works with young people through different colleges and universities to help them understand that arts and crafts can be legitimate avenues for business pursuits.

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Dennis Brady,
Blue Pinwheel,
15" fused glass bowl.

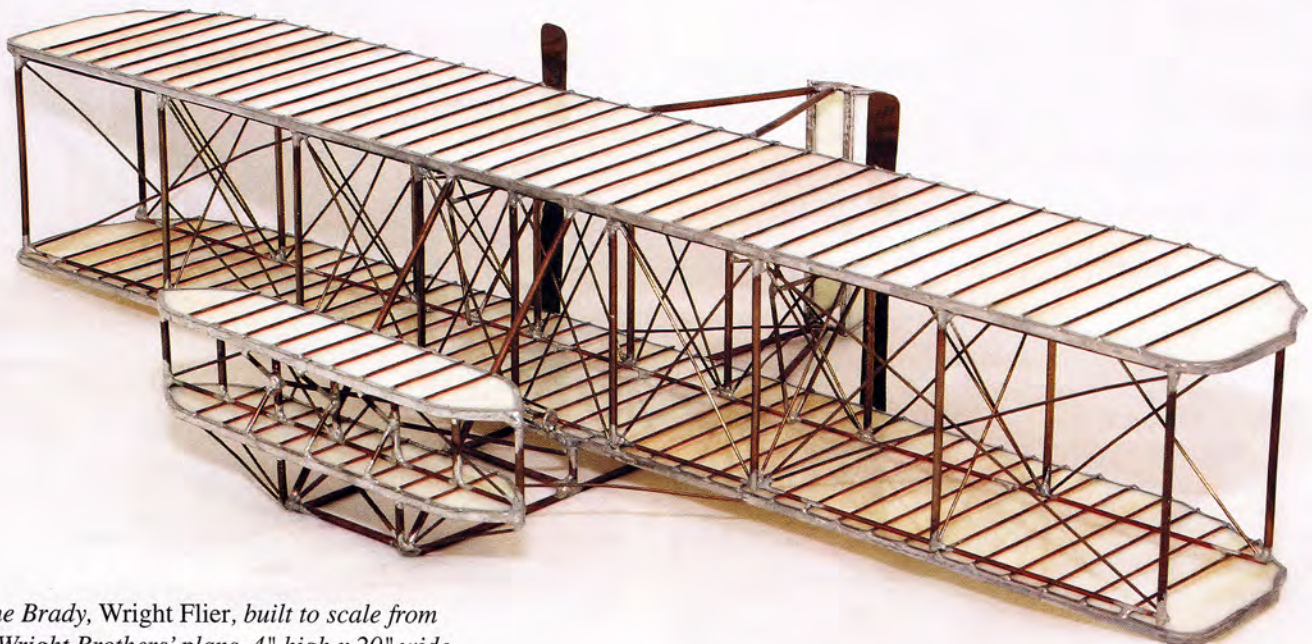
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Brady enjoys experimenting with and teaching quick, inexpensive ways to make molds, which he dubs "DIM stuff" (did it myself). "With Master Artisan, we manufacture ceramic and stainless steel molds and sell them to most of the major distributors in the industry. But I am at a point in my career where I can afford to be more altruistic and do what benefits the greatest number of people. I'm trying to reintroduce older, simpler, less expensive techniques that can substitute for expensive high-tech methods. We teach lots of very basic things, including plaster of paris molds."

Similarly, he teaches fundamentals such as really good glass cutting skills, because he is so convinced of the need for them. "I am always amazed to find that many people who have been involved in the craft for 10 years have only picked up just enough skill to get by and make something. They don't recognize how developing really good glass cutting skills or learning the science behind fusing and slumping processes can help them up their game, reduce their costs, and improve their chance of success. As I grow older, I'm finding it harder to keep my inside voice locked inside when I encounter that phenomenon."

A favorite among the DeBrady class offerings is a Glass Art Sampler that his sons taught in Las Vegas last year. It gives students a taste of a variety of techniques and allows them to try out different things before investing in one they really like. The class incorporates stained glass, fusing and slumping, embossing, sandblasting, casting, mold making, and torchworking. "We got the best student evaluation I've ever seen. Someone drew a line through our one-through-five evaluation and wrote in 10!"

Brady particularly enjoys experimenting with new techniques and churning ideas, and is thrilled by what the Internet now makes possible. "I created a Glass Campus Facebook group exclusively for members to discuss teaching or explain a favorite technique. We now have more than 1,000 people from 20 different countries who participate in the forum."



Dane Brady, Wright Flier, built to scale from the Wright Brothers' plans, 4" high x 20" wide. Design and pattern by Dennis Brady.

He is intrigued by how Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) now allow people who live remotely to connect with classes at major prestigious universities and speculates about what promise that trend may offer to the glass art industry. The earlier practice of posting text materials on the Web has been replaced by material that is created specifically for the Internet. Webinar formats are shifting away from stop-action photography toward the use of slow-motion photography and cartooning. It is now possible to get incredible close-ups so that all of the subscribers to a Webinar can have the best seat in the house.” Brady can be absolutist in his conclusion: “Embrace the Internet as a teaching, retail, and design tool. Either figure out how to use its potential or shuffle to the curb.”

The Importance of Good Teaching

Brady cites the importance of good teaching in maintaining a vital glass art industry. These days he concentrates on teaching people in the glass industry how to teach. Having taught business administration and entrepreneurial management at the university level before getting into the glass arts, he often finds the misalignment of teachers across the industry somewhat jarring. “Many people who should be teaching aren’t. Many others who shouldn’t be in front of a class are.” Both situations exact a hefty price on the industry.

“Good teachers may or may not be the best artists, but they have a particular aptitude and personality that makes them able to structure a class outline and keep a room full of students interested and under control as they move through the presentation.” When students pay their hard-earned money to competent teachers, they get the value they paid for. He tries to impart skills such as curriculum and classroom management that can help the artisan bridge the gap. A few years ago Brady created an Ethical Instructor Guideline that helps teachers find the balance necessary to deliver a good classroom experience. It even includes a list of profiles for typical problem students and suggests ways to deal with them so that everyone can derive value from the experience.

“People from Venezuela and Scotland take my Webinars and post to my Glass Campus Facebook page. One lady from Israel got up at 2:30 a.m. her time to take a Webinar.” Brady estimates that in the past five years, at least 30 people have come through one of his beginner classes and gone on to become professional glass artists. A couple of them are realizing \$100,000 incomes from glass, and he is proud of his role in their success.

Brady understands teaching as a way of paying forward in recognition of the many people who helped him and his company along the way. His free tutorials on Glass Campus address a broad range of techniques, modalities, and projects, and include titles on business, teaching, and general advice. He is enthusiastic about helping others who want to take up glass professionally. He looks forward to expanding his teaching, including traveling more to teach internationally.

Pitfalls of Perfectionism

Brady is excited by the major changes occurring across the glass industry and what he sees as a renaissance of the glass arts, particularly those fueled by the explosion of interest in fusing. He observes that technological advances have driven down the costs required to start glassworking. Brady is intent upon driving those costs down further, and much of his experimentation focuses on that goal. In the sandblasting arena, Brady says, aspiring sandblasters are often told they need a \$3,000 to 5,000 outfit in order to approach the art form. “I can show them how to do respectable work for \$500.”

Increasingly in his quasi-retirement, Brady focuses on experimental work. "My sons say, 'Dad's job is to drive as fast as possible without skidding into a ditch.'" He delights in the fact that just a few successes can justify a whole lot of failures and allow him to tell everybody else what works.

Brady's expertise is built upon a mountain of trial and error. His philosophy is that everything we do is governed by a "Goldilocks" syndrome. Our first efforts are too hot. The next are too cold. We do not generally get things right until we have made multiple attempts.

A willingness to accept failure is essential in every enterprise, Brady posits. "Fear of failure cripples so many efforts at the outset. Whether you're selling art, autos, or appliances, if you can't accept failure, you can't make advances. You should get a job where someone else will take all the risks, but don't expect to be rewarded on par with someone who pushes things forward. We need to recognize and embrace the reality that our first efforts are likely to fail."

Brady observes that a lot of aspiring artists don't understand the concept or the importance of being good enough. "I don't believe in perfectionism and think of it as an illness. Pursuit of the best is often the great enemy of the good."

Launching as Professional Artists

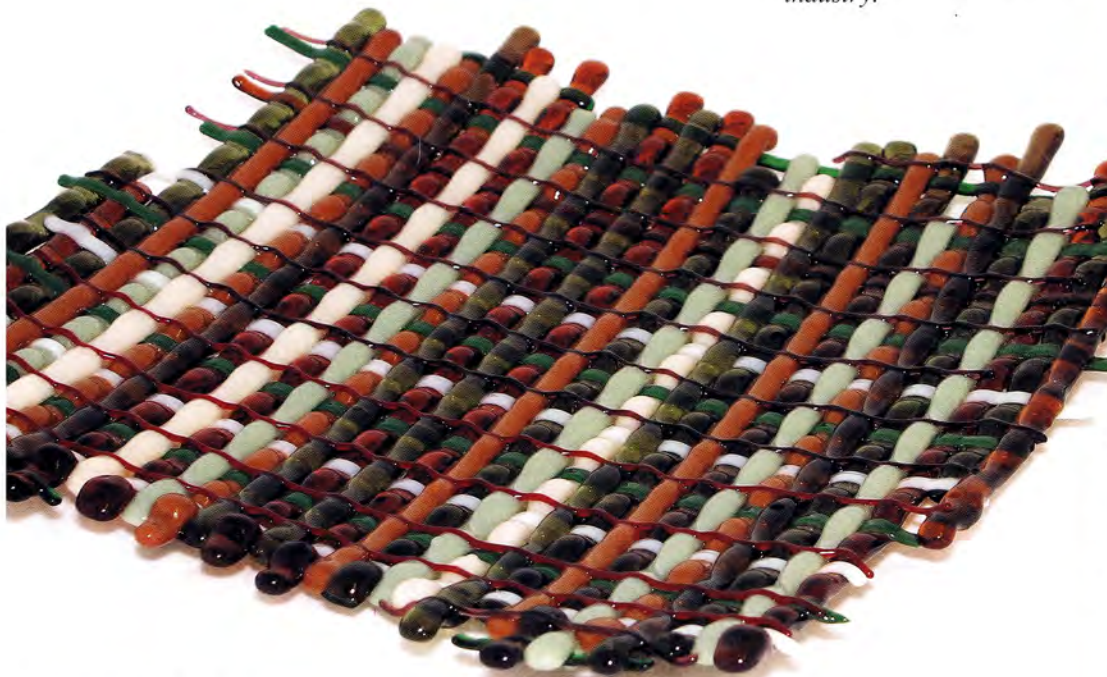
Launching a business can be the hardest step for an emerging artist. "Getting a business moving, getting the wheels to turn, and breaking the inertia is the hardest part. Set the wheels straight forward, make it move, and generate momentum before you worry about direction. Make something. Sell it. Make something else. During your apprenticeship, that is your task."

Brady believes that the major difference between an amateur and a professional glassworker is often not so much the quality but rather the speed with which they can work. A hobbyist might take 50 hours to do something a pro could do in three or four. "I see a lot of people wanting to transition from hobbyist to professional, when the significant change they need to make is to reduce the time it takes to produce a finished product. This is much more common than needing giant leaps in quality."

The prevailing notion that novice glassmakers must make money coming out of the chute is one that Brady thinks is unrealistic. "When you go to school, you don't immediately generate an income from what you learn in the classes. I see a lot of people with the naive idea that they will immediately sell their product at prices equivalent to those demanded by masters. You don't get paid during an apprenticeship. You develop the technique, range, and expertise that customers might be willing to pay for in the future. A famous glassblower once told me, 'I spent two years making nothing but paperweights, and I developed exceptional skill in manipulating soft glass.' When people can't launch their business, the problem is often that they are unwilling to do the work that needs to be done."

In the interim, Brady thinks the worst advice he hears given young apprentices is: Don't work cheap. "Unless you start by working cheap, you won't work at all and you don't get any better." He also cautions budding artisans against getting too particular in what they will undertake. "In general, a starving artist is simply too picky about what he will eat. You can make a living from anything. You just have to figure out where the revenue is and go there." Sometimes, that involves a lot of routine production work. **G&A**

*Look for **Subscriber Benefits** coming to **Subscribers Only** via links in upcoming e-mails from Glass Art. This **Bonus Content** will include insights from Dennis Brady on the ever-changing glass art industry.*



*Dennis Brady, Irish Tweed,
fused glass weave, 10" x 10".*



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