

Trinity Stained Glass

by Diane Heilenman

Trinity Stained Glass and Windmill Studio in Warwick, Rhode Island, has grown 10 to 15 percent each year since owner Amy Custis bought it in 1997. “And it’s still climbing,” she said. “I’m very happy about that.”

Custis is a former photographer’s assistant, auctioneer’s helper, dry cleaner, and customer relations consultant who is a true believer in the power of tapping into left-brain and right-brain thinking. “You have to have both to run a shop. The left brain is the side that processes logic, language, and business sense. The right side is the side of creativity and art,” said Custis. Being able to distinguish between the two is critical in a studio/shop setting so you don’t get offtrack with all right-brain creativity and no left-brain logic.

For instance, once her creative process is complete, Custis is careful to take a photo of every work produced at Trinity. She uses them as more than a personal record. “A picture *is* worth a thousand words,” she said. “Believe it or not, lots of people don’t know what they want.” The photo albums allow Custis to walk clients toward a crystallized

notion of the art glass they want but perhaps can’t articulate. The albums are also a good way to be able to give clients a notion of cost. And, if they are still stuck in a decision quandary, Custis often asks them to produce a personal “tickle file,” composed of images of anything that strikes their fancy, from clothes and cars to plants and cuisine, so she can start to analyze likes and dislikes. Once the client’s creative side is settled, she prepares a two-page contract that is a point-by-point walk-through of the custom project. “I make sure there are no surprises. I make sure the left brain is completely engaged at this point,” Custis said.

If you are new to the process, don’t try to move too quickly from a creative moment to a logical one, she said. Even if it’s only a few minutes, insert something relatively mindless in between tasks to cleanse the mental palette.

Clear thinking is critical when you are running a shop solo, said Custis, and when you don’t have a lot of space. Trinity is a storefront in a strip mall and has a mere 1,100 square feet. “We’re squished,” said Custis, cheerfully. She



opted to keep the space totally open, devoting one-third to retail and the rest to studio and workspace. The student “studio” is set up along the Knights of the Roundtable model, she said. Custis uses an eight-foot-square table in the middle of the shop where everyone can see what everyone else is doing. Her personal workbench is scarcely half that size. Retail sales, classes, and custom work each account for about one-third of Trinity’s income, she said.

Custis, 48, said running Trinity and growing it really have not been difficult. She credits a flow of jobs over the past thirty years. “When I bought Trinity, I had everything I needed to know except actually running the store and cutting large glass,” she noted. The former owners stayed around for five weeks. Then she was on her own, “a sole proprietor with zero employees,” she noted. But she does receive what she considers to be invaluable help from her artistic assistant, Roberta LaMothe. Bert, as she is known, is an independent contractor who works on-site and whom Custis considers to be her right hand. She has been involved as a stained glass artist for the past twenty-five years and is responsible for fabrication work. Custis shared that, “She is phenomenal at it. I don’t know what I would do without her.” Custis is also aided by her shop security system and official greeter, Cecelia Bloom, her Jack Russell terrier. While she is trying to finish something in order to help other customers, Cece takes on the task of keeping them occupied until it’s their turn.

What Custis said she was not prepared for is how much she would love



“Tree in Wind”
Copper Sculpture on Art Glass

working with stained glass. On reflection, she thinks the stage was set during her first two jobs, a pair of part-time positions as assistant at an antiques auction that introduced her to glass. Her job was to present auction items to the bidders. She recalls holding up Tiffany lamps. “I would have these Tiffany lamps right in my face. The memory of that has never left me. That was where I fell in love with the medium,” said Custis.

“I did this [the two jobs] for about five years. Then I just went along my merry way, which I call ‘my dues’ now, doing a lot of crummy jobs and winding up in the dry cleaning business.” After eleven years in that, working alone except for a presser, “I learned you really can do it all, from waiting on customers to placing orders to washing up the bathroom, just like I do now.” She also got deep lessons in customer relations. “Dry cleaning is really all about customer service—you don’t have a product. In the dry cleaning business, people don’t really want to be there.”

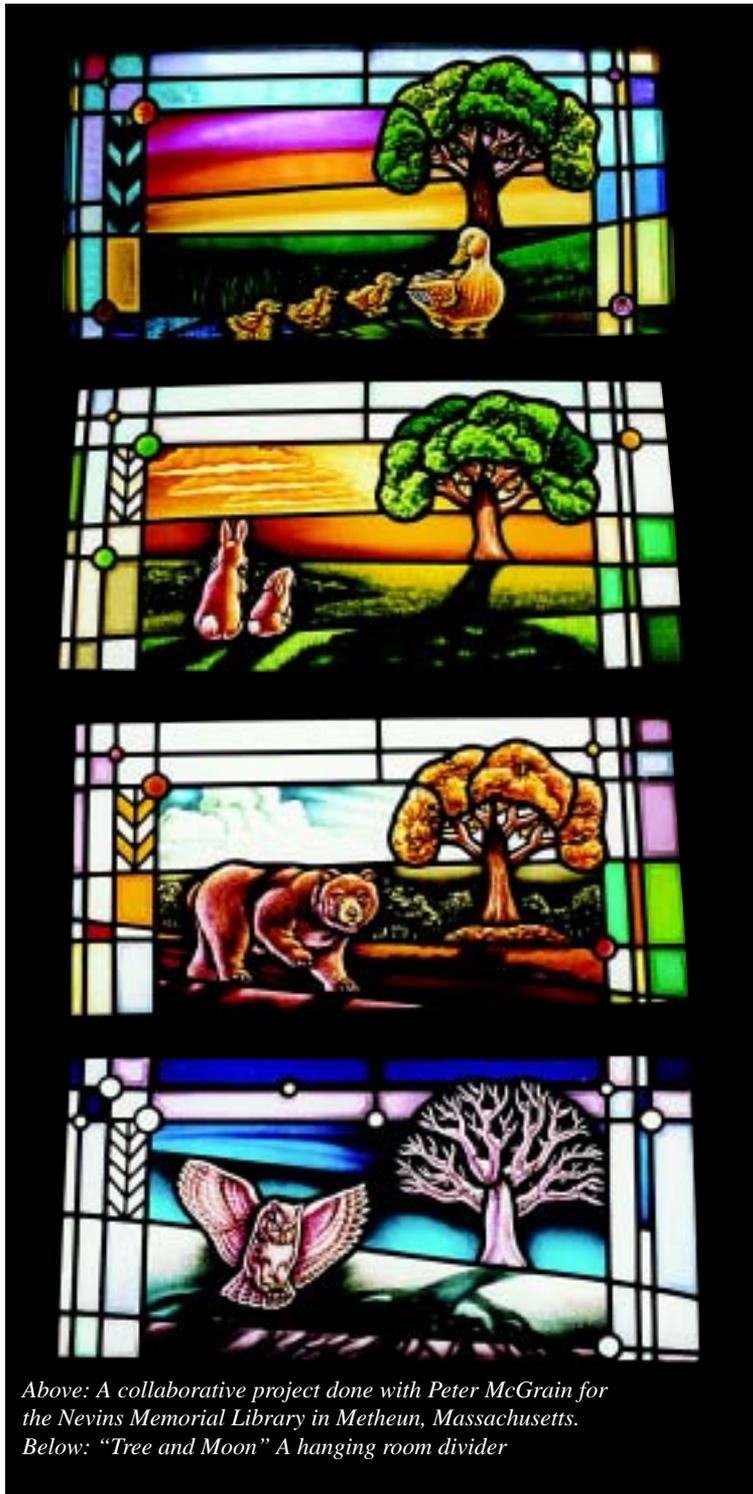
When she sold the store in 1989, she had a strange commodity on her hands—free time.

She stopped by a little gift shop near her home in Rhode Island. She asked about classes. “I plunked down \$50 and became an instant addict.” At the same time, she began to purchase her glass supplies from Trinity on the recommendation of the gift shop owners and her teachers, Vinny and Dimity Rainello. During the day she was using her hard-won customer service skills as a consultant teaching those skills to the employees of thirty-six Stop & Shop grocery stores. “I was running around like a mad lady,” she recalled, traveling store-to-store and having 6 a.m. meetings in order to catch night staff. For fun and sanity, she said, “I was hanging out at the gift shop several nights each week and all day Saturday. The Rainellos asked me to teach beginner classes. Since their supply base was small, I continued to buy my stained glass supplies from the founding owners of Trinity, Sandy and Joe DiPalma. When they decided to retire six years later, I bought the store.”

There have been relatively few unpleasant surprises thanks to her long business background, but Custis said she does have a few tips for anyone interested in getting into the business:

Make word-of-mouth your advertising base.

“The only ad I’ve taken out is in the Yellow Pages®,” said Custis, who teaches more than 200 beginners every year. Keep your internal lists up-to-date for mailing and be alert to promotional possibilities that are high impact for little time spent. For instance, she created stained glass inserts for cabinets in several regional kitchen design centers in exchange for the



Above: A collaborative project done with Peter McGrain for the Nevins Memorial Library in Methuen, Massachusetts.

Below: “Tree and Moon” A hanging room divider



credit and exposure. She avoids art festivals, which are “planning and time heavy,” making one exception for the high-end exhibition, The Martha’s Vineyard Home Furnishings Show, held each May on the island. She has affiliated with various programs for continuing adult education in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, which print 70,000 brochures at a time and send them out six times a year. “I just made the cover of one,” Custis noted.

Control growth. Custis does not have a Web site. “I’m in no hurry to have one,” she said. “You have to have controlled growth. You can’t do twenty things and do none of them well. You have to pick five things and do them well. I just read that multiple tasking is 40 percent less efficient than if you concentrate on a single task. That’s scary,” said Custis who admits to double- and even triple-tasking every day.

Have goals. Her goal five years ago was to increase Trinity’s focus on education, and she has introduced a dozen specialty workshops in topics from decorative soldering and mosaics to Tiffany-style lamps and stepping-stones. She instituted a popular program of guest teachers, including multiple visits from one of her first personal workshop teachers, Peter McGrain of Bingen, Washington, who is known for painting on glass.

Now, her five-year plan includes expansion of the commercial side of custom work, based in part on the resounding success of a collaborative project done with McGrain in 2002 for windows added during the expansion of Nevins Memorial Library in Metheun, Massachusetts. With a new focus in that direction, custom commercial work has doubled recently, she said.

Educate yourself. One of the first things Custis did after buying Trinity Stained Glass in 1997 was join the American Glass Association (AGA). Five months after the shop purchase, she drove to the annual meeting in Baltimore. “I didn’t know anyone in this contemporary glass world. I got there and looked around and thought: What is a dry cleaner doing here?” She took a workshop under McGrain the next year at the AGA show. “It was the largest dose

of humble pie I had ever eaten. After his slide show, I was thinking: I’m only a cabinet door maker. Then, I got my Irish up and said, ‘No, I can do this.’” Custis noted that every time she brings a guest artist to Trinity, which is an organizational feat she likens to planning a wedding, she and her students get the benefit of continuing education.

Give back. Some might call it networking. Custis writes for several glass publications. She is also active at the committee level with AGA, recently chairing a task force on education and is active in the International Guild of Glass Artists, New England.

And last, but certainly not least:

You do have to be willing to do it all, including clean the bathrooms.

Perhaps the hardest thing to deal with, she said, is being an organized person who is never organized enough. “As long as I live I’ll never get used to the fact that I have a to-do list and it never, ever happens. Trinity owns me; I don’t own Trinity. And I’m not complaining. Every day is a present. It’s like Christmas. I never know what’s in the box . . . The delineation between personal life and business life no longer exists and that’s not a complaint, either. I like my life. I have met so many new friends that have become old friends since 1997. That’s not common for someone at my stage of life, a single woman, making a living, and I feel so blessed.”

But, she said, “make sure you’re in it for love, not money. I’m loving what I do. I’m not very material. I’m definitely a low-maintenance lady with a high-maintenance life. I can’t wear anything decent to work because it just gets trashed. I don’t make very much money and the trade show is my vacation every year, but it is far better than a lot of other jobs I’ve had. Scraping crud off other people’s clothes is not nice,” she noted. And of a stint as a fast food manager: “You’re kicking grease and soapy suds in the middle of the night, trying to manage a crew of eleven teenagers who don’t want to be there.”

The best part of the stained glass business is “happy customers,” Custis said. Unlike the grocery or dry cleaning business, where basically, “you are

an errand, you are a chore, here they have to have a little extra time. They have to have a little time and a little extra money or they wouldn’t be doing stained glass.”

Being connected with art makes the journey of life special. In a classically balanced statement of right-brain and left-brain thinking, Custis concluded: “I hope all of my students grow wings, but I hope they don’t fly too far away.”

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