A Touch of Glass

Granville County glass blower Lisa Oakley continues her family’s 40-year legacy — while forging one of her own.

BY KATHRYN WILLIFORD

Tucked away on more than 10 acres of old tobacco fields in Creedmoor, just 20 miles north of Raleigh, lies one of the state’s true hidden treasures. Here, at Cedar Creek Gallery, you can find the work of more than 250 accomplished artists from across North Carolina and the nation — artists like Tim Turner, Brad Tucker, Ben Owen III, and Lisa Oakley, daughter of renowned potters Sid and Pat Oakley who founded Cedar Creek Gallery 40 years ago.

What began as a place for a pair of newlyweds to sell their work has evolved into one of the largest collections of fine crafts on the East Coast. Sid and Pat Oakley not only launched their esteemed careers at Cedar Creek, but also made it possible for other artists to create, show, and ultimately sell their work. Today, Lisa continues their legacy. Since 2004, when her father passed away and her mother retired from the gallery, Lisa has maintained Cedar Creek with the same spirit, enthusiasm, and generosity for which her parents were known and loved. Sid and Pat helped make North Carolina a national leader in fine pottery, but Lisa is bringing awareness and accessibility to the craft of glass blowing.

Change of plans

Growing up, Lisa spent her summers working in the gallery. When she turned 16, her father decided it was time for pottery lessons. Sid, already a distinguished potter whose work was on display in the Smithsonian Institution, instructed his daughter to practice at least eight hours a day because if she was going to do it, she needed to be good.

Lisa did some quick math. “As a teenager, you’re sleeping about 10 hours a day,” she says, “so I calculated it and realized if I was working eight hours a day, throwing pots eight hours a day, and sleeping for 10 hours, then I was already in a deficit, and I hadn’t even spent time socializing. Needless to say, I dropped it.”

For the remainder of her teen years, Lisa continued to work for her parents at Cedar Creek but avoided making any art of her own. She attended college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she chose psychology over the art department. After graduating, Lisa spent a few years working jobs outside the family business, including a stint at a backpacking store in Raleigh. But she couldn’t shake the fact that art was in her blood.

By January 1994, she was back working in the gallery when a catalog arrived from the Penland School of Crafts. “I started flipping through the catalog and saw a description for a two-week glass-blowing experience,” says Oakley. “I... The first night I was in Penland, I called home and told my parents, ‘This is what I want to do. I just knew.’

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casually mentioned it to my parents, and they both told me to call right away. By 11 o’clock that same morning, I was signed up for the class.

“I never planned on blowing glass,” she continues. “I just thought it would be fun. But the first night I was in Penland, I called home and told my parents, ‘This is what I want to do.’ I just knew.”

Lisa returned to Penland the following spring for an intensive eight-week course. When she came back, she was disappointed there wasn’t anywhere in the eastern part of the state to blow glass.

“Logically, if I had done it the easy way, I would have gone and apprenticed in someone else’s studio,” she says. But she was an Oakley, and the easy way just wouldn’t do. “It took us two years to build all the equipment,” she says. “Now you can buy a lot of things, but back then there was no place east of the mountains for art glass and no place to buy the equipment. So we built it all by hand. I can’t tell you how many men’s eyes light up when I tell them I can weld.”

“A life of its own”

Today, Lisa operates out of a contemporary glass-blowing studio adjacent to the main gallery. Completed in 2002, the 4,000-square-foot building includes a kitchen, a small living area, Lisa’s spacious glass-blowing studio, and a corner room that she rents out to other artists.

What’s even more exciting for Lisa is that her studio is not the only one at Cedar Creek. In the fall of 2006, Four Winds Studio — a partnership of four North Carolina glass blowers — was constructed steps away from Lisa’s. “That’s a big deal,” says Oakley. “Fourteen years ago there were no glass studios in this entire part of the state, and now we have two right here.”

The main room in Lisa’s studio houses her equipment, including the glory hole, the crucible, and, of course, the furnace, which Lisa affectionately calls “Molly.” The furnace will hold up to 150 pounds of molten glass. It takes a full week to get it hot enough to use because the temperature must be raised gradually. “It’s a big time commitment,” says Oakley. “You have to watch her constantly.”

Once the furnace has reached about 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit, Lisa begins to charge it. The charging process involves her slowly shoveling the batch — the ingredients that melt together to make the glass — into the furnace throughout
the day and then letting it cook overnight. Depending on what she’s making, Lisa will have enough glass to work with for several days before the charging process must be repeated.

After Lisa removes the clear, molten glass from the furnace, it’s time to add color, an aspect of glass blowing she’s passionate about. From brilliant blues to striking reds, Lisa experiments with all kinds of color, often mixing multiple hues in different forms — sand-like powders or chips the size of corn flakes — and never really knowing what she might get.

“That’s what makes it exciting to me,” she says. “I could use the exact same color combination and make five vases in one day and none of them would come out the same. The color changes as you go through the process. From the very beginning, it had me.”

While Lisa adds the color, she simultaneously works to gather and shape the glass using a wet, wooden Swedish tool known as a block.

“Before I start a piece, I always have an idea of what it will be,” says Oakley, “but it doesn’t mean it stays that way. I really like to let the glass do what it wants to do. I like it to take a life of its own.”

The glass may transform itself into a steep bowl or a low platter or a wide-mouth vase. These days, however, Lisa is focusing more on the furnace-pulled glass beads that comprise her distinctive and popular line of jewelry. As she says, the wearable pieces are more accommodating to her schedule, which, among other things, involves overseeing the gallery and spending time with her husband and two small children.

To create her beads, Lisa employs a process called the “pull.” She attaches the recently shaped and colored glass to a pipe on both ends. Standing on the front porch of her studio, Lisa has an assistant hold one pipe while she carefully pulls hers to the other end of the porch, stretching the glass like taffy to a length of 30 feet or more. The long bead of glass is then cut into two-foot rods and cooled overnight. Afterward, the rods are cut into smaller bead sections with a diamond saw, washed, sorted, and fire-polished. Lisa then assembles the beads by hand to create beautiful pieces like brightly colored drop earrings, fancy beaded chokers, and jewel-like bracelets.

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“I saw my parents and what they did to help other artists,” she says. “I really believe that our role as a gallery is to provide the outlet for accomplished artists to sell their work. We educate the public and bring them in to show them what is made in North Carolina and across the country.”

A lot has changed since Lisa’s parents first started Cedar Creek Gallery four decades ago. One building has expanded to 10. Two artists have multiplied to more than 200. And a previously unknown craft has become one of the gallery’s major draws. When asked how she sees Cedar Creek evolving in the future, Lisa’s answer is, in typical Oakley fashion, a generous one.

“I would like to establish a real residency program,” she says. “I’d love to see more young artists coming here and staying for a couple of years until they’re able to move on to their own studios. There’s just such an energy when artists are together.”

She would certainly know.

Kathryn Williford writes about food, wine, and the arts from her home in Greensboro.