

# The Stained Glass Studio of Clearwater

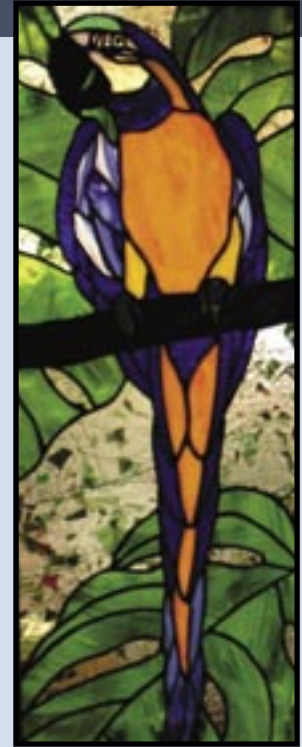
— by Colleen Bryan

Kathleen Bromley Rothman owns the china shop where the proverbial bull runs loose. Well, not exactly, but being a stained glass retailer in hurricane country has definite similarities. Managing successfully for the past twenty-seven years has given her a rich trove of experience from which to draw. But perhaps we should go back to the beginning.

Kathleen's father Bill Bromley got her started. His mother had collected glass during his childhood, and he had good friends and associates who loved and collected and worked in art glass. Bromley developed a business model based on glass. Kathleen was in college, when in 1978 the two opened their first art glass studio in Atlanta, Georgia. Over the next ten years the company grew to more than twenty operating retail studios, a major warehouse and distribution center, and a fully staffed custom design and fabrication facility. Kathleen's mother, two sisters and brothers-in-law, aunt and uncle, and several close friends joined the family business. "We had all kinds of employees, joint venture partnerships, artists, mechanics, and accountants. It was exciting to see something grow so large and so fast."

In 1982, Kathleen took the business model to the Florida market. Within three years they had six studios operating in Orlando, Sarasota, Clearwater, and West Palm Beach. Growth potential was incredible and many stained glass manufacturers, wholesalers, and retail businesses were booming. It was a very exciting time to be involved in the renewed industry.

Eventually, Kathleen was in a position to experience the downside of an economic cycle. The glass industry began compressing in the same way as banking and auto industries. Survival required adaptation. It was difficult when the family



dynasty started to unravel and others left to pursue different interests. Rothman was disappointed, but moving through that transition helped clarify her priorities. "I enjoyed being the master of my own ship. I loved the people and the diversity of the work. I felt like the ice cream guy when I was working in glass, distributing something everybody loves." Kathleen decided to go it alone.

## Locating a New Enterprise

Kathleen had no trouble choosing Clearwater, Florida, as the site for her new enterprise. She wanted to be by the water and enjoy the generally prevailing calm of Tampa Bay, with its sugar-sand beaches and its laid-back, "Old Florida" feel.

From a business perspective, Kathleen's choice of home base offered fertile ground. Tampa Bay is a straight shot down Interstate 75, heavily trafficked by vacationers from Michigan, Ohio, and eastern Canada. Vacationers and retirees are a major part of the studio's customer base. But the city's burgeoning commercial sector has broadened the studio's clientele so that it now encompasses young and old; families and singles; retired, working class, and wealthy.

The studio, located on US 19, is easily accessible from all of Pinellas County. The fifty-five-mile-per-hour speed of traffic doesn't help passers-by notice the store, so Kathleen advertises extensively to keep the studio's name in front of the public. The Tampa Bay area now has six neighborhood Yellow Pages. "We spend at least \$600 per month on Yellow Page

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advertisement. These ads and newspaper campaigns for our new classes are the biggest part of our advertising budget.” The studio takes advantage of the lower cost of e-mail to stay in touch with its customer base and maintains a mailing list of 2,750 qualified customers, with about 500 to 700 active buyers.

The studio website has been an invaluable tool for promotion. It gives the local community a convenient place to check location, calendar, class descriptions, and prices. It gives prospective custom clients a chance to see the examples of the studio’s work and review the backgrounds of its artisans without having to come in the door. Given Florida’s draw on international tourists, the website has brought in customers from all over the world, including Japan and Great Britain, South America, and Saudi Arabia. “It brings in a lot of Europeans, who don’t seem to have access to the choices we have by way of studios and distributors. Being able to see and touch glasses, materials, and supplies is a great treat for them, part of their whole vacation experience. One lady in Saudi Arabia comes in twice a year with a list, and throughout the year we send her new things. The website opens the door to all these customers.”

### The Operational Layout

Kathleen’s retail space in Clearwater has grown in the same location to the current 2,400-square-foot studio. “I rent the space and have been fortunate to have a reasonable landlady who has kept rents realistic. She appreciates the fact that she’s had a great tenant for over twenty years who continues to bring a flood of people into the center.”

Custom work occupies 35 percent of current studio space. The kilns and hot glass inventory take up another 10 percent, and that proportion is rising. The classroom area is 25 percent and the remaining 30 percent is devoted to retail. But Kathleen boasts that the shop is “100 percent display.” All of the ceilings and walls are covered with stained glass panels and finished items.

### Offering Education, Expertise, and Service

A broad range of low-priced, well-designed stained glass classes generate interest and build the customer base, as well as generating sales of supplies.

“We have a wonderful eight-week class that is designed like an apprenticeship program. Students move from making a small project to full-size windows. They complete two window panels, a lampshade, and about ten small projects over the course of the program. We enable people to build up their skills and do what they want to do faster. We incorporate education principles so they come out with a better working knowledge and a higher confidence level by the end of a class.”

The Stained Glass Studio of Clearwater teaches classes at several levels in all aspects of stained glass technique, as well as offering classes and workshops in hot glass, fusing, mosaics, lampworking, and beads. The studio also brings in guest teachers to help its workers maintain skills and to further intrigue students and provides access to additional printed instructional resources. “I keep the *Glass Patterns Quarterly* up by the register and frequently sell out almost as soon as it arrives. It creates a buzz on new products, a need to try them out. *GPQ* gives my students a first-class teacher to lead them through a project—here’s what one may want to buy; here’s a suggestion for colors; here’s what to do first, then next—and pictures to see what the final product should look like. It’s a great way to supplement my classes.”

Students at the studio participate under an open-access program. When people are enrolled in a class, they can go in whenever the shop is open and work with the cutting tables, grinders, etc. “That’s the kind of thing you do with your friends.” The studio tries to keep prices competitive with the national market and to give all of its customers more than their money’s worth.

Kathleen sees these measures as important, particularly since, along with its promise, the Internet poses some challenge to her core business model. Retail sales have always been important to the economics of the model. Class fees are kept low—eight weeks of two-hour classes with unlimited open workshop time for \$85. Participants need to supply their own tools and materials, which historically they have bought from the studio, thus helping to support profitability.

With the Internet, people have access to warehouse operations that offer



pricing previously exclusive to retailers. “We have to work much harder to sell ourselves on service, reminding students that buying things here helps us keep our rent paid and doors open so we can continue to help them when they want us. We have to work smarter and give more of ourselves on the service side so our customers continue to want to support us.”

Part of the value Kathleen offers customers is a current and first-hand knowledge of glass-related tools and products. “We want to see all the new toys as soon as they’re out. We buy everything at least once. We play with it and plan with it and use it. We educate ourselves with the newest latest-and-greatest, boil it down to make it easy to learn, and give people the time they need to achieve some mastery with it. We share with our customers what we find good and help them compare features across product lines.”

Kathleen is aided in her “try it and see” approach by a close relationship with her distributor, Art Glass House, who lets her know as soon as new products hit the market and does special orders without significant upcharge. She also attends trade shows and scours industry magazines. “Our kiln classes are the fastest growing part of our business. In the last class we held, 90 percent of our students bought kilns, which are high-ticket items. Because I own a range of kilns and have worked with each on different kinds of projects, I can recom-

mend one over another for the kinds of projects an individual customer prefers, based on features and attributes I’ve tried myself.” Rothman thinks the biggest mistake other retailers make is to underestimate the pocketbook of their customers. But tapping it requires a retailer to know the comparative features of each product, with its respective pros and cons and differences.

The Stained Glass Studio of Clearwater now has six full-time employees, several part-time, and several volunteers. The volunteer pool is one of the many benefits Kathleen realizes from having so many retirees and leisure class residents in the area. “People who have taken our classes often volunteer to help with future classes. They reinforce their skills at no cost, with a few perks and bonuses. If the relationship goes well, we may groom them to be teachers or to work on our custom production.” This provides a way to assess their skills, creativity, and personality.

### Restoring the Old and Creating Anew

Repair and restoration is a growing area of the studio’s business. Rothman notes that many of the stained glass pieces constructed during the height of the popularity of art glass twenty years ago were not professionally executed and show signs of damage from the years of packing and moving and use. But people love their stained glass heirloom pieces and want to preserve them.

This specialty requires a staff with time and experience; mechanical, analytical, and technical skills; and tremendous patience.

“This part of our work is not always the most fun unless you happen to enjoy the analytical and mechanical side of stained glass. It doesn’t call up the high creativity that motivates many glass artists, but it does bring a special kind of satisfaction. Gary Reid is a coworker who has done stained glass for eighteen years and is very skilled in approaching these projects. Gary and I sit down with a restoration piece and address it like a big puzzle.” Kathleen still treasures the time the Smithsonian Institution asked her to restore a Christmas ornament from the 1800s, which was comprised of many delicate pieces.

The key to incorporating restoration as a profitable aspect of a stained glass business is to not undersell yourself. Kathleen tries from the outset to shift the customer away from thinking of repair or restoration as a means of economizing. For those who are willing to pay the studio on the same level that it would be paid to start with something fresh and new, the Clearwater artisans are happy to take on most anything. Otherwise, they offer to teach the customer how to fix or restore the piece himself. A beloved piece is often worth the price to its owner. It becomes an investment in a personal experience—a piece of art, not something functional like a window covering that you would leave behind if you moved.

Still, Kathleen loves the Christmas-morning feel of custom work. “I love being able to put into practice all the years of design, color, and textural influences I have been exposed to. Three-quarters of the studio’s work is residential, but we’ve done churches, synagogues, libraries, restaurants, and businesses as well. One of my favorites was a hospital that asked us to create the door to their chapel. I know what it is like to have people in the hospital and needing a place to just be still and pray.”

Another favorite project came as a commission from Rothman’s best friend from childhood. The friend’s husband owns a line-and-grade survey business and was building a million-dollar mansion in Atlanta. His wife asked Kathleen to design and build a



window for her front foyer. They decided on a five-foot by six-foot compass rose, which seemed to fit the home and personality of the owners and to tell a story about their business.

### Keeping Your Sea Legs in a Storm

Over the years, Rothman has known winds both at her back and in her face. And she's learned to keep her legs in both circumstances. "One of the main things I've learned is the necessity of keeping two or three months of operating capital in savings that can tide you over when things get rough, even if it means putting away \$100 per week until you build up a sizeable fund."

Kathleen's most recent personal experience with this imperative came in 2004. Florida suffered four hurricanes within an eight-week period in August and September. "Luckily, we were not directly affected. We had no storm damage, and no one reported damage to windows we'd installed. We were incredibly lucky." Still, many of their neighbors were devastated and worried about things such as food and water and kerosene. People were not spending money on stained glass. Post hurricane restorations didn't start coming in until late November. Retailers generally don't plan for downturns but they come anyway—through normal economic business cycles, personal illnesses, family disruptions, or natural catastrophes. Kathleen knows that "retailers need to understand the distinctions between working cash, cash flow, and profit."

### Planning for New Growth

In the immediate future, The Stained Glass Studio of Clearwater sounds like the site of orchestrated chaos. As

her office is being rearranged around her, Kathleen ticks off the schedule. A computerized point-of-sale system will be implemented within the coming month, and the migration was expected to take three to six months. "It's long overdue, and I'm expecting it to free up my time to be more creative," Rothman reports. The website is a constant work-in-progress.

Kathleen's business plan includes buying a building and property, but the timing of a move is uncertain. Property values in Pinellas County have quadrupled over the past five years, so finding the right property in a serviceable location is difficult. "But I like this area, so the hunt is on. I'm looking for something big enough that we won't ever have to do it again."

Persistence, tenacity, and adaptability have paid off for Rothman. Ample doses of curiosity and optimism have fed her continuous delight in stained glass and attracted loyal customers. "We work hard to do everything at the top of our game. My dad used to tell me: 'The harder you work, the luckier you'll get.' I've been very lucky!" **PGQ**



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