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OCTOBER 2025

CREATIVE COMMUNITY

FALL ARTS EDITION

OYES

GLASS ARTS COLLECTIVE

VENTURA IMPROV COMPANY

THROUGH A GL

Glass Arts Collective fuses imagination and community into a mesmerizing whole.

BY NANCY D. LACKEY SHAFFER | PHOTOS BY VIKTOR BUDNIK

Those who crave creative expression but don't click with more traditional approaches like painting or sculpture should consider glass.

To clarify: Blown glass is more specialized, requiring temperatures over 1,000 degrees and a careful approach. That's how Dave Chihuly is able to create those large, illustrious installations that have made him famous. But fused and stained glass are surprisingly accessible. Sheets or shards of glass, some basic hand tools, glue and vision (and a kiln to bring it all together) are all that's required to craft something colorful, original and magnificent.

Glass Arts Collective in Westlake Village is the ideal place to explore a variety of glass techniques, under the guidance of owner Nancy Dilling-

ham Marks. With classes, workshops, studio space and a mesmerizing gift shop, there's something for everyone, from the experienced crafter to the complete novice.

DISCOVERING GLASS

Marks spent more than 35 years in the corporate world, including serving as the chief operating officer for her husband's company. Numbers, logistics, technology — that was where her skillset was strongest.

"I didn't believe I had a creative bone in my body," she said. "I tried painting, crocheting, knitting, woodworking, sewing...I never felt anything for any of them, really."

But then she found glass. Or, rather, her mother did. After relocating to California from Massachusetts, Marks's parents moved into a retirement community, where an artist would come onsite to teach fused glass techniques.

"My mom was so excited!" Marks recalled. "So I took a class....it was something that we could do together."

Marks's mother liked it so much that Marks even organized a party birthday party for her at a glass studio in town.

"They had the best time," she said. "And the manager of this location was phenomenal."

Marks had finally found a medium that awakened her inner artist, and she was all in.

"I just wanted to keep coming back...every chance I got I would come over."

In addition to experiencing the joy of artistic creation, Marks made friends with her fellow artists. She became particularly close with the studio manager, and started helping out — sweeping the floors, refilling jars of crushed glass (called frit), working the kiln when the manager was out.

"Eventually, she taught me how to teach the intro class — and I loved it!" Marks said. ►►

NANCY MARKS (standing), owner of Glass Arts Collective, watches while member BJ Fitzgerald recreates a photo in glass.



CLASS BRIGHTLY



ALL HEART A variety of colorful glass hearts made by Glass Arts Collective members for sale in the gift shop or Marketplace at the front of the studio.

A STUDIO OF HER OWN

Eventually, the company that owned the glass studio decided to close the location. Marks was heartbroken — as were many of her new friends, who were as enthusiastic about glass art as she was.

Around the same time, her husband had sold his company. Marks was ready for a change...and had no interest in retiring.

“You know how to run a business,” her husband said to her. “Why don’t you open your own?”

She loved working with glass, knew how to teach classes and could run all the kilns and other mechanical devices. She also knew there were glass artists like herself in need of a place to work.

“So I said, ‘You know what? I’m gonna do it. It’s the right thing to do. This is exactly what I’m supposed to be doing.’”

In January 2020, less than a year after she discovered the wonders of glass, Marks took over the lease for that same studio space and opened Glass Arts Collective.

TIME WELL SPENT

Early 2020 turned out to be a terrible time to start a business. The pandemic forced Glass Arts Collective to close just five weeks after opening its

doors. The former COO was undaunted, however.

“I went through all the traditional mental anguish that anybody would do,” she recalled. “And then looked at it from a different perspective. I’d always wished I’d had more hours in the day...I’m not as strong in the skills as I’d like to be...guess what I’m going to do now? I can be in here and I can be learning and testing and training myself and pushing the envelope.

“I pushed myself, I challenged myself, and I got better and better.”

She spoke with state health officials, to learn what her operating options were, and used her own good judgment. When non-essential retail and restaurants started opening with social distancing requirements, Glass Arts Collective did, too — with limited numbers of clients, plenty of hand sanitizer and masking requirements.

“I could spread people out here better than people in a restaurant were, and everyone gets their own set of tools, even today,” Marks noted.

Several of her clients were nurses, and she “touched base with them, making sure I was doing the right things related to COVID.”

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TOP Artists-in-residence can sell their work in the Marketplace.

ABOVE Darlene Heusser works on a piece with some help from BJ Fitzgerald.

READY, SET, CREATE Glass Arts Collective provides classes, space, materials and tools for aspiring artists.

CONNECTING WHILE CREATING

Marks did some advertising, but relied largely on word of mouth — which proved surprisingly successful. Through the nurses that came to her studio, she came to recognize the therapeutic benefits of art.

“I discovered that working with glass wasn’t just a skill to learn — it was a way to relax, let go of stress and reconnect with creativity.”

Even more than the art, however, were the connections being made. Glass Arts Collective became a real lifeline for many people during those isolating pandemic years.

“A community was being built right before my eyes,” Marks said. “I didn’t even anticipate it when I opened my studio, that people would come in that didn’t know each other, all different backgrounds, and friendships were start-

ing. Sharing recipes, books they liked to read...it became a sanctuary.”

In just five years, that sanctuary has called to more and more artists — particularly those who think they aren’t artists. There’s something about the color, transparency and light-catching qualities of glass that overcome intimidation, and awaken the creative spirit.

JOINING THE CLUB

There are several ways to explore glasswork. Glass Arts Collective offers classes five days a week — every day that it’s open — in a variety of techniques, including fused and stained glass and mosaics. Marks said that kids as young as 7 and adults well into their golden years can all enjoy the experience.



TOP Crushed glass or frit is a popular material.
ABOVE Art by Nancy Marks, studio owner.



RICH TAPESTRY Glass can be fused, cut, molded, layered and more to create any number of original works.

Everyone must take an introductory fused glass class, where students learn the basics while making a coaster, suncatcher or garden stake. After that, they can take more advanced classes.

Artists are also welcome to book studio time to work on independent projects. The \$53 fee includes two hours of studio space and use of tools; clients must also pay for the glass (by sheet, piece or pound, depending on the type) and kiln time.

Many of Marks's regulars have monthly memberships, with different levels and pricing based on frequency (similar to a gym membership). After six months, these artists-in-residence are welcome to sell their pieces in the Glass Arts Collective Marketplace — a great place for anyone, customer or not, to find handmade, one-of-a-kind gifts.

"I keep trying to find ways to support the people that are supporting me," Marks said.

She is also happy to organize something for special events, such as corporate team building, birthdays or bridal showers.

"It's something different, and people really like experiences," she said.

All attendees, class students and independent workers alike, sign up online. It's easy, allows Marks to focus on her clients rather than tending to the phone, and keeps the studio from getting too crowded.

"I can continue to control the number of people in here," she explained. "What I don't want to have happen is somebody just shows up and there's no space."

WELCOMING COMMUNITY

Marks loves watching the glass artists in her studio learn, grow and complete their own special projects.

Longtime member Barbara "BJ" Fitzgerald of Ventura started making pet portraits in glass based off of photographs. People who came into Glass Arts Collective saw her work and were inspired — and she has received

many commissions as a result.

Marks also finds joy in the community that develops at her studio. Her regulars aren't just customers; they've all become friends, who discuss so much more than just art when they're all working together "at the bench" — and are always happy to offer advice and assistance.

Darlene Heusser, another longtime member, said that, "Crafters tend to be great people...and we all share." She described an ambitious project recently completed, a large picture of a pirate ship, that she created with suggestions and ideas offered up by others in the studio.

"Everyone offered hints...it really reflected the community spirit," Marks said.

"Our classes are filled with laughter, sometimes a little singing along to the oldies, and always plenty of my puns (I've become known for my 'dad jokes')," she continued. "It's such a joy to watch total strangers admire each other's work as the class progresses. Honestly, I think I get more out of each class than they do!" ▾

GLASS ARTS COLLECTIVE

31139 Via Colinas, Unit 201, Westlake Village
 818.318.1462

12-5 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday
 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday, Sunday

Book workshops and studio time online at
glassartscollective.com.