

Dale Chihuly helps Hilltop Artists celebrate its 20th year

BY ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI

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Glass artist Dale Chihuly, center, oversees master glass blower Jim Mongrain, right, and gaffer Gabe Fennan, left, as they mentor Jason Lee Middle School students at the Museum of Glass on Friday. Chihuly will be blowing glass at the Museum of Glass today and Saturday with Hilltop Artists students from Jason Lee to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the group, which he co-founded.

A half dozen Tacoma high school students had an inspiring alternative to school Friday morning.

Standing in the burning glare of the Museum of Glass furnaces, they watched and helped as lead gaffer James Mongrain curled a taffy-thin length of molten glass around an amethyst-colored vase under the direction of artist Dale Chihuly.

Students in the Hilltop Artists glass program — which Chihuly helped found — were part of a two-day collaboration this weekend to celebrate the organization's 20th anniversary.

A retrospective exhibition will follow next weekend.

"I'm so excited," said Billy Bob Lockwood, a freshman at the Science and Math Institute.

Lockwood joined the Hilltop program in middle school and was excitedly waiting his turn in the hot shop.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” he said.

It’s hard to beat a high school graduation rate of 97 percent or student glass sales that top \$119,000, but the Hilltop Artists has plenty more to boast about for its 20th anniversary.

The program, begun to give at-risk Tacoma youth an alternative to gangs and violence, can take credit for inspiring similar programs in the United States and abroad, as well as seeing many of its students go on to college and employment.

But as well as glassblowing skills, Hilltop Artists takes pride in teaching teens life skills such as teamwork, problem solving and creativity.

Those skills will be on display in the museum Saturday (Sept. 6) during live glassblowing (creating elaborate centerpieces to be auctioned at Hilltop’s October fundraiser) and the exhibition to follow.

“(The program’s success) shows one more time that engaging in the arts is a way to solve major issues, from changing the economic outlook of a particular area to opening it up for urban students to succeed,” said Kit Evans, Hilltop Artists’ executive director.

The Hilltop program began in 1994 as a summer program teaching glass art to local youth.

Tacoma’s Hilltop neighborhood was in the grip of nationally infamous gang violence when then-gallerist Kathy Kaperick — who sold glass art by Tacoma-born Chihuly — imagined a program that could give teens an alternative to that cycle by immersing them in glassblowing.

Initially without a furnace, the 20 students painted Snapple bottles and other commercially made glass, heating them to reshape. That fall saw further experimentation and by January the program had begun offering after-school classes.

Now, Hilltop Artists serves more than 500 students a year, teaching glassblowing in hot shops at Jason Lee Middle School and Wilson High School and flameworking at Ford Middle School. Students also learn glass fusing and mosaics.

About three dozen students each year move on to the evening production team, which makes glass for commissions and galleries.

Of those committed students, 97 percent graduate from school (the 2013 Tacoma Schools graduation rate is 61.7 percent), 69 percent go on to college and 77 percent find jobs. (The program tracks only students who join the production team.)

Now a non-profit with a \$500,000 yearly budget, Hilltop Artists also supports studies, career education for high school upperclassmen and the Arts Connect program for girls in the juvenile court system.

The program also recently piloted an exchange program with a student from Tacoma's sister city of Biot, France.

Glass Roots in New Jersey and Berlin Glas in Germany model their programs on Hilltop Artists.

How does blowing glass achieve such success?

"Glass was very important (to the idea) because once (the students) got to try making glass — it grabs you," explained Chihuly during a hot shop break.

The 72-year-old artist donated a lot of the money and equipment to get Hilltop Artists started, and still inspires students through occasional visits and hosting student groups at his Seattle boathouse studio.

"The material is very magical," he said. "You can tell just by watching how intriguing it is."

Tony Sorgenfrei joined Hilltop Artists in 1998 as a struggling student and now teaches the Wilson program.

He agrees that glass (and Hilltop Artists' requirement that students maintain grades and behavior) was a big motivator for him and his brother and friends. It gave them a reason to do their schoolwork so they could blow glass after school.

"We wouldn't have graduated without (Hilltop Artists)," Sorgenfrei said in a press release. "It saved us."

Other former students have gone on to successful careers in creative and commercial fields.

"It gives them a reason to stay connected and trust more," Evans said.

"I've learned a lot of skills," Lockwood said. "It gives you a good understanding of how things work."

And after 20 years, the future looks bright for Hilltop Artists.

Fresh from an online crowd-funding campaign that raised a record \$38,000 for new furnaces, the organization's leaders hope to expand into a Saturday program to serve Eastside youth who don't have access during the school week, Evans said.

They're also looking at repeating the Biot exchange, possibly for teachers as well.

But what Evans credits as the true measure of the program's success is the creativity it instills in young people, which she said helps in every aspect of life from school math to planning a better Tacoma.

"Truly, there's a creative piece to every solution that works well," she said. "Kids participating in art gives them access to that creativity."

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