

Hot Glass: Meet the artist and shop behind the 2016 Radish awards

Posted: Wednesday, December 23, 2015 3:16 pm | Updated: 3:16 pm, Wed Dec 23, 2015.

By Lillian Zier Martell

A few years ago, Joel Ryser was a football coach. Now, he's a glass-blowing artist.

But the change isn't as drastic as it sounds. Art has been just as much a part of his life as football, going back to his school days growing up in Moline.

"You put yourself out there with art the same way you do on the field," he says.

Ryser is now in his second year as the executive director of Hot Glass Inc., a nonprofit organization he started as a way to reach out to youth by teaching them the art of glass-blowing.

Located at 104 Western Ave., Davenport, near Modern Woodmen Park, the organization accepts youth into its programs for free, regardless of their artistic abilities or past behavior. The programs receive funding from donations and grants.

Hot Glass also offers fee-based classes for adults and corporate team-building events, among other programs, to help provide income that pays for the space, equipment and supplies. Commissions also provide revenue for the organization. One of the organization's latest works are the radishes Ryser and other workers designed for this year's Radish Award recipients.

Ryser came up with the idea for Hot Glass several years ago after seeing a television report about Hilltop Artists in Tacoma, Wash. Established by renowned glass-blower Dale Chihuly, Hilltop Artists has operated for more than 20 years and serves about 500 youths a year.

It also serves as a model for Hot Glass.

Ryser gained experience in glass-blowing from his college days at Eastern Oregon University, where he also played football. He started out with an interest in pottery that stemmed from his high school art classes. But then an instructor at Eastern Oregon pointed him toward the school's glass-blowing facility, and he was hooked.

He earned his degree in fine arts from Eastern Oregon, then returned to his home state and completed an education degree at Illinois State University. He went to work at Moline High School as an art teacher and football coach. He continues to teach at the school.

After 26 years of coaching, Ryser decided to turn his attention toward art. He found a place in Rock Island where he was able to start blowing glass again. When that location closed, he considered building a shop in his house, but his son, Logan, found the space in Davenport.

It took about two years and \$200,000 to prepare the space and equipment for the shop, Ryser says. He enlisted the help of other artists, educators and businesspeople in the Quad-Cities, who helped remodel the space for the shop and build the equipment. Many of them also have continued to work with the organization.

Last year, Hot Glass served 80 kids, working in groups of six, split into two teams. By working together on projects, the kids build lifelong skills, including communication, planning and responsibility.

“Glass blowing is not a one-man sport — it’s a group thing,” Ryser says.

While he loves football, he says, he also loves that he doesn’t have to be concerned about developing the best athletes. With art, athleticism isn’t necessary.

“A lot of other kids will have success doing this, and I don’t have to worry about the win-loss record,” he says.

The youth participants keep their artwork, such as paper weights, small bowls, vases and the like.

“You should see the smile on their faces when they make it,” Ryser says.

Grants for Hot Glass Inc. come from the Iowa Arts Council, Quad City Arts, the Doris and Victor Day Foundation, HavLife and the Frederick Logan Companies, as well as numerous individuals.

Ryser says he’s “blessed and fortunate” to be able to operate in a community where he knows a large number of folks who can help with the shop and its programs.

At the end of the day, he doesn't need to make a profit, he says. If he's able to do what he loves and help others, "then I'm good with that."

http://www.qconline.com/radish/hot-glass-meet-the-artist-and-shop-behind-the-radish/article_1dc3cedb-2051-5d42-87e0-ae8a1b85ceaa.html