

The Faces of Green VI Glass Studio

by Colleen Bryan

When one sees a group of people undertaking such an unorthodox endeavor as setting up a glass studio to demonstrate environmental reclamation, it is irresistible to ask questions. What sparks their passion and fuels them in their enterprise? What paths did they each take to get to their common goal?

Such is the case with the team that staffs Green VI and the glass studio in Cane Garden Bay, Tortola, British Virgin Islands (BVI). They have to follow a difficult course that taps into core passions for each person. Their conversations with *Glass Art* about the establishment and operation of the glass studio project gave some insight into these questions.

Executive Leadership

Executive Director Charlotte McDevitt comes to the work from an environmental and waste management background. The object of a glass studio was incidental to her ultimate goal of demonstrating the potential for waste to be recycled and reused as material and fuel for a creative process.

McDevitt finds personal satisfaction from working on sustainable development on an island. “If we keep doing the things that are destroying every living system that keeps us alive, depleting forests and fish without allowing them to recover, it will lead to our extinction. On islands in particular, climate change issues are huge, with their implications for rising water levels and the ocean pollution that kills the coral reefs. We have to change. I find it immensely satisfying to demonstrate that we can change. We know better now, so *now* is the time for us to do better.”

Studio Management

Garrett Wheeler, studio manager and lead glassblower, grew up in Toledo, Ohio, with a connection to that region’s glass history. Wheeler trained in glass at Bowling Green State University. “Some-time after graduating from college in 2004, I got the feeling that unless you were ultratalented and uber-successful, the glassblowing game had become an elite sport.”

Wheeler spent time in a kind of unfolding apprenticeship, working in small private studios and practicing his craft. He assisted successive teams of established glass artisans. Most recently, he spent six years in Vermont working with Dave and Melanie Leppla at Mad River Glass Gallery. “They are solid artisans who have been niche glassblowers for 25 years, running a really sound business and operating a mid- to high-end glass gallery. They made me focus on attainable goals, not trying to be a rock star, because that is not what being an artist is about. That elevated status only happens to a few people. The Lepplas focus on making a living doing what they want to do, and that is where they focused me.” Then, concluding that he had learned all they had to teach him, they kicked the fledgling Wheeler out of the nest.

Wheeler is frank that at 28, his prospects in glass upon leaving



Mangroves are integral to the shoreline ecosystem and are the inspiration for the Green VI Glass Studio mangrove line, including this vase. Photo by Todd VanSickle.

Vermont looked glum. “Having devoted nearly 10 years to the craft, opening my own studio still did not seem a viable or sustainable way of making a living. I had apprenticed for many studios that did not have a viable business plan until I started working at Mad River Glass Gallery. The Lepplas taught me how to run a professional studio. Furthermore, they observed that the fight against rising costs of materials and energy in hot glass is a losing battle. They encouraged me to go the green route if I was determined to stay in glassmaking.”

With the rising cost of fossil fuels, Wheeler figured he would be wasting his time pursuing glassmaking unless he found an alternative for resourcing and fueling the enterprise. Being at the right place at the right time with the right contacts led him to Oaxaca, Mexico, Christian Thornton, and the eco-conscious Xaquixe glass studio.

“My immediate goal was to seek out those people who are pushing the envelope, who are already doing things differently for one reason or another (for example, because they lack the resources to buy high-end materials or because they are only interested in working with waste stream bottles). When I heard that the Green VI glass studio was getting started, I signed on and we pulled all those ideas and applied them under a single enterprise.”

Undertaking a real world demonstration of these principles has been a trial by fire. And Wheeler has to admit that he, too, has been transformed by the experience. “It has been satisfying to bring the practical and artistic considerations together. Now the recycling aspects of what we do are just as important to me as blowing glass every day.”

Wheeler’s role with the studio is multifaceted, and his three and a half year tenure with Green VI has brought some pride of accomplishment. He serves as the studio manager, head glassblower, and the person who keeps all the plates spinning. “Before I came, the studio was only melting recycled bottles. I’ve helped them tighten up the system, transition to UVO fuel, and attract workers who are here for a career rather than just a paycheck. Bringing what I learned from earlier workplaces, I’ve raised the level of professionalism here.” He now works in the studio full time, but that is a recent development. “Previously, I would come in and out, traveling to Mexico and Alaska between stints on the island. Now my boss has taken away and burned my passport so that I can’t leave.”

Wheeler blows production glass eight hours each day. “At 32 years old, I’d like to get out of making craft items. In terms of my artistic career, my next step would be graduate school, but that is on hold for a while as I focus on teaching and getting the studio fully functional by its fifth year. My personal art career takes a back seat to my focus on environmental work. The other men and women who work at Green VI walk the walk of living green and watching our impact on the environment. For now, that is more important to me.”



A visiting school group brings old bottles for recycling. Monica Myers gives them a demonstration of the glass cullet production. She collects the bottles from local restaurants, then cleans them and smashes at least 300 pounds of glass each week.



Providing education and raising awareness about recycling and sustainability is one of the main objectives of Green VI.



Green VI's recycled glass version of the green sea turtle, which is found in nearby Caribbean waters. Photo by Donna Abaira.

Local Apprentice

Speaking for the upcoming generation of West Indian glassblowers, apprentice Daryl “Lion” McClean reflects: “Returning to live in Tortola after many years of living in the United States, I was distressed to see the lack of recycling and poor waste management—its impact on the environment and my beautiful native island home. I am a farmer and a beekeeper, and I care deeply about the environment.

“I met Charlotte McDevitt, my current boss and the director of Green VI, at a farmer’s market where she was displaying many eco-friendly products. She informed me of the recycling efforts she was involved in and told me that she had a glass studio where she offered a volunteer program.”

During a vacation from his job at the Department of Agriculture, McClean volunteered at the Green VI Glass Studio. “I was inspired by the environmental initiatives at Green VI, but I was also in awe of the glassblowing process. It became all I wanted to do. I resigned my job, and in January 2012 I started working full time as a glassblowing apprentice for Green VI.

At the Green VI studio in Cane Garden Bay, McClean has had the opportunity to work with and receive training from many experienced guest artists including Charles Lowrie. “The late Jonathan Christie gave me a great deal of useful advice and assistance, and I received invaluable training from Jake Barron while he was the resident head glassblower.” And then, of course, there was the trip to Pilchuck.

“I cannot thank Green VI enough for providing me this most extraordinary opportunity to further my knowledge and skills in many aspects of glassblowing. The knowledge I have gained, not only in glassblowing techniques but also in the business and safety aspects of running a glassblowing studio, are very much appreciated. I am proud of all the environmental initiatives that Green VI has taken, and I’m particularly grateful to Garrett Wheeler for bringing to fruition Green VI’s long held goal of converting our glass furnaces from propane to used veggie oil.

“In the years that I have been here, Green VI has developed both as a business and in educating the public. I feel fortunate to be a part of this unique organization that promotes glass artistry while serving the higher purpose of protecting the environment. I have come to an ever-deepening commitment to supporting its aims.”



Green VI has produced wave bowls and plates for local award trophies.



Water-colored pieces from the Green VI Glass Studio. Photo by Todd VanSickle.

Wave pattern with the BVI stamp. Photo by Todd VanSickle.



Unexpectedly Satisfying

As Green VI attains the tipping point of becoming a carbon-free and profit-generating enterprise, its board and staff, the larger island community, and even tourists express a rising level of enthusiasm. “They all get excited for us,” McDevitt observes. “The shift is happening in terms of sustainable development!”

McDevitt’s assessment seems borne out by anecdotal evidence. In online clips from Trip Advisor, some visitors favorably compare the stop to better-known Venetian studios, while another writes: “While at Cane Garden Bay, it is a *must* to stop here. They are doing something great for Tortola and the world by recycling bottles—which are *everywhere* on Tortola—and turning them into beautiful vases, art pieces, bowls, and other useful and beautiful objects. You can watch them make things right there, and they will make items to order in your choice of colors. The prices are great as well. I highly recommend buying something to remember your trip that isn’t a touristy piece of junk, but a truly creative, beautiful piece that also helps the environment.” (Liminlady on TripAdvisor 28 January 2013)

One might expect tourists to be casually invested in the mission of Green VI, since they have only temporary exposure to the place. However, nothing could be further from the truth, Wheeler says. “A lot of people come to this incredibly beautiful island on vacation, and the one downer they encounter is the lack of opportunity to recycle. Everything they consume goes into the air or the ocean. They enjoy the artistic flair of the glassworkers and seeing work created in front of them, but they respond like people gulping fresh air when they can see some type of movement to recycle—something that can make a difference in preserving the natural beauty of the Caribbean.”

Government officials are more excited about the use of biofuels than they are about the glassblowing. They see its potential for seeding small businesses and are now working with Green VI to develop progressive waste management strategies for the island.

From their many corners of the world, the people of Green VI have come together, united by a common passion and sense of purpose. Stop by their island studio and meet them next time you find yourself cruising in the Caribbean.

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Look for more on how Green VI is finding ways to repurpose waste in the January/February 2015 issue of Glass Art.

Cane Garden Bay on the island of Tortola, British Virgin Islands.
Photo by Hezikiah Maddox Photography.

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