

Still a Place to Shine

White Salmon Glassworks owners hope studio can find a backer to keep art thriving in the community

By Jeanie Senior

After six years of bringing gleam, sparkle and color to the west end of Jewett Boulevard, the owners and founders of White Salmon Glassworks have a “For Rent” sign in the window of their business.

The gallery is closing. Ellen and Robin Knoke asked artists to pick up their items from the shop at the first of the year.

The kilns will continue to operate, at least for now, Robin says.

“Glass artists are still using the studio, and we would like to keep the studio available through the next year, until we can find somebody to take it over,” he says.

Ellen calls the decision to phase out the business a bittersweet one, prompted by the fact that both she and Robin have suffered serious health problems during the last year.

The gallery “was most of the work, having to be there seven days a week,” Ellen says. “It’s a lot of work to run a retail business.”

The couple bought a motor home and plan to take it to the Southwest for a while to check out winter down there.

“I’m not young and bouncy like I was before,” admits Robin, who had a heart attack followed by quadruple bypass surgery.

The couple moved from the Seattle area and built White Salmon Glassworks from scratch in a former plumbing supply building. The owner wanted it used for something artistic, not as an



Robin Knoke blows glass as Jess Keeler shapes a bowl at White Salmon Glassworks.

office for Robin’s engineering business, which was the original plan.

The “something artistic” came about after they visited the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, which features exhibitions as well as a Hot Shop, where visitors can watch glass blowing.

“I thought, this is what White Salmon needs, or something close to it,” Robin says.

They made an offer to the building

owner based on plans to turn it into a glass studio and bought it in March 2004. They met glass artist Mark Eckstrand of Seattle, who became their mentor, helping them put together the equipment they needed to set up a studio.

If you build the studio, artists will come, they were told. In fact, three artists moved from Seattle to work there.

Robin says Glassworks is one of the nicer studios in Washington.

“We modeled it after the Tacoma museum and tried to make it a public studio where people could come in and watch glass blowing, with very similar equipment,” he says.

The Knoke also joined the Oregon Glass Guild, and Robin later became president of the guild’s Columbia Gorge chapter. Ellen is now treasurer.

Convinced of White Salmon’s potential as a haven for artists, they helped found the White Salmon Arts Council.

“Now there are not so many studios,” Robin says. “Property values went up very rapidly and artists found it hard to afford to live here.”

As building rents increased, “it just got hard to keep a fledgling art community going,” he says.

Then the economy turned sour and people cut back on their spending for art, which further hampered artists’ ability to make a living. White Salmon suffered another blow when fire destroyed two galleries on Jewett.

An electronics engineer, Robin built a Seattle-area business that employed almost 300 people. He says he doesn’t want to sell the Glassworks building.

“I’ve put a lot of heart and soul into it,” Robin says.

The two-floor, 7,000-square-foot structure started life almost a century ago as a hardware store and later housed a sporting goods store, an appliance and hi-fi store, and a meat market.

For a couple of decades, it was a Red and White Grocery store.

Robin learned glass blowing after they built the studio and Ellen turned to glass fusing. She makes jewelry, art pieces and dinnerware. She has been invited again this year to participate in the art festival at Maryhill Museum.

“I don’t think I’m quite an artist yet,” she says.

Even so, Ellen has sold sets of her brilliantly colorful dinnerware to families for their homes in Palm Springs, California, Atlanta and Newport News, Virginia.



Ellen says she will continue to work in her studio, housed in a light-filled space on the ground floor of the building.

Robin and Ellen say they want to keep the doors open at the glassblowing studio because so many artists depend on the studio for their livelihood. At the very least, they hope to find someone to manage the place.

“White Salmon has a lot of potential,” says Robin, whose roots in Klickitat County stretch back to 1859, when his great-great-great grandfather came there to homestead.

“With the Arts Council and the White Salmon Business Association, a lot of things could happen—if somebody has the energy to get it going.”

Meanwhile, the Knokes are going to



Top, Ellen Knoke fetches an item from a display window behind a display of blown glass ornaments. Above, the Knokes helped found the White Salmon Arts Council.

try out vacationing in the motor home. Robin says there is space in the RV for an office.

“I can put a computer in there and write software as part of my work,” he says. “I can do it from anywhere.” ■