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# Business



Dennis Brady and sons Jason and Dane of DeBrady Glass Studio display some of the stained-glass boats produced in their Bay Street factory. The studio produced more than 8,000 pieces last year and expects that total to climb to 10,000.

*Jan McKain/Times Colonist*

# Clear sailing

A Victoria family has taken a hobby of building ornamental glass boats from their garage to a busy assembly line, selling thousands across the continent

BY NORMAN GIDNEY

*Times Colonist staff*

**T**HE BIGGEST BOATBUILDER in Victoria is three floors up in an old building in a nondescript district close to the harbour.

Dennis Brady's boats won't float, but inch for inch they can sell almost as much as a fibreglass or aluminum cartop cousin - up to \$2,000 for a limited-edition three-masted sailing ship.

Brady Builds his boats out of glass - not glass-bottom boats, but brightly coloured and textured stained glass.

Six weeks ago, DeBrady Glass moved from home production at a crowded converted garage in Colwood to several times the space in the city's Bay Street manufacturing area.

For some time, the workshop has been selling everything it could make, and actually had to turn away sale inquiries.

"We've been in the bizarre position of working with the brakes on for years," Brady says.

Ten employees, including Brady's sons Jason and Dane, made the move to the new premises and 10 contract assemblers are still turning out finished pieces at home from glass parts supplied by DeBrady.

More space means room for new equipment such as kilns to make curved pieces of glass and space for teaching stained glass techniques to do-it-yourselfers.

The nautical theme has been rewarding. Not long after they started making items for sale in the 1980s, "we found that the marketplace for anything maritime exceeded everything else."

It still does. Glass boats still outsell everything, which varies from dragonfly kits and antique cars to coloured panels to hang in a window.

DeBrady Glass sells sailboats and lighthouses a long way from saltwater - to residents of the prairies in Nebraska and Saskatchewan. The company's biggest outlet is in the pseudo-Bavarian town of Leavenworth, Wash., in the Cascade Mountains.

It's a high-end gift shop that caters to the tour group buses and WOOFs - "well-off-over-50s," Brady says with a smile. "They don't sell anything under \$1,000."

He still can't quite believe the demand for a new line of elaborate model ships that will retail in gift shops and galleries for \$2,000. They'll make just 10 of each, keep one and sell nine.

The first model, Marco Polo, is sold out. "our next two designs (Mississippi riverboat and Chinese Junk) nobody has seen but we've already sold six.

Making a good living from a craft business is possible, says Brady, who calls himself a hard-core entrepreneur and a lifelong hobby sketcher.

"You have to take your artistic ego and put it up on a shelf."

Brady was active in construction, retail and restaurants on the B.C. mainland before coming to Victoria in the early 1980s.

He started in stained glass when his first son came home from high school with a couple of projects. It grew from a leisure pastime to an enterprise that eventually outgrew their home.

Assembly-line style production has been the key to success. Brady now is giving away some of his designs as pattern books that are selling thousands of copies, and he even encourages people to sell their own versions of his designs.

"The demand for product very substantially exceeds supply," Brady says. The big gap in the market for high-quality handmade work is in the \$200-to-\$2,000 niche, some where between the made-in-China items that Wal-Mart sells and one-of-kind fine art pieces.

Brady is confident that their production techniques and time-saving methods - they cut out glass pieces for 20 sailboats at a time - can reduce assembly time to a quarter of what the first prototype required. And time, not the glass, is the big component. A \$400 sailboat takes seven or eight hours of soldering and assembly. Cost of materials is small compared to the labour involved.

With sales staying strong and the business now able to sign up new outlets, Brady expects their annual production of 8,000 boats will soon move higher.

"My guess is if we're not doing 10,000 this year, we're awfully close to it."