

Art Glass Invitational 2008— An Affair to Remember

by Aymie McKesson

The Art Glass Invitational (AGI) is a gift given to the glassblowing world by two very generous folks. Tom and Elaine Doner not only have big hearts but also a big piece of land, and they share both openly with those who join in for the wonderment that is the Art Glass Invitational. A good artist knows what other artists are doing, and AGI is a chance to rub elbows with many a talented and creative glass artist. Much to the dismay of many of those who attend, AGI only happens once a year. The place is always the same, and no one would want to change it. For one week in August Tom and Elaine open their home and business to a small allotment of sixty eager glassblowers. I have never been to any other facility that was able to set up stations for that many torches, and they built it for us . . . for AGI.

The Glass Blowing Center is located north of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in a nice rural area. Even the closest hotel is on the other side of a ten-mile drive. On Day One, the trip took about twenty minutes and involved much tailgating from the locals. Who would have known there was a Pennsylvania Audubon. By the end of the

trip we were racing around corners with the best of them, but the drive was still time wasted. Seems to be that those in the know camp out. There was no shortage of late-night activity, and camping saves a good chunk of time spent driving. However, if you choose to hotel it as I did, the Emlenton Inn was clean and the food in the adjacent truck stop was edible. It was only on the last day that I made an attempt, but they were more than happy to accommodate off-the-menu creations.



Opening Night

AGI officially kicks off on Monday, but there are plenty of people buzzing about on Sunday night. The majority of the torch spots are picked then. There are some spots that seem to be the annual residence of a few choice regulars, but in AGI '09, some of them face a torch challenge to hold their reign of the much-coveted Michigan Building. Sunday night is a laid-back, meet-and-greet pre-party. Those who can, do. Those who can't take the spots left in the morning.

There is plenty of time for introductions on Monday. Campers are welcome to set up Sunday as well. Camping is just down the road and comes with the view of a lovely rustic cabin that was built by Don. Next to the cabin is a blacksmithing shop where Don is happy to give demos. Campfire breakfasts and a cannon alarm are two of the features available to those who camp. Okay, to be honest, the cannon comes free for every camper, like it or not. No one complained, though. Showers are also an option, and those who checked "yes" were greatly appreciated. Camping or not, your toilet option is a port-o-john, so bring a flashlight for late-night tinkles.

Monday

Monday is pretty slow and laid-back. There is plenty of time to get to know people and get familiar with the property. There is a total of five buildings at the Glass Blowing Center. The first is Tom and Elaine's house, which has an office area where attendees are checked in and name tags are given out. The largest is the main building that hosts all of the demos and connects to a glass gallery. Upstairs is a lounge with a giant TV and loads of glassblowing videos. Glass and a huge variety of tools and torches are available in the back part of the lounge at great prices from Kristian at Generations Glass, so bring money. There is an orientation late in the afternoon, and most of the day is open for making cups. In order to drink from the perpetual keg one must make a cup, but no drinking is allowed on the main property.

Meal service starts Monday with three meals a day plus occasional snacks. Breakfast is early . . . many miss it. I missed that it even existed as an option for the entire week. While a few items are donated already prepared, the majority of the food is made from scratch by Kevin and fills you with goodness.





Tuesday

Tuesday is when the real goodness of AGI gets going. The demos that go on for the next four days would stand alone as being well worth the investment of the \$600 ticket to AGI. You can get lessons on everything from beads and marbles to ring seals and three-foot vessels, not to mention color chemistry and fume work. The list goes on and on, and the knowledge available at AGI is priceless. Only one demo is done at a time, so you never have to miss any of them. Torches can be on from sunup to long after sundown, even in the demo hall. As if the demos and the food weren't enough, the general rule is that torches are open for trying out and sharing. Just ask first. A Herbert Arnold, a variety of GTTs including a Kabuki, Bethlehems, Nortels, Carlises—you name it and you can probably find it at AGI. Ask real nice and maybe, just maybe, I'll let you rock my Red Max. Several of the people who demo are available throughout the week and are happy to share knowledge freely. Ask and you shall receive. There didn't seem to be much that couldn't be found. Seriously, someone there knows how to do anything you could want to learn, and it seems that everyone there knows just where to point you. Big names, small names, new names, old names . . . it's all at AGI. A late-night hot shop was even set up in a fire pit for those with the only itch that wasn't being scratched. For those in a competitive mood, Barry Lafler has a mystery glass challenge. A ten-dollar entry fee gets you a mystery bag of glass that must be made into a specific item. This year it was an oil lamp, and the entries were quite varied.





After Hours and Closing Celebrations

Most of the nighttime activity is laid-back and friendly. The evenings are a little cool—sometimes downright chilly—and the “hot shop” is open every night under the guise of a run-of-the-mill campfire. Folks gather ’round for good conversation and live music by several of the multit talented attendees. The tune of glass drums and acoustic guitar is always a good note to end the evening on. Torches are open until 2 a.m. offering a different atmosphere for working as the night owls come to life and the air cools. As an added bonus, late-night snacks are often served up and are a much appreciated boost. Friday night offered the option of a Texas Hold ’Em tournament with a glass buy in. It was a great chance to have some fun, get to know some people I had not chatted with before, and to go home with some awesome glass art. (Three Texans on the final table. Let that be a reminder to all the Michiganders . . . Texans bring it!) However, no matter how great the poker and the campfire proved to be, the standout event for those interested in discovering the Pennsylvucky night life is the group outing on Thursday. It offers a bit of debauchery and a ton of fun. Bring some money and an open mind and make sure to wear a hat. It’s good times for all.

The week comes to a close on Saturday with a true glassblower cookout. This year was sausage cooked in giant tubes of boro turning on rollers. There were plenty of veggies for the veggies—giant zucchini the size of small children. The day is filled with mixed emotions. Many are tired and ready to be home, but no one wants to say good-bye or leave AGI.

All of the stations were cleared, all of the glass was packed, and the party commenced. Tom and Elaine provided refreshments, and there was live music and plenty of dancing. My favorite part of the day was trading. Everyone who wanted to participate gathered in the demo hall and opened their cases for a one-of-a-kind art show. Be sure to bring plenty of your work to AGI, because you do not want to miss out on the opportunity to take home the work of so many amazing artists.

Looking Forward to AGI 2009

It is really hard to sum up AGI in limited wordage. One night at a gathering here in town a very wise man told me that if I could only afford one event that year to make it to AGI. I pass that advice on to all of you. At some point in your glassblowing career you must experience the wonderment of AGI. Now, I’m not urging the masses to head out to this event. After all, the tickets are limited and I want to go. But I’m betting many of you who try it out will be addicted instantly and will be buying your tickets the minute they go on sale—ten months before it happens—leaving you to count the days . . . living each one in agony as they drag on . . . and it just never seems to be August yet. But then it happens again, and just like a kid on Christmas morning, all of the waiting and good behavior pays off. May AGI and its spirit of free knowledge live on forever!

Visit www.glass123.com/AGI for more information about the location, facilities, and presenters for the 2009 Art Glass Invitational that is scheduled for August 18–23.

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