

GLASS WORKING AT THE HARLEY

WRITTEN BY DARREN VANHOUTEN

PHOTOS BY JASON HOWARD

Sitting atop a speckled metallic gray stool at one of six new glass working stations, Rolf Lehman is carefully using a Barracuda torch to create a lime green and bright yellow bead that he will add to his quickly growing collection. Rolf is in 6th grade and is already hooked on the art of glass working.

"I love the bright colors and how I can work with the glass to shape it the way I want," said Rolf. "It's just so much different than most of the other type of art most kids can do at school. This will be a great experience for Harley students," he said.

Rolf is one of 510 students from nursery to 12th grade at The Harley School in Rochester, New York. The independent school has always stressed the importance of the Arts in a well-rounded liberal arts education.

"Harley is unique among other schools because students are required to take courses in the Arts through their sophomore year, and take several additional electives in the 11th and 12th grades," said Art Department Head and Upper School Art teacher, Kelly Fallon. "That is twice the amount of time as required by most public schools," she said.

Harley is not considered a typical Arts school. Instead, its students excel in math, science and the humanities as adeptly as they do in drawing and sculpture. The reasons for this are readily apparent, according to Head of School, Paul Schiffman.

"Our students are encouraged to think creatively and find individual expression in all of their subjects," said Schiffman. "They approach calculus problems and charcoal drawings with the same fundamental sense of discovery and desire for mastery. And they achieve that mastery using their particular talents and experience," he said.

While students learn from extremely talented teachers, the simple truth was that the school's art facilities did not reflect the importance that the school placed on the Arts. It also did not encourage the type of original and inspired works that students wished to create. To remedy this situation, Harley began developing blueprints for a new Center for the Visual Arts in 2002.

"When we began talking about this new facility, we made a 'dream list' that included everything that our faculty and students would want in the new building," said Schiffman. "Of course, we needed to pair down that list and do the best we could to accommodate everyone's interests," he said. One of the requests was a glass working studio, which is almost

unheard of for most grade schools.

"What initially seemed like a wild suggestion turned out to be one of the most exciting outcomes of our discussions," said Schiffman. "Our faculty and students couldn't be more eager to learn about and experience the art of glass working using the torches and kilns," he said.

According to Fallon, glass working affords students the unique opportunity to work with a complicated, fluid three-dimensional medium. So much of art as it is taught in grade school relies upon the two-dimensional forms of drawing, photography and, more recently, computer graphics. With glass working, Fallon said, students must think in ways similar to how they do with ceramics, but must ultimately develop different technical and mental skills to achieve the desired outcome. That is where she sees the importance of the addition of glass working to the curriculum.

As part of the school's new \$1.8 million, 10,500 square foot facility opened this winter – which includes gallery and studio space to display student artwork, four additional classrooms, a pottery room and kiln, and a computer graphics lab – the glass working studio contains one of the area's most sophisticated glass working areas, complete with six Barracuda torches, a fusing kiln, and three annealing kilns.

"We are all very excited about the new studio," said Fallon, "but we are also at the very early stages of training the faculty and determining the curriculum for our students." Members of the art department view the next few years as a kind of pilot program, and are looking to the experts for guidance.

The school has a lot going for it already. It is ideally located to take advantage of two well-known glass working centers, the Corning Museum of Glass and Rochester Institute of Technology. The city of Rochester and its surrounding communities are also home to a burgeoning group of talented glass artisans who the school hopes might eventually wish to use the school's space and provide demonstrations that will allow them to share their craft with students.

The first step of the faculty training involved a few art teachers and the Head of School (who will teach a glass working class in the fall) heading to Corning for an intensive, 6-day instructional course. Their goal was to begin to better understand the best way to teach students of different ages and abilities about the properties of glass and about fundamental torch and kiln techniques.

"Corning was a real eye-opener for most of us," said middle school art teacher, Tim Rogers, who had no prior experience working with glass. "I am more excited about working and making art with glass than I have been with any other medium," he said. "There are just so many possibilities," he continued. The faculty received a crash course during their stay at Corning in how to run a classroom, set-up a studio, devise age and experience appropriate course plans, and, of course, about safety.

The teachers are starting to get a better sense of the "how's" and "what's" to teach. They are already taking a few students into the studio to begin experimenting with some ideas and projects. They all admit, however, that there is still a ways to go before next fall when classes begin. One thing is for certain, demand for the glass working courses will be high.

"I get three or four teachers a week coming up and asking about whether they will get to use the studio too," said Rogers. "Even the parents are wanting to get in here," he continued.

The faculty envisions that students in all grades will learn from the new studio. Children in the earliest grades (Nursery through 4th grade) will be able to learn about the basic art concepts like colors and patterns from the glass, and will be able to create elementary slump pieces. Middle School students (5-8) will work on more advanced kiln pieces – including fused tiles, jewelry, slumped plates, precious metal clay, and mosaic art – and will even be able to work with the torch. The majority of the classes will take place in the Upper School (grades 9-12), where students will work with the torches and kilns to create their own beads, pendants, vessels, sculpted vases, marbles, perfume bottles, and even try their hands at small glassblowing pieces.

Like with all other curriculum additions, glass working will mesh with the overall core subject matter at the school.

"Harley is very interdisciplinary," said Schiffman. "When students are learning about Shakespeare or the Underground Railroad, for example, they will simultaneously learn about the artistic or musical traditions of that time. We will take that same process and try to make it work with glass working," he said.

The faculty are already looking into ways to do this, and have come up with a few correlative plans. The 8th grade science class typically travels to Corning to learn about the physical properties of glass. Prior to the trip next year, students will already have first-hand knowledge of how glass is affected by heat and about some of the terminology. This extra insight will make their visit to Corning more insightful and interesting. The history department is also working to incorporate the glass studio into its Ancient Civilization curriculum. For example, when they discuss Ancient Egypt – which many people believe is the birthplace of glass – the faculty are determining ways that they might be able demonstrate how glass was manipulated in that era.

"This is an entirely new adventure for us," said Fallon. "I know we made the right decision to include the glass working studio into our new facility. Now we just have to work together to tap into the excitement and possibilities that the studio brings with it," she said.

