

Glassroots Roundtable— Issues for Glass Pipe Makers

Glassroots 2011 featured a flame off and a trade show, but the highlight for many of the functional glass artists was the contribution by six panelists who shared their positions on the state of today's lampworking industry. There was a chance for audience participants to share their concerns for the glass pipe making industry and their ideas for improving between artists and their communities.

Robert Mickelsen: We're going to open up the floor to some questions and comments, so who wants to go first?

Paul Trautman: I really do respect all of the color people out there. Everybody has contributed. It's true that I was the first one, because I loved color. I have a technical and an artistic side, and glass is a perfect blending between the two. I wasn't being successful as a flameworker selling hummingbird feeders, salt and pepper shakers, and that sort of thing, so color is where the money started coming from.

Audience Participant (AP) #1: Margaret and several other people have made the point about the legalities and the gray area that our industry is involved in and what we can do to create a group to help promote our future and do this for the rest of our lives. I don't know about all of you, but I don't deal well with authority. I like being my own boss. I love being creative. I like being able to do this, and I want to be able to do this until I die or until my hands stop working. Facing the things that happened recently—several shops being raided, things of that sort—brings this issue directly into our front line, and I think it's something we need to talk about as an industry.

This question may be more for our audience than our panel, but Margaret's numerical equation—1,000 of us at \$100 a year will be \$100,000 that we can put toward attorneys and lobbyists. Out of this crowd, who of you would donate that \$100?

I feel that for all of us who were able to pay \$60 to get in here, there are a lot of people in our industry who cannot afford that. There are a lot of people who aren't here with us, and what we would be doing would be for the greater cause for everybody. I'm curious to see if this does happen. I would like to have everybody spread the word to the people who may not necessarily be able to afford this. It would be the biggest, most beneficial step that we could take right now in promoting the longevity of what we're doing.

Margaret Zinser: To give you an idea of how powerful a small amount of money can be, at Sonoran Glasswork, a tiny little arts academy, we run on around \$400,000 dollars a year. With that \$400,000, we're employing nine people, four of whom are full-time and have health insurance for their families. We're federally funded. We're teaching kids. We're working as an advocate for arts in southern Arizona and an advocate for glass arts around the country, so imagine how much momentum we would gain by organizing.

How many of you actually have health insurance as pipe makers? How many of you, if you had easy access to it through a professional organization, would actually end up with health insurance? That's what I'd love to push for



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Wil Menzies: I still beat the streets. I still carry cases. I talk to a lot of shop owners. How many people in here are from the retail side of it? How many in here are shop owners? These guys, in my mind, are our shield, and you wonder why they mark the sale two and a half, three times. It's because they're going to take the hit. We're not out there standing behind that counter. We're sitting in our comfortable shops making things, but the dynamic—I don't want to waltz around this, because we've waltzed around it all night. Are we going to legalize? Are we going to decriminalize? Are we going to talk about spice?

Straight up, spice is not a good thing for our industry. It's the irresponsibility of local convenience store owners. They're selling

it to fourteen-year-old kids, not the responsible guys who are hitting those smoking IDs every time and making sure that customers are eighteen years or older. These guys make a lot of money off of this. In turn, who do all of you spend it with? Us. So it's a strange dynamic. I don't like it, but how many of these shops can stand the hit of losing that 30 to 40 percent of inflationary income that's been happening over the last two or three years?

We might not like the soft import. We might not like the stuff that comes in that you see at CHAMPS or ASD. But the fact is they get to mark that up four, five, six times, whereas my normal production piece is two and a half, right? We have to consider both sides of the story.

I don't like spice, and I'm sure these guys probably don't either, but it is a verifiable income to these businesses that helps them keep spending money with us. So how do we approach it?

AP#2: Jason did a pretty reasonable job at the CK show last week of trying to promote this, but before the first two days, we had a seminar that was presented by the UCCTO—the United Counter Culture Trade Organization. It just goes to show you how fragmented the industry is to see that there was this seminar that happened at this trade show that nobody knows about.

There are forces at work already trying to make what you're talking about happen. And you're right. Everybody has to decide that we're going to back it. It doesn't have to be the UCCTO. It could be any organization, but it was a pretty interesting panel discussion that happened there. It was twelve people both days. The first day was a business panel with retailers, distributors, manufacturers who spoke about how we can handle credit with retailers and distributors. Almost all industries have these trade organizations, and within them they focus on promoting things like establishing credit and allowing distributors to grow with their retailers.

The second day was a legal seminar. We need to know about these things, and what we really need is lawyers who are going to work for basically free, which is almost harder than putting together the organization.

Snic: Being a pipe maker or whatever, we don't really have access to what all the stores are going through in each different state. I'm from Pennsylvania, and I still have people who are afraid to ship stuff to Pennsylvania because of what happened almost ten years ago. There's a huge disconnect among everyone. If we had a lawyer, even something like a guideline—these are the basic principles of what can happen in each state and not happen—that would be so helpful.

No one has any idea who can ship to whom, what they can sell, what they can call it. There's no basic terminology or regulation or anything just for us. We all need to communicate on some level. There's the Internet, but some people aren't on the Internet and some people don't go to the shows. A lot of these people live out in the middle of nowhere, and they don't want to talk to anybody. We're all spread out, but we have to figure it out somehow.





AP#3: We all need to get together along with that concept of \$100 each, because \$10 each a year would make a huge difference if we all did it. I really think that we need legal support, but I also think that we need to bring those out of the shadows who are unable to be here and be in this community to help understand how to stand up together—how strong we actually are.

Bandhu Dunham: Pursuing legalization and issues like that is really great, but I think there's a short-term solution and there's a long-term solution. You might want to look at both. I just want to remind people that there are things like the Colorado Project and the Arizona Project where you get involved with a charity. You're promoting an awareness in the public that, hey, these pipe makers aren't so bad. It creates an atmosphere of legitimacy, and that creates an atmosphere where it becomes that much easier to address the legal issues. I think addressing them head on with lawyers, lobbying, and such is probably good, but also keep in mind that creating a more accepting atmosphere overall in the art community and the general public is really valuable, too.

Paul Trautman: I think that we also have to be proactive and not just reactive. That's where lobbying comes in, for example. We need to find out what's going on and be there and try to effect legislation and that kind of thing as well. Not just have lawyers to defend us if something happens, but really try to effect policy.

Robert Mickelsen: I also believe that because people are afraid to show their faces, an essential organization that could do that for them would be very useful. There would be somebody who could step up to the plate and find the lawyers, initiate the lawsuits, and organize us without necessarily revealing our identities. It might really be a useful thing.

Sean: I think this kind of a central group that's promoting what's happening but also providing information and resources and all of that is good. When we talk about a thousand glassblowers giving ten bucks or a hundred bucks, we're not even thinking about the distributors—Glasscraft, ABR, Mountain Glass, Northstar, Trautman. We would be willing to invest a lot more than a hundred bucks in the sustainability and the long-term growth of this community.

Without an organization, we're not going to put any money anywhere, but if we have an organization with a structured outline and a plan, for me as a lampworker, I'd put up a hundred dollars toward that. I guarantee you I can talk to Dave or Abe or Paul, and some much larger money will come toward that. Right now, manufacturers and distributors are doing well. We want that to continue for obvious reasons.

The question is, what is the next step and how do we start to form that organization? Who are the people who would be in it? How do we keep the thing positive rather than forming this organization and getting the negative blowback.

AP#2: Can we have your list? Part of the problem with the GCCTO was it was a great panel, but we didn't have any way to reach these people. It was just some people who don't know everybody in this room.

Sean: I can speak for myself and Dave that if we're presented with the right outline and the right plan, we will give you that list. It needs to be clearly outlined exactly what's going to happen with that list, what the plan is, and where the money's going. It's got to be professional.

We're talking ten, fifteen thousand-plus people. And I'm not just going to give that away for obvious reasons. But if it's organized and Dave and I believe in it, absolutely for the sustainability of this industry. I can only speak for our company, but we're here for this industry. We're a company as well, but if giving that list out is what will take this thing to the next level, for sure.

Snic: That list is what's controlling the release of information. The distributors are the ones who have contact with everyone.

Paul Trautman: There are a lot of other ways that people can get the word out as well, through the boards, for example.

AP#4: My name is Erica, and I work with Carver-B Glass. I have a nonprofit background. I worked in D.C. for a nonprofit for the National Association for Community Mediation Conflict Resolution, so the idea of going through litigation first kind of makes me cringe. We need to come with a positive attitude and not a defensive attitude, although I know that we need to protect ourselves, our families, and each other at the same time.

One of the things that I heard was, Robert, when you said we're organizing, how can we do this without our faces or without our names being known? I think it's time for us to not go there. We need to stand behind our word. That's basically what I want to bring forward. Let's not go into this with fear. Let's go into this with a positive knowledge that we are not making bad things. Don't listen to that. We're coming with a really positive message and product and something that can flourish us, our economy, and our country globally.

We have people calling us from overseas who are asking for our work, and I have no idea how to ship it to them—if we're safe. So I do think that organizing is a good idea. I do think we need to go at it in a positive and not fearful way, and be ready to stand up with our names. Although we're Carver-B, we're Andrew Brown and Erica Hartwick Brown. Those are our real names. Thank you.

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AP#5: Three or four years ago I wasn't involved. I feel like when you're talking about \$100,000 or even a million dollars, if the dispensaries in Michigan can't make it happen when it's a state law—and they have pretty much unlimited amounts of money—then I just don't see how a trade organization with \$100,000 or \$200,000 would make a difference to beat the powers that be that would actually be paying attention to this industry. Mainly it might be because of this invented drug problem. So that's pretty much it.

Margaret Zinser: We have to start somewhere.

AP#6: I started the Arizona Project with a group of friends to promote an awareness of what we're all trying to do on behalf of that. There's a lot going on right now. We're getting together. We're binding. We can harness that, and we can go forward a lot further. So if there's anybody who's willing to step up to the plate . . .

I wake up every day and have responsibility. I did not know it, but the Arizona Project is a serious amount of effort that Sean is helping me with a lot, and everybody. The first people I go to are the industry leaders—the organizers, the people who are producing the colors—because they're the people I can trust first and foremost. Then I trickle down to the glass artists, and that's the same conscious effort that we can all put together.



We have to start somewhere.

Nick: I just want to throw a couple of things out there. I'm talking about fear—putting on a show in the Midwest in a shop across the street from the Hilton. I mean, I have a problem with paranoia. It all falls on me. Whatever the show's doing, if they come in, I can sell to the lawyer. He pretty much said they can come in and freeze all of my assets, take everything from me. Who was it who said they would go to jail for blowing glass? I would. I'd go to jail.

AP#7: I have been to jail before.

Nick: I have, too, actually—not for blowing, but for selling pipes. So I know what you guys are saying. But one thing: What if it wasn't a hundred dollar bill, but what if it was a hundred dollars in production. You know what I'm saying? What if you had the option to throw a hundred dollars in glass at a person.

What I'm saying is that I took trade from three-quarters of the people in this room for the booths. If you have the opportunity to trade that, how much would you be willing to give this year in love and not money? It seems that greenbacks are kind of like the evil thing. We don't do this all just for money. We do what we do for love, right? I'm just saying that there are a lot of people who couldn't afford to do the booth at this show if I didn't take the trade. If there was somebody willing to peddle that glass around and take the trade for that organization, how much easier would it be for everybody? I just don't know.

AP#8: A lot of this stuff we've actually started bringing out to you-guys in our first edition. I hope you liked it. We have a lot going for you all in the future, and I wanted to touch on a lot of this. At dinner last night I was the only one who had health insurance at a table of twelve. That's not good odds. Twelve people, and most of them did a way more dangerous job than I did. All I do is shuffle papers and talk to people. They're slinging glass that can burn them at any minute in severe ways. I just think that these thoughts and these people coming together like this is really what we do need. And our magazine is definitely supporting this. The UCCTO's ad was definitely a donated ad, and we want to reach out to the people in these organizations and know that we also are there to support.

AP#9: The association needs to stay within the industry specifically, and I think the flip side is really looking for funding, from my viewpoint of being on both sides of manufacture and a store owner. We need to have a retail designation and an opportunity for the stores to join and be part of the association as well. You can absolutely get the funding through the stores, especially the stores that have been true to artistry and buy from American-produced products and artisans. I think that most stores, if they could get a designation that says "We are approved; we support this" will go a long way. I'd be happy to pay for that.

I did a lot of research, and I filed my suit in state court. We were successful in doing that. I ended up selling the brand name, because it had been diluted and stepped on by importers and things of that nature. I think that the reality is that those are the people who are dangerous in this industry. People who are taking risk, doing things, absolutely motivated by greed. If we can get the association to root them out via the retail stores—I think if we banded together and said, "Hey, if you're going to conduct and promote and sponsor this type of behavior, you're not welcome here."

AP#10: Hi. My name is Eric. My wife Ellen and I run a trade shop called Age, and this kind of thing is after our own hearts. It's a very big gamble. This industry was almost destroyed years ago by trade shows such as CHAMPS and other things that really helped to keep us alive, but the fact is that they brought so many other imports and so much spice and stuff like that, it really helped devalue the price of our product. With the influx of all the stuff that was coming in from China, it almost killed us. The fact that we banded together four, five, six years ago to start our show and unite and step aside from the staple show in the industry, it was huge. Because things like that happened, this movement is inevitable. It's never going to stop as long as the government gives us the ability.

My wife and I were talking about the stuff that's going on here. We were trying to come up with concepts and things to bring it out to the general public. We came along with the suggestion of a documentary, because this is such a big business. It's much more than hundreds of millions of dollars. It's in the billion-dollar range. And we're not talking from the green part of industry and things like that. We're talking from the artistic part of industry. This film and things like that are very important. If we could get a film out there that showed that there are American families, this is the next GM of America. This is in the forefront of things that are just starting to be if it's possible.

In each state, it only takes about 250,000 signatures for this law to be changed. The Paraphernalia Act is a joke. If we all band together and we're not afraid to let a documentary be made and people to come in and say that this is not only for this use—there is now a huge artistic part of pipe making that it doesn't have to be functional art. It can be anything. These guys have the ability to do whatever they set their minds to.

The new things that are coming out with the guys that are here have blown me away every day, and I've been in awe of simple things like Jerome Baker was making fifteen, twenty years ago. But thank God that the industry didn't give up when all the pipe dreams and all that stuff was going on, and the head shops and everything still kept supporting us. If we can get out there and make it a documentary, we can show how much money this is bringing into our country and not leaving America.



AP#11: This is what's so important, is just the fact that people step up and say: "You know what? I'm no longer going to be afraid. We're going to make this. We're going to get it out to as many film festivals as possible. We're going to get it out to people who make large-scale films. Michael Moore—whoever it could be. It doesn't matter. But it needs to be put out there in the light that it really is. Unfortunately it comes back to, "Oh, we're just pipe makers."

We're not just pipe makers. We're American families. And that's what really has to be put out there, is that this is feeding American families just like we've talked about. The nonsense that's going on, it's about time to be over. That's what has to be stressed, and that's what has to be pointed out in everything that's made, is that these are American families who are staying in this country, because we're losing so much money being shipped out everywhere else but here. This industry is here to stay as long as we can band together.