

# Trial by Fire— A Story of Collaborative Flameworking

by Jenny Atchley from *Interviews with Jacs, Dina, and White Monkey*

From the solitary corners where, on most days, they worked over a lone torch, three flameworkers from Boulder, Colorado—Dina, Jacs, and White Monkey—converged to create a stunning display of artistic collaboration. Over the course of eighteen hours and three days of competition at the August 2010 Las Vegas CHAMPS Flame-Off, the trio brought to life “Karl,” a three-and-a-half-foot-tall moveable skeleton made from one hundred individual pieces of borosilicate glass strung together with steel cable and jeweler’s wire.

The decision to collaborate on Karl was partly by necessity, since the Flame-Off rules required competitors to work in teams, a relatively new concept in the glass community. The previous spring, the International Hot Glass Invitational in Las Vegas had been one of the first glassblowing competitions to require that flameworkers compete in teams. For an industry that historically has evolved through the work of solitary artisans, the growing trend toward collaboration is a sign that flameworkers are seeking new ways to diversify their skills and broaden perspectives of their craft. For flameworkers seeking to push their creative limits, no longer will it be enough to rely on trained habit and isolated thinking. Learning to embrace other artists’ ideas is becoming as important as mastering the technical aspects of glassblowing.

## Discovering the Nuance of Working Together

Dina, Jacs, and White Monkey knew that to be successful, they would have to create a symbiotic working relationship that fostered open sharing of their respective skills and techniques. Their flameworking experience ranged from four to twelve years, and they had all, at one time or another, worked in an environment where the typical MO of flameworkers is to fiercely guard their designs and maintain a stubborn independence in their work. For Dina, Jacs, and White Monkey, constructing Karl would shatter the traditional sense that flameworking could only be a solitary endeavor.

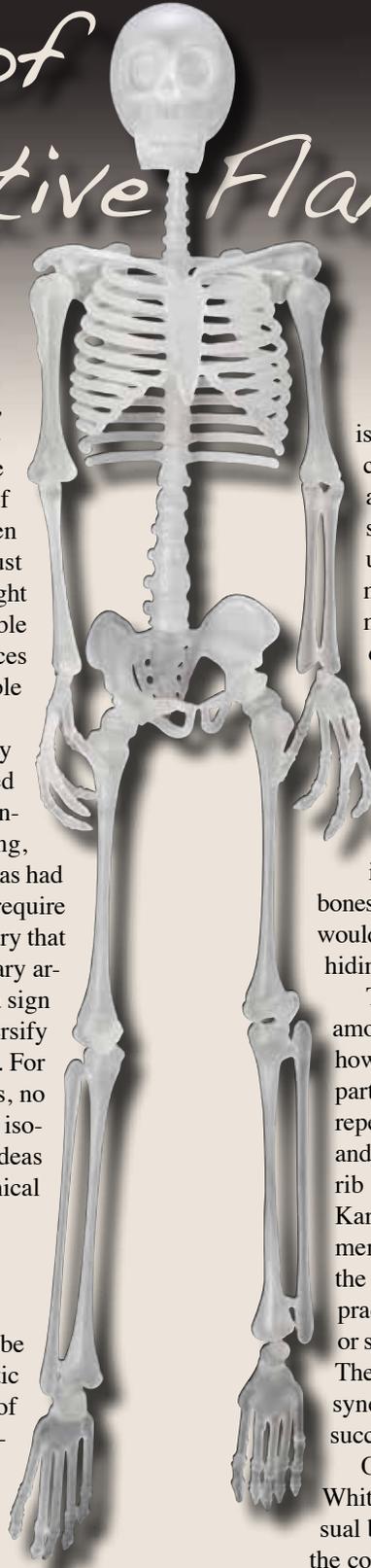


Photo of Full-Length “Karl” by Alive Studios

Preparing for the Flame-Off first exposed the artists to the importance of establishing clear communication. Planning Karl required meticulous research and discussion about how to create him. The team spent hours studying books on human anatomy to understand how skeletons are constructed, not to mention learning the names of various bones and measuring how each piece would fit together. The decision-making process required team members to abandon their egos—which sometimes meant letting go of exciting, creative ideas—and focus on the most rational options for creating Karl. For instance, initially the flameworkers wanted Karl to be colored so his bones would glow. After much deliberation, however, the team agreed that instead of coloring Karl, they would sandblast his bones to make them opaque rather than clear. That method would still make Karl appear as realistic as possible while hiding his wired “joints.”

The team members also had to demonstrate a certain amount of flexibility and agreeableness when deciding how to divide the workload. After all, creating skeleton parts wasn’t necessarily part of their regular artistic repertoire. Dina was in charge of the skull, scapula, and pelvis, while Jacs would construct the spine and rib cage. White Monkey was responsible for all of Karl’s extremities. Prior to the competition, the team members practiced making their respective parts of the skeleton—but individually. They didn’t actually practice creating their skeleton parts at the same time or stringing Karl together until they were in Las Vegas. They would be forced to rely on each other and the synergy they’d developed before the competition to successfully execute their project.

Once the Flame-Off was under way, Dina, Jacs, and White Monkey found their groove and maintained a casual but steady pace. The flameworkers discovered that the communication skills they’d practiced enabled them to help each other quickly during the event without much discussion. They also tested their trust in one another. There wasn’t time for anything but complete faith that the other team members were fulfilling their duties. The success of the team relied on the success of the individual artists.

## Collaboration Pays Off

When the final day of competition arrived and the time left to finish Karl began to wane, it became clear that Dina, Jacs, and White Monkey were comfortable with collaboration. As other teams submitted their entries and cleaned up their stations, the three Boulder frameworkers were still in the throes of building Karl, wondering at times whether they'd be able to finish him before the time expired. What kept the team focused was the mutual respect and cohesive energy they'd created together. If something needed to be done, someone jumped in and did it. By the competition's end, the individual artists were truly operating as a unified team determined to achieve a mutual goal.

The final moments of the Flame-Off found Dina, Jacs, and White Monkey dashing through the competition space with Karl, desperately hoping they would finish setting him up in the official entry area by noon. Stringing Karl's many pieces together was the team's final testament to the importance of effective teamwork. Before the competition, they'd considered and criticized numerous ideas about the best way to connect and display him. As with their other decisions, the team had settled on the approach they thought would be the least complex and most viable in a competitive environment.

Within minutes of the competition's end, the team finally stepped back to admire a finished Karl. The craftsmanship was impressive, but Karl also represented something that was perhaps even more important—the magic that could result from collective creative energy.



## The Benefits of Sharing Live On

The team left Las Vegas with high hopes that other solitary frameworkers would seek similar opportunities to work with fellow artists. Dina, Jacs, and White Monkey discovered that exposure to fresh ideas and new artistic techniques produced benefits that far outweighed the need to protect their own habits and preferences. What's more, they realized the overwhelming potential of collaborative glass art to influence the entire glassblowing community. The open sharing of ideas is a simple yet powerful concept that could advance the entire medium.

Long after the Flame-Off had ended, Dina, Jacs, and White Monkey continued to blow glass together. The chance to exchange skills while expanding their artistic opportunities was irresistible. The thought process they engaged in to create Karl had spawned infinite possibilities for future projects. Ideas that weren't conducive to Karl weren't lost. Rather, they held the creative potential to launch many other artistic endeavors. And naturally, Dina, Jacs, and White Monkey have become convinced that their collective ideas would be best executed as a team.

P.S. from Dina, White Monkey & Jacs: We hope to encourage more frameworkers to share their skills and talents with others in collaboration. Also, a huge "Thanks!" to all the other teams and glassblowers at the Flame-Off. The energy, creativity, time, and spirit that all of the artists put into their pieces was an amazing inspiration.

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*Jacs, Dina, and White Monkey*