

# PROFITABLE GLASS

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# Seraphim Studios

by Colleen Bryan



Since the 1980s, Dee Tatum has been in a lunch group of six friends. That group has grown over the years to encompass the friends' daughters and daughters-in-law and their babies. In the past few years, two women in the group have experienced breast cancer scares. One of those has actually been diagnosed with breast cancer.

Many of us have heard that one in eight American women will receive that diagnosis in her lifetime. After losing close friends, family members, and social acquaintances to the disease, Dee realized that breast cancer impacts everybody. She began to look for a way to acknowledge and support the people who carry that burden. As a stained glass retailer and owner of Seraphim Studios, she looked for a stained glass project. As a southern woman, she chose a variation of the old-fashioned quilting bee.



## Flowers of Hope Stained Glass Panels Project

Denise and Virgil Hurley, owners of Glass Addicts Stained Glass Creations in Sanford, Florida, initiated the "Flowers of Hope" project. The couple produced a book of eight-by-eight-inch patterns with twenty-seven designs—twenty-six flowers and one pink ribbon.

They enlisted different people to make the designs into quiltlike panels and auctioned the finished pieces to raise funds for breast cancer awareness. When Dee Tatum first saw the Hurleys' book several years ago, she was immediately struck with the power of the idea and wanted to use it in her own town of Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Dee did not focus on the fundraising angle of the concept, but rather wanted to make symbolic gifts that could be given to the people most affected—the people diagnosed with breast cancer. Finding a way to implement the idea in Hattiesburg took time and tenacity, and Dee's eventual success reads like an exercise in three degrees of separation.



## Transplanting a Hybrid Concept

Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where Dee owns Seraphim Studios, is a hub city of about 45,000 that serves a metropolitan area of about 257,000 people. Halfway between the Mississippi Gulf Coast and the capital city of Jackson, and ninety miles from New Orleans, Natchez, and Jackson, Hattiesburg has quite a number of stained glass artists. Dee has met nearly thirty since she moved to Hattiesburg in 1995. Hattiesburg is

home to two colleges, the University of Southern Mississippi and William Carey College. Hattiesburg has worked hard during the past decade to keep its downtown functional and is currently developing its downtown arts district to complement its five historic districts that contain homes built from the late 1800s through the 1940s. The city has grown in recent years with the construction of newer homes. Seraphim Studios is ten blocks from the heart of downtown on the edge of The Oaks Historic District, just off the main east-to-west corridor through town.

One could expect a town like Hattiesburg to have many women diagnosed with breast cancer, but the disease is often hidden within a community. Dee remembers talking to a fellow stained glass retailer about the project. "At the time, she said she didn't know anyone with breast cancer. Then the next three students she sent to my store were all survivors!"

Dee approached several groups with her idea beginning in the late 1990s. The break for the concept came when one of Dee's students in a beginning lead class suggested that she talk to a member of the newly forming Breast Cancer Awareness Team (BCAT). The team, which was coming together to promote breast cancer awareness in Hattiesburg, included representatives from the two Hattiesburg hospitals, the American Cancer Society, the Southeast Mississippi Rural Health Initiative, the National Cancer Institute, the Deep South Network for Cancer Control, and Hattiesburg Clinic. Among them, these facilities and organizations treat the majority of breast cancer patients throughout the southern half of Mississippi.





### (Not) Just a Bowl of Cherries

The Hattiesburg Flowers of Hope Project got underway in the early summer of 2002. Dee had developed and implemented a plan for the project. She engaged the stained glass artists who would make the panels, identified a target group of cancer patients, designed and distributed a brochure to inform them of the project, arranged for an exhibition of the finished art pieces, and developed a plan to distribute the panels to the patients. But nothing was as simple as it sounds.

After several meetings with the local BCAT, the team and Dee agreed to work together on the project. The first question was: How many breast cancer patients were there to be served? The BCAT estimated there were between 200 and 400 newly diagnosed cases of breast cancer each year in southeast Mississippi. Dee swallowed hard. There was no way she could enroll enough artists to produce so many panels. Her first executive decision was to narrow the scale to a manageable number, so Dee and the BCAT decided to target the group whose cancer was diagnosed during the National Breast Cancer Awareness Month of October. The panels would be presented to women on the one-year anniversary of their diagnosis. In this way, the project would draw awareness and support for breast cancer survival.

The next hurdle came from an unexpected quarter—new federal government health regulations. As Dee and the BCAT began to identify their subgroup of patients to receive the panels, new federal medical privacy regulations (HIPAA) took effect. The regulations severely constrain the release of medical information on individuals for any purpose beyond the ones specifically agreed to by the patient. So how would Dee and BCAT identify the women to receive the glass panels?

Dee solved this problem by designing and producing a two-page brochure that explains the Flowers of Hope project while meeting all of the federal privacy mandates. Each brochure included a gift certificate redeemable at Seraphim Stu-

dios for a Flowers of Hope panel. Since a different artist produced each panel, Dee wanted to deter competition for any particular piece. She randomly assigned an individual sticker/symbol to each gift certificate, to be redeemed for a specific panel at Seraphim Studios. The brochures were distributed to medical providers in August to be passed along to cancer patients who would celebrate their first anniversary of survivorship in October 2004. The brochures identify the artists who made the panels and the companies that participated in the project.

Concurrently, Dee was finding stained glass artists and hobbyists to build the panels. She talked to her students and sent a mailing to her stained glass contacts soliciting help. Two retail stained glass stores, thirty-three people in the community, and two visiting relatives from California volunteered to participate in making panels. The crafters each picked a pattern from the Hurleys' book, selected their own glass, and decided between the use of lead or copper foil. Many artisans were newcomers to glass working under the guidance of a teacher in a stained glass class. In the end, twenty-one people brought in thirty panels.

### Fruition

As the panels came together, their power as a collective visual statement for breast cancer awareness grew obvious. Dee Tatum and the BCAT realized that it might help patients to see the individual panels hanging together as a message that they aren't in it alone with their breast cancer struggle. Dee volunteers at the local library and walks regularly with the librarian Pamela Pridgen, one of Dee's first stained glass students in Hattiesburg who is a flame worker in her spare



time. The two discussed the possibilities for a public display. As a result of their collaboration, The Library of Hattiesburg, Petal and Forrest Counties, and BCAT decided to host a reception on September 30, 2004, to recognize the people who produced the panels. An exhibit of the Hattiesburg Flowers of Hope panels was also held through the first week in October 2004 concurrent with Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Following the exhibit, the panels were available for patients to take home.

Dee Tatum's primary goal for the project was to build community involve-



ment among the stained glass community by doing something worthwhile that did not depend on asking people for money. "We get asked to donate all the time, but this was something that was for people, that could lift spirits, and that didn't have a fundraising angle to it. I hoped that it would help us as stained glass people to strengthen the community among ourselves. So many glass people work alone or with only one or two other people, we don't really get much feedback or interaction with others."

Asked to evaluate her project against that goal, Dee is generally satisfied. The reception honoring the creators of the panels is further testimony to a successful, if informal, association. "People feel good about having worked on the project. One of first panels came in with a note that [the artist] first started working on the panel as a nice thing to do. But the more he worked on it, the more he remembered when his mother had a breast cancer scare. That remembrance changed his whole attitude toward working on the panel. The people who built the panels got as much from the project as the eventual recipients."

From her own professional perspec-

tive, too, Dee sees benefits from the project. "I have certainly learned a lot about how to make newsletters and design brochures. It was great when one of the BCAT members asked me who had contributed the design for the brochure. The glass work gives us skill in graphic design that can transfer to other media." Dee believes that the project has raised the visibility of stained glass crafts in the metropolitan Hattiesburg community. From her television spot relative to the project, she has received several phone calls expressing interest in the project, but also in retail supplies and stained glass classes.

Even when people don't remember the studio specifically, they do remember the project and the people who participated. At a recent Greater Pine Belt Business Expo at the convention center, Dee's booth was featuring fused stained glass bracelets. One person who wanted a black bracelet with a pink ribbon to wear to the Pink Ribbon Ball in October recognized the Flowers of Hope information and commented that she was thankful for the studio's participation in the project.



### Seeds for Another Season

Dee believes that some version of the Flowers of Hope project is doable nationwide and wishes the stained glass industry would pick up the project. "It would be a great way to help others while helping the stained glass industry and promoting one's own work without spending resources on advertising." Dee believes that finding key contact people in each community would be the hard part.

She estimates that the Hattiesburg project has taken an average of two hours per week for almost two years to

complete. Persistence through time was critical to success, as was finding the people on the BCAT who were willing to explore the option.

This project is very well suited to students, hobbyists, and journeymen stained glass workers. For professionals, each panel will probably take four to six hours, and students will likely need ten to twelve hours. All of them will find it rewarding. The Hattiesburg's Flowers of Hope project had an even mix of beginners and people who do glass professionally. About half of the people who made the panels indicated that their panels were made in memoriam or in honor of someone with breast cancer.



### New Growth from Deep Roots

Dee Tatum's involvement in the Flowers of Hope project is fed by her love of the color and vibrancy of glass, which was sparked by her first hobby class in 1976. In December of 1986, she left an administrative job in the Louisiana state government—the same week a Merry-Go-Round Stained Glass store opened in Baton Rouge. Among the first group of students at the store, Dee was soon hired there to work part-time. Three years later she opened a small home studio doing limited commission work in Baton Rouge. In 1995, she and her husband moved to Hattiesburg, and Dee opened a studio. Seraphim Studios moved to its current location—a 2,000-square-foot, freestanding building—in July 2002.

Seraphim Studios, LLC, is a small custom studio located in a commercial building. Thirty percent of its business is commercial, thirty percent is residential, and the balance is classes and retail sales. "The biggest project I ever worked on, both in terms of size and dollar

value, was the renovation of the historic Saenger Theater in downtown Hattiesburg. It involved renovating nine original and historic fixtures and constructing thirty new wall sconces to replicate the originals. The central fixture, suspended in the main auditorium, weighs over 2,000 pounds, stands over twelve feet tall, and contains over 200 square feet of glass. It was such a big endeavor and I had never gone through a bid development process. I really didn't think I could do it. Imagine my surprise at not only receiving the contract but also successfully completing it!"

**PGQ**



*Feel free to contact Dee with your questions about Flowers of Hope or to discuss other collaborations.*



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