

Love Built In Glass

Now Their Goal Is A House



Their love story began nearly 50 years ago, at the Sweet Shop, the decades old, classical 50s “malt shop,” across from the FSU South Gate. It was a cold, late fall afternoon in 1969.

“I was never very aggressive about meeting girls,” Bob said. “She was walking with another girl from Gilchrist Hall (a girl’s dorm, back when they had

such things) and I went up to her and said my friend wants to meet her friend.”

It was an absolute lie - a lame, pick-up line. I know, I was there, the unwitting bait. Jo Ann and Bob Bischoff married in 1970. Still together - a half century later.

We arrived at FSU in 1968. "The taxi driver dumped us at the Union. He said it was where should go, not the dorm. Remember?" he asked. Vividly. Why did he hate us? Sweating, we began to schlep footlockers uphill to Kellum Hall. Our first introduction to Tallahassee's brutal, late summer heat. It made Miami's weather - which we just left - seem like a brisk Fall day in New England.

"Standing at that old crosswalk on Copeland, I looked around and realized my life had changed," He had no idea.

Today, at 68, Bischoff has thick, grey ponytailed hair, a welcoming smile, warm brown eyes and the rough hands of a man who's worked with them all his life. You might say he's lived the American Dream. Until it wasn't. More on that later. First, the bittersweet success story.

Best friends, Bob and I graduated from an all boys Catholic school in Miami, came up together for early orientation, the were roommates in the dorm, a fraternity house and a big rented house on corner of Jefferson and Copeland. We got our first real jobs together, as photographers, and later opened a small art gallery. A lot of shared history - in and with our adopted home.

After graduate school and a stint at real jobs, in 1976 we opened Gallery 741. The name being the street address - and a nod to

photographer Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery.

"It was small and unique - nothing like it in Tallahassee. A collective of really talented resident artists, a marketplace for student art like hand blown glass and pottery and good exhibitions," he recalled. True. One of the exhibits was artwork by patients in the forensic unit - criminally insane - at Florida State Hospital in Chattahoochee. Aesthetically solid work - some darkly disturbing.

Gallery 741 was an artistic success, but financially, not so much. However, it was where Bischoff Studios was born and nurtured. They made custom, leaded glass windows (commonly called stained glass) and lamps and did repairs. Jo designed and Bob fabricated. They had started the foray into stained glass, in the early 70s, with a mail order kit. Self-taught, the medium was a natural fit, with Bob's degree in photography and Jo's in design.

A big break came in the early 80s, when they were hired by historic Bethel Baptist to repair windows from their old church and adapt them for a new church building. "It was really an honor. We knew the historical significance of the church," said Bob. "The windows are an icon. We still have one of the unused windows - which were part of our payment." Then, this is when their lives turned bittersweet.

Around the same time, Jo Ann started experiencing double vision, excruciating

headaches and numbness. These were the early symptoms of what would later be diagnosed as Multiple Sclerosis.

The disease disrupts signals from the brain, and can impair muscle control, movement, vision and temperature sensitivity. It's progressive, incurable and unpredictable, with "attacks," causing the effects to temporarily worsen.

"The diagnosis was pretty devastating. Remember, Jo is a designer; vision problems, limited mobility, well..., "he said, his words fading. "But we had mapped out our lives with the glass business, and we weren't going to let this stop it. "

And they did. Creating leaded, beveled and etched glass works for a national clientele, the likes of Lord and Taylor, Kia, Bergdoff-Goodman and more. But they never forgot from where they came, with donated work to Big Bend Hospice, the FSU/PBS auction and more.

The Bischoffs made two monumental pieces of work, two pieces celebrating to aspect of FSU's distinction.

In 1997, working with a concept by the late Ivan Johnson, AIA, they created the stunning, leaded glass centerpiece in FSU's Dodd Hall. Strikingly vibrant reds are offset by a complex, gradient blue sky, in this 22 x 10-foot multi-paneled window, depicting the university's classic architecture. It contains 10,000 pieces of glass.

The beauty of a stained-glass window comes from the magical collaboration between light and color. The interplay between both is what makes a completed window a stunning, visual treat. The artist creating the work must be able to select the right type and color of the glass, selecting from a rainbow of solid colors, as well as glass with freeform swirls, and variegated with multicolored designs.

Most importantly is how light interacts with the glass - the opacity, transparency, translucence, reflectivity and texture - of each piece are crucial factors in the visual impact of a stained glass window.

This is one of the areas in which the Bischoff's work excels. For instance, the gradient sky in the Dodd Hall window progresses from white and light blue at the bottom to cobalt blue at the top. Multiple shades and transparencies of blue and white - hundreds of pieces of glass - progressively combine to create the graduated image of a skyline.

In addition, the variations of red used by the Bischoff's, reinforces the legacy of brick architecture, changing color with age.

Their understanding of color theory - the effective use of complementary and contrasting colors, as well as primary and secondary colors - makes their work exceptional.

In 2004, they also designed and then created - in conjunction with the FSU Master Craftsmans Program (which Bischoff developed and directed for 14 years) - the enormous leaded glass window overlooking the field in Doak Campbell stadium. A tribute to Bobby Bowen, the 30 x 20-foot window is made with 30,000

pieces of colored glass - being one of the five largest, secular stained glass windows in the country.

But the Bischoff's American Dream began to



fray, and nearly unravel, because of some poor business decisions and painful life events. A trusted employee embezzle \$40,000, and having spent a good amount renovating a large house in Quincy - as a retirement investment, the house's equity was wiped out when housing market crashed. It was financially ruinous.

Jo's condition was increasingly declining. Bischoff left FSU, put the company in hiatus, and moved to Chaires, in to focus on Jo's health and his five grandchildren. But he has a very definitive goal for the future. Now, I'm going to build a house for specifically designed for Jo's needs."

He's finished the construction plans for an 800 sq. ft. - small yet cozy home. It will be built next to their existing house, where his

daughter and grandkids will live. Technology driven, everything in the house will be voice controlled.

"Jo Ann's MS has slowly taken away one after another of her abilities," he said. "She has those temporary low episodes, but the following highs, seem to get lower each time," he said.

"It's not a matter of if but when. The prospect of her living in a nursing home - I'm not going to let that happen. This house can prevent that. It's why getting this built as quickly is so critical," said Bob. "She'll be close to the kids, which is important."

He's doing the project inside out - having bought, a little at a time, nearly the entire interior - bathroom and kitchen fixtures, appliances, the automation components and more. After selling a motor home - bought with the unsuccessful hope of traveling - and using the last of their savings, they will be tapped out. He accurately pointed out that banks are not interested in financing small houses.

Since timing is critical and resources nearly gone, he's starting a "Go-Fund-Me-Page" and a Facebook campaign for help. "We're reaching out to friends and people who know that we've given back. They know Jo's needs, and I think they can see we've taken as far we can on our own," he said.

After pausing for a second he said, "I guess I believe in the goodness of people - and I think they see themselves in this and realize that - if not for a break here or a piece of luck there...."