



Livin' the dream with a festive theme

Adult survivors of acquired brain injuries find work and a place to fit in

BY SANDRA WALNECK

PHOTOGRAPHY • TOMASZ ADAMSKI

Hundreds of shiny stars are being assembled and glued, angels are waiting patiently for their wings and Christmas trees are receiving final touches of shimmering swirls and dots.

The spacious workshop at Livin' the Dream Designs in Kitchener is definitely the place to be if you're looking to get in a festive mood – even on a hot summer day.

The women creating these beautiful fused-glass ornaments require a steady hand, an eye for detail and, for much of the year, a genuine appreciation for all things merry and bright.

The workroom is quiet, and the floor appears

to sparkle due to tiny fragments produced when glass is cut. Near the open roll-up door are dozens of plastic bins of finished product, all carefully organized and labelled.

Uncut pieces of glass in a multitude of colours are neatly arranged on one wall alongside the cutting device. The individual work stations are at the back of the room, near the two glass kilns; everything is ordered and tidy.

Owner Patti Lehman started Livin' the Dream Designs in November of 2015 after more than 30 years as a social worker. Lehman's career was fulfilling, but she had always nurtured her creative side.

"I have a background in art," she says. "I have

Star ornaments are assembled at Livin' the Dream Designs in Kitchener. Rebekah Haynes (left) and Patti Lehman work in blue, while Paula Mahoney gets creative with pink.



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participated in different art walks and displayed in art galleries.”

Lehman is an accomplished painter, and enjoys working in clay. But her ability to visualize colours and work with texture is most evident in the stunning glass pieces she has created.

Choosing the name for her business venture came easily to Lehman.

“Whenever I saw my friend she’d ask how things were going,” Lehman recalls with a laugh. “I’d always say ‘I’m livin’ the dream!’”

Choosing the employees who would help achieve her dream was just as straightforward. The workers are adult survivors of an acquired brain injury.

As a former executive director of the Brain Injury Association for Waterloo Wellington, Lehman, 54, understands the challenges her staff members face in finding rewarding and steady employment. But she also has high expectations.

“My philosophy with them is that ‘You are no different than me,’” she says. “‘Yes, you have had an accident that changed your life, but it is not a get-out-of-jail-free card.’ I hold them very accountable.”

But Lehman’s tough talk and no-nonsense exterior are just a front.

“Ultimately, all any of us ever wants is to fit in,” Lehman says. “Here, you’re OK the way you are, we will help you fit in.”

In the early 2000s, as executive director of the Brain Injury Association, Lehman was instrumental in creating an innovative day program for adult brain injury survivors. “These people were sitting at home with no safe place to go,” she recalls.

“When I took over it was a small little office that ran two support groups per month and had a monthly newsletter,” Lehman says. She increased programming

and client numbers and created Making Headway, a recreational day program.

When Making Headway outgrew its space on Park Street, it moved to a larger facility on King Street and was re-named The Opportunity Centre.

“On average we had 35 to 40 people per day,” she explains. “We were the largest day program for ABI survivors in Ontario.”

Lehman’s clients ran their own leisure programs. “It was the first of its kind,” she says. “People came from all over Ontario to see it.”

Allowing clients to pursue their own interests generated inspiring results. Lehman recounts

that this eventually led to the formation of a band called The Opportunities. “They even produced their own CD,” Lehman says with a smile.

Brain injuries can cause survivors to struggle in social situations while they learn to cope with diminished capacities or difficult emotions. This can lead to outbursts and what Lehman describes as “tantrums.”

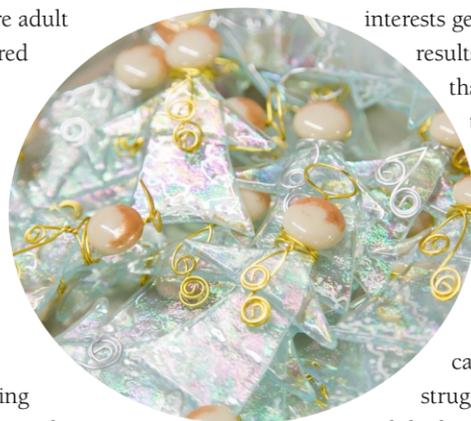
Lehman believes that being with other survivors is key to learning how to adjust.

“Because they are surrounded by their peers, their peers will usually govern their behaviour,” she explains. “They will say ‘You’re going to ruin this for everyone.’ It always works!”

One challenge in the early years was finding creative outlets. Instrumental in solving that dilemma was Dietlind Stager, who had joined Making Headway in 2002. Two years earlier a car accident had left her very ill and feeling isolated and alone.

“I was scanning the Internet and looking for a place to go where I could fit in,” Stager recalls. “I went to Making Headway and met a whole slew of people who were just like me.

“But we needed an adult craft,” Stager



says. “Higher-functioning survivors can’t be making things from popsicle sticks.”

Stager, a former family studies teacher, looked for ideas.

“In 2007 all of us took a pottery class at the Breithaupt Centre (in Kitchener),” she says. “Then we noticed in the backroom that there was a fused-glass class going on.”

Stager and Lehman enrolled in a class, and “fell in love with it.”

They started small with simple pendants and Christmas ornaments so that survivors could give gifts to friends and family during the holidays.

“Then community members saw them and wanted them,” Stager recalls.

They started selling at local craft sales and festivals. Local physical rehab clinics offered to sell them from wicker baskets placed at their reception areas. More businesses took part and demand grew.

In 2014, Lehman developed a vocational program for her clients who were looking for employment. She hired Rob Silver as her vocational instructor, and the two kept their workers busy with the fused glass as well as piece-work for a local trophy company, Al-Fran Trophies.

Around that time Lehman decided that it was time for a career change. When the opportunity arose to purchase Al-Fran, she and Silver didn’t hesitate. By November of 2015, Livin’ The Dream and Al-Fran moved into their Kitchener location.

In response to customer demand, their work has expanded to include different holiday themes such as Halloween and Canada Day. They make all sorts of animals, bugs, flowers, birds and even musical instruments. The guitars are always a big seller at Kitchener’s Blues Fest.

Local charities often ask for special orders for fundraisers, and Lehman is delighted to assist.

Lehman credits Stager with being the creative mind behind many of the designs, and calls her “my champion of the business.”



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Unable to work regularly due to her injury, Stager volunteers when she is feeling up to it. She enjoys delivering their baskets to local businesses, and at Christmas can barely keep up with the demand.

But what Stager loves most of all is the creative aspect of the business.

"I will start something and Patti will add to it," she says. "We play! I love it but we don't have enough time to play."

Lehman credits local personal injury lawyer George Dietrich with unflinching financial and moral support for her programs.

"George has been a supporter of my work for about 15 years," she says. "He was the only lawyer who did not ask for anything in return. He truly believed in us and didn't care about advertising and getting clients from us."

For Dietrich, seeing the direct benefits of his donations was reward enough, especially as some of his clients are survivors of

severe brain injuries.

"We all want to do the right thing when we donate," he says. "But we have no way of seeing how funds are used. With Patti, I always saw it. It benefits them so much."

Even after Lehman started the business, Dietrich helped out financially wherever there was a need. And he was delighted to receive a gift from Lehman's group as a thank you.

"They made us a beautiful piece of glass sculpture which uses our logo in it," Dietrich says.

Although \$5 ornaments and jewelry are the bread and butter of the business, there are often requests for larger pieces. Rhea Thompson Candies in Stratford ordered snowmen-themed glass plates for Christmas of 2016.

"It challenged us!" says Lehman. This season will be no different with another large order.

Their production numbers are impressive

when Stager breaks them down.

"We have 700 stars ordered in different colours, and another order of 400," she says. "We probably sell about 1,000 angels each year."

Every year they retire a couple of designs, and come up with new ones.

This season they have added a little razzle dazzle to their designs. The trees have adopted a modern twist, and the snowmen and angels are more elaborately decorated with wires and shimmery glass.

There is a universal appeal to their ornaments. The snowmen have winning smiles, the penguins are simply adorable, and the reindeer have a goofy aspect to them. Although not identical, there is a consistency that is a testament to the women who create them.

One of the women, Paula Mahoney, is gregarious, with a hearty laugh and a twinkle in her eye. On this day, she is working on

the stars and gestures to the large stack of cut glass still waiting to be glued. Although it seems a daunting task, she doesn't mind.

"It doesn't take a lot of mind work, but I get to see a finished product," Mahoney says. "It gives us something to look forward to."

Mahoney described her life as a "roller-coaster ride" since her injury at the age of 13. Now 51, she relishes being with people who understand how everything changes after a serious brain injury.

"Your behaviours change, your view of the world changes, and there's a mental change. Here, we can show our differences," Mahoney explains.

For Mahoney, a retired custodian, finding companionship at Making Headway was the first step.

"We all felt alone in our injury," she says. "My first visit, I played pool."

Rebekah Haynes, 40, also recalls her first visit in 2008.

"I found them by accident," she recalls. "I

saw the place and worked up the nerve to go in. I hadn't really had much of anything then."

Finding friendship and understanding opened up new worlds for both women.

"I went through almost two years of complete isolation," says Haynes. "I came in, and they were really nice. It was such a difference to connect with people."

Haynes is frank about how making plans becomes difficult with a brain injury like hers.

"There is so much more involved in trying to make something work out now," Haynes says. "It is more complicated and more stressful."

As a former pastry chef, Haynes relishes the artistic aspect to her work. Despite joining the group after they took the fused-glass course, she caught on quickly.

"I thought I can do something," she says. "It changed my perspective."

For Haynes, coming to terms with the effects of her brain injury was key to her

recovery.

"It means truly accepting yourself," she says. "'This is me', instead of trying to do something the way you knew how before."

Angelina Scarfone fits in well with the group. Scarfone, 21, has autism and struggled to find rewarding work in a supportive environment.

"I like being creative," she says. "As long as I get a mixture of things I don't get bored."

Today she is attaching ornaments to cards, but she will also do gluing and wiring.

"Closer to Christmas it gets busier and I will start coming in more days a week," she says happily.

Everyone laughs as Lehman jokes that she is a success because her dream was never to make lots of money.

But her real success is in giving her employees meaningful work, and their dignity.

"When they find someone to believe in them, then they own it," she says. 



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