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COUSINS and siblings enjoy picking out colorful glass "pebbles" for their fused-glass creations during a "play date" at the Renegade Art Glass studio. Shown are (from left) Savanna Sigler and her first cousins, Aubrey and Natalie Sigler. (Kit Huffman photo)



KELLY AND RICK Sigler admire a square of colored glass for a bowl while their daughters (from left) Natalie and Aubrey look on. (Kit Huffman photo)



STUDIO OWNER Karla Rodgers watches Katelyn and Savanna Sigler put their decorated glass layers into a kiln, where they will be fused together by intense heat. (Kit Huffman photo)



ANDY RODGERS (left) tells a visitor, Joshua Golub of Richmond, about the old-fashioned wooden elevator in the former cement block factory, now Renegade Art Glass, that once carried bags of cement from the railroad level to the second floor. (Kit Huffman photo)

Making Glass

Woman's Passion Leads To New Area Studio

By KIT HUFFMAN

Walkers along the Chessie Nature Trail heading east from Lexington are prepared to enjoy nature, including the trees, cliffs and river. Now, a recent addition to the East Lexington neighborhood has brought a new and man-made interest to the environment.

Renegade Art Glass, a studio and gallery featuring fused and stained glass, opened this fall at 142 Old Buena Vista Road.

The gallery, a well-lit, renovated space, displays graceful pieces of art glass created by owner/artisan Karla Rodgers. The adjoining studio, also well-lit with large windows over-

looking the trail, is where Rodgers does her work. She also uses the studio for two-hour "play dates," when she teaches small groups, including families with children, how to make colorful pieces of fused glass, such as pendants, ornaments and small bowls and trays.

Fused glass, for those who may not know the term, is layers of glass that have been subjected to incredibly high heat, thus being fused into one smooth surface. If the maker wants to make a box, bowl or other shape, the glass is then placed in a mold and fired again.

Renegade Art Glass — so named for her love of things

out of the ordinary and contrary to expectations, Rodgers said — occupies the former premises of Stonewood Inc., a home construction and renovation business. The building was originally a cement block factory, hence its location along the former Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad line into Lexington. Karla Rodgers' husband, Andy Rodgers, who runs the business side of the studio and gallery, delights in showing visitors the old wooden elevator, located in the new art studio, once used to lift heavy bags of cement unloaded from the boxcars up to the factory's main floor.

Though worlds away from.

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its original use, the building remains accessible from the Chessie Trail, and walkers are welcome to pop into the studio and gallery as part of their outing. For those arriving by road, ample parking is available next to the building.

Establishing her own studio and gallery has been, for Karla Rodgers, a dream come true. "Making glass was always my passion, and now I can do it," she said.

Born in Colorado, she lived there with her husband, a high-tech engineer and product development manager, and their three children before moving to Texas four years for his job. Her interest in glass started around 1990, when she wanted to make a stained-glass window for the family's home. She took a short class, began to teach herself more, and the interest took off.

Over the next couple of years, Rodgers, well on her way to becoming a skilled artisan, built all kinds of glass pieces for family and friends. She then decided to go "pro" by working in a commercial stained glass studio where she started out building windows and over time grew to be the shop supervisor. She discovered fused glass on a business trip to a trade show where she took a class very much like the play dates she now offers in her Lexington studio.

As for Andy Rodgers, his engineering and management background makes him "perfect" to handle the business, marketing and management side of the new art glass works, Karla Rodgers said.

In the studio on the Saturday morning after Thanksgiving, a fused-glass play date is in full swing.

Two related families, Bruce and Peggy Sigler of Natural Bridge and their daughters, Katelyn, 13, and Savanna, 12, along with the family of Bruce's brother, Rick and Kelly Sigler, and their two daughters, Natalie, 11, and Aubrey, 7, visiting from Cary, N.C., are hard at work, making small glass items that will later be fired in one of the massive electric kilns standing ready at one side.

Rodgers and her son, Jonathan Rodgers, also an experienced glass worker who lives in Fort Collins, Colo., help the cousins select the colorful layers of glass for their pieces. Jonathan — who has clearly inherited his mother's love of teaching — then shows the youngsters how to score the glass with a razor-sharp cutter and then break it along the scored lines. Though demonstrating the process, he allows the children to do most of the actual work themselves, giving them lots of hands-on satisfaction.

Everyone, including all of the adults, looks a little unusual. It takes a moment to realize that all are wearing transparent safety glasses — a requirement for the class, says Karla Rodgers.

Peggy Sigler, who had come to Renegade Glass the previous weekend with her sister to make Christmas ornaments and a bowl, says that, having enjoyed that introduction to glass work, she then invited her in-laws and their children to return to the studio after Thanksgiving.

"I saw their work on Mountain Day in Buena Vista and thought it was phenomenal," she

explains. "I like the materials and that it's all-American-made glass. Plus, this is a small business, and I want to support it. And they're so good with the kids."

Peggy's husband, Bruce, chimes in with another motivation for the post-Thanksgiving art session: "It's better than sitting in front of the boob tube."

After cutting their squares of glass and decorating them with additional glass "pebbles" and other glass fragments — Aubrey, the youngest, is delighted with the snowman she's fashioned by carefully placing white pebbles for the body, a black square for the hat and a tiny orange triangle for the nose — the cousins then place their squares of glass in a kiln for firing. This part of the process will be done later by Karla Rodgers, who will phone Peggy Sigler in a few days when the pieces are ready to be picked up.

Rodgers explains that fused glass must be fired at 1,500 degrees F for 22 hours. Then, if further molded into a bowl or tray, the pieces are fired for a second time, at 1,370 degrees F for 18 to 22 hours.

After the play date, Rodgers offers a quick tour of the rest of the rest of the facility. On the north side facing Old Buena Vista Road is the office, dominated by a large-format printer. The printer can make print full-sized designs for large stained-glass projects, such as windows and doors — another of Rodgers' specialties. Making the large print, she says, helps the customer visualize the final product and is useful when actually making the piece.

Next on the tour is the "wet room," where Rodgers cuts and shapes glass for her larger stained-glass projects. The tools that do this kind of work require water as a lubricant and coolant, she ex-

plains. These tools include a large belt sander, a lapidary grinder, a diamond saw and a drill press. The wet room has been designed so that all water, even the part that gets splashed on the floor, is collected and contained, with special strainers to catch the tiniest fragments of glass.

In the wall between the wet room and gallery is a decorative interior window that is used to demonstrate half a dozen different types of textured glass that can be used in projects, Rodgers explains. However, this is just the tip of the iceberg, since there are actually about 30 different textures that she has access to. The gallery itself displays some of Rodgers' best work, from fused glass pieces of modern design to a Victorian-style stained-glass window.

On the way out, Rodgers pauses at a Christmas tree in the foyer decorated with miniature stained-glass ornaments. The ornaments have been made as models for the after-school class she's currently teaching at Central Elementary School, as part of the school's new grant-funded program.

Her students, who are in third through fifth grades, are "so into it," Rodgers says. She adds, "Education is important. We value both — art and education." gram.

During the winter, Renegade Glass is open Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and, during the holidays, on Saturday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Play dates are offered on Tuesday evenings and Saturday mornings. The studio and gallery are also open by appointment. For more information or to schedule a play date, call (540) 521-6128.