

Making a Masterpiece Out of Glass

Artist Turns Decorative Windows Into Growing \$7 Million Business

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BY JULIE POUCHER HARBIN

How does a one-time stained glass artist transform himself into being a multimillion-dollar wholesale window manufacturer?

“Everything you see here started from one window,” Masterpiece Leaded Windows, Corp. CEO and founder Joel DeBus said proudly, as he completed a walk-through of the 18,000-square-foot facility that turns out as much as 200 leaded glass windows a day. After feeding his two scarlet macaws some grilled meat from the company’s weekly Friday barbecue, he explains his colorful history.



Leaded glass, a decorative glass with a design in it — basically stained-glass without the color — is the centerpiece of the business.

The Poway firm, incorporated in 1999, started as a sole proprietorship, run by DeBus, called Masterpiece Stained Glass in 1991. The company had its roots in the late '70s-early '80s, when Debus sold 20 multicolored windows to Barratt Homes’ San Diego division, as “a decorator item to jazz up their models.”

It took him one to three weeks to build and design each one, then three people ordered the windows.

“Now all of a sudden I gotta cut 950 little pieces. It was a disaster. That’s why I knew, a long time ago, that I did not want to be in this custom business,” DeBus said.

So in 1990, Debus, working out of a 500-square-foot, \$200-per-month shop, took a chance and dropped off 40 leaded glass front door sidelight windows to all the area builders he could find — and waited. Leaded glass had never been on builder option sheets, DeBus explained, though some small “ma and pa” shops did, and still do, market directly to homeowners.

“I was ready to quit. I’d spent almost a year and a half, (waiting for) one person, anybody to use it, and when Shea (Homes) called me. I said, ‘Finally, this is my big break,’” DeBus explained. “That happened in 1991. Nine out of the first 14 houses (Shea) built bought that option. Then they said, we have three new projects coming up. We want you to put windows in all of them. And it took off from the most humble beginnings.”

In 2000, DeBus bought its current facility and had a staff of 30. In 2001, new, more stringent energy codes came into force.

Masterpiece switched from making exclusively single-pane glass windows to about 95 percent triple-pane glass. All it took was sealing their hand-crafted single pane windows between two additional glass panes with the aid of “a couple million dollars worth” of sophisticated glass cutting, cleaning, tempering, and pressing machinery. This allowed the company to turn out better windows faster, and to scale back factory staff.

“We kind of reinvented ourselves,” DeBus said. “In 20 minutes those machines can do what 15 guys could do in 8 hours.”

The investments paid off, with 2003 revenues reaching \$3.5 million and \$7 million projected for this year.

Humble Beginnings

DeBus regrets he didn't shift to triple-pane back in 1998-99, when the windows started having leakage problems, because they were building up to 1,000 single-pane glass windows a day — “so fast that we couldn't putty them as good.

“I can remember doing 49 straight days where Saturdays and Sundays didn't mean anything. I didn't see anybody. I remember doing that from '92 to practically '95,” DeBus explained as he pulled a worn 20-year-old gray briefcase full of old brochures and pictures out from under his computer-less desk.

“I was doing everything. I was out in the field installing; I was out in the factory. It was such a different life back then, it almost seems like another lifetime ago,” DeBus reminisced, but not fondly.

He's more at home in his office, surrounded by family photos and hunting trophies, including a stuffed raccoon, bear head, and mountain lion.

Gone are the days of buying materials on credit, and not always on time, from a friend who owned a local stained glass store.

In the mid- and late '90s DeBus ran three shifts, seven days a week, when he could afford workers, but had no machines to automate the process.

Now there are about 12 to 15 factory floor laborers and four installation crews working one shift, plus a small administrative, executive, and sales staff who all only work weekdays.

The window's middle panel is still made by hand, but the art glass pieces and everything around it are cut by machines.

“With the machines it gives us a big advantage. It actually cuts labor costs. There's not as much hand work and so we can still be profitable even working in San Diego and paying good wages to our people,” Debus said. This includes health benefits.

The factory laborers make between \$12 and \$20 per hour.

Most of Masterpiece's business is wholesale for builders. Though the business started with sidelights, they branched out into making triple-pane and single-pane leaded glass for everything from bathrooms, to stairwells, to sliding doors. The windows are advertised to last a lifetime.

Masterpiece works with about 25 builders in Riverside, Orange, and San Diego counties, and also has a Las Vegas division. Some of the developers include KB Home, Trimark Pacific Homes, Fieldstone Communities, Ryland Homes, and Vista-based Lucas & Mercier Development.

Also, Masterpiece was a supplier for Windowmaster Products, Inc. of El Cajon, which has sold Masterpiece's single-pane windows in Windowmaster frames for the past two years. Windowmaster, which was acquired by Oregon-based JELD-WEN, Inc. in January, sells at Home Depot locally.

Time For Diversification

DeBus took a call from one of his salesmen on opening day of this year's San Diego Interior Design & Landscape Expo at the San Diego Convention Center.

“It's just hopping down there. He says he's handed out more than 150 brochures already,” Debus said.

He said he's a lot more interested in direct marketing to homeowners these days than he used to be. He brought on a vice president/marketing director, Bill O'Connor, 13 months ago to attract more business from developers and individual homeowners.

O'Connor showed off the company's glossy new brochures.

"We're just starting to aggressively expand our company (in the last year and a half) to go after more developers," said O'Connor. And the company's first TV commercial is airing countywide this year.

Masterpiece has the capacity to turn out 2,000 windows a day which is at least 10 times the number they are making now, DeBus said.

"We could build \$25 million worth of stuff if we wanted to, if we had the business, and believe me, we're going to have the business," he said.

Workers' comp costs "are irritating," said DeBus, especially for the installers and the factory labor. He might "possibly" consider moving some manufacturing to Mexico to save on labor costs, depending on what it takes to keep up with the projected increased capacity.

But for DeBus, who was born here and attended Monte Vista High in Spring Valley, local ties are also very important. His retired father works one day a week for him, and his senior production worker, Manny Arichega, has been with him almost from the beginning.

Debus said he's gotten to the point where he spends "maybe 20 hours a week in the office" and an untold number of hours brainstorming.

"I can do whatever I want, basically. I have a lot of fun. My desires are to be able to travel and I want to have a huge yacht to go everywhere in the world."

Expansion plans include Washington state by the end of the year, where his brother wants to open up a division. Phoenix, Tucson, Houston, Northern California, and then the rest of the United States, and perhaps the world, are also part of the dream.

"The triple-pane (window) is a much superior product, and there's so many more applications for it — that is what gives us the real ability to expand," DeBus said. "Even though this company has been around for 13, 14 years, we're really right now in our infancy."

Masterpiece Leaded Windows Corp.

CEO and founder: Joel DeBus.

Founded: 1991 as a sole proprietorship called Masterpiece Stained Glass, which was incorporated in 1997. Incorporated as Masterpiece Leaded Windows, Corp. in 1999.

Employees: 45, plus 10 in the Las Vegas division of the company.

Revenues: \$3.5 million. \$7 million projected for 2004.

Location: 13831 Danielson St., Poway.

Business: Manufactures mainly triple-pane, and some single-pane leaded glass windows. Customers include 25 homebuilders working in San Diego, Riverside, and Orange counties, plus El Cajon-based Windowmaster Products, Inc., with some additional direct retail customers.

Web site: (www.mpglass.com).