

Local Talent, Wide Appeal

by Karri Sandino

Lexington, KY -

Guy Kemper is pretty good at telling it like it is. Ask him what he thinks about being and becoming an artist and his answer comes at you like his immense glass paintings: vibrant, colorful and larger than life. "You have to have serious guts to be an artist," he said. "You have to work like hell."



Kemper's glass manipulation began as a hobby, creating

Stained glass artist Guy Kemper silhouetted before his art.

and repairing stained glass pieces. Kemper's degree, however, was in agronomy, which he studied at the University of Kentucky. At the time, his desire was to live in the country and be self-sufficient. While working on a farm, he continued working with glass – helping a friend make repairs to his antique stained glass collections. He fine-tuned his skills working with Frank Close, another successful Lexington-area glass artist who recently moved his studio back to Lexington after a stint in New York City.

In the mid-1980s, Kemper opened his first studio, still located at the corner of Broadway and West Second. His first jobs were primarily residential, designing stained glass windows for homeowners in the area. His first big commercial job was at the Ohavay Zion Synagogue on Alumni Drive in Lexington.

What he considers his big break came around 2000 when he received his first out-of-state job creating a 100-foot-long piece for the Orlando International Airport. Now his list of clients ranges from Bellarmine University in Louisville and the Catholic Memorial at Ground Zero in New York City to the Baltimore/Washington International Airport and churches in Germany.

Kemper describes himself as a refractive expressionist, translating his drawings and paintings into blown glass and then adding color. It's a merging of fine art and architectural ornament, he said. His works literally explode like giant translucent paintings on huge walls of glass.

The size and complexity of the projects never intimidated Kemper. "I didn't know anything when I started," he said. "I learned how to accomplish these things as I went," he said, describing also how the projects do take "tons of planning" and the ability to work with engineers and architects



One of Kemper's work at Bellarmine University.

He relates art to farming and working with the soil. The artist, like the farmer, he said, "has to have faith that it's going to rain and that the crops will grow. With art, you have to trust your intuition."

At the same time, Kemper said, "You have to be disciplined and organized." Paraphrasing one of his favorite quotes, he said, "It's a job. Real artists get up in the morning and work. The others wait for inspiration."

Bluntly, Kemper advised artists to be prepared to accept failure. "You fail 90 percent of the time as an artist. People don't call back. You don't get the job. They don't like your work. You get stabbed in the back. Do not get discouraged."

Kemper said artists must be willing to accept jobs they sometimes don't want to become successful. When artists become too picky, he said, they set themselves up for failure. But he also cautioned, "Never compromise quality. Always make it the best you can and always improve your craft."