

FOCUS

Glassblower's enterprise requires teamwork, funding

By AMY LEAP
Business Journal Staff

Glassblower John Choi can be found most days and most evenings in the GlassWorks at the Banana Factory on Bethlehem's South Side.

For the past two and a half years, Choi has been the manager of the glass studio. When he isn't teaching a class, he can be found working on his own glass creations, which he sells.

"The number of master glassblowers is declining. There are probably only 25 masters left in the country," Choi said. His goal is to reach that level.

"The cost to run the furnace is around \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year."

~ John Choi, glassblower

Choi said that some of his pieces sell for as much as \$10,000, but "it isn't all about the profit and earning commissions."

He said that part of his goal is to earn money so he can study under and work

with a master glassblower. To attend a glass making school and work with a master is costly, according to Choi.

"Studying and working under and with a master for only one to two weeks costs anywhere from \$1,000 to \$2,000," Choi said. He added that he is always looking for chances to study and work with other glassblowers. One benefit of this is that he can often earn free studio use time.

"Glassblowing isn't like golf. It costs a lot more than golf," he said.

He said that blowing glass usually involves a team of several people, which means he may be paying up to five people to work with him, so it can get expensive.

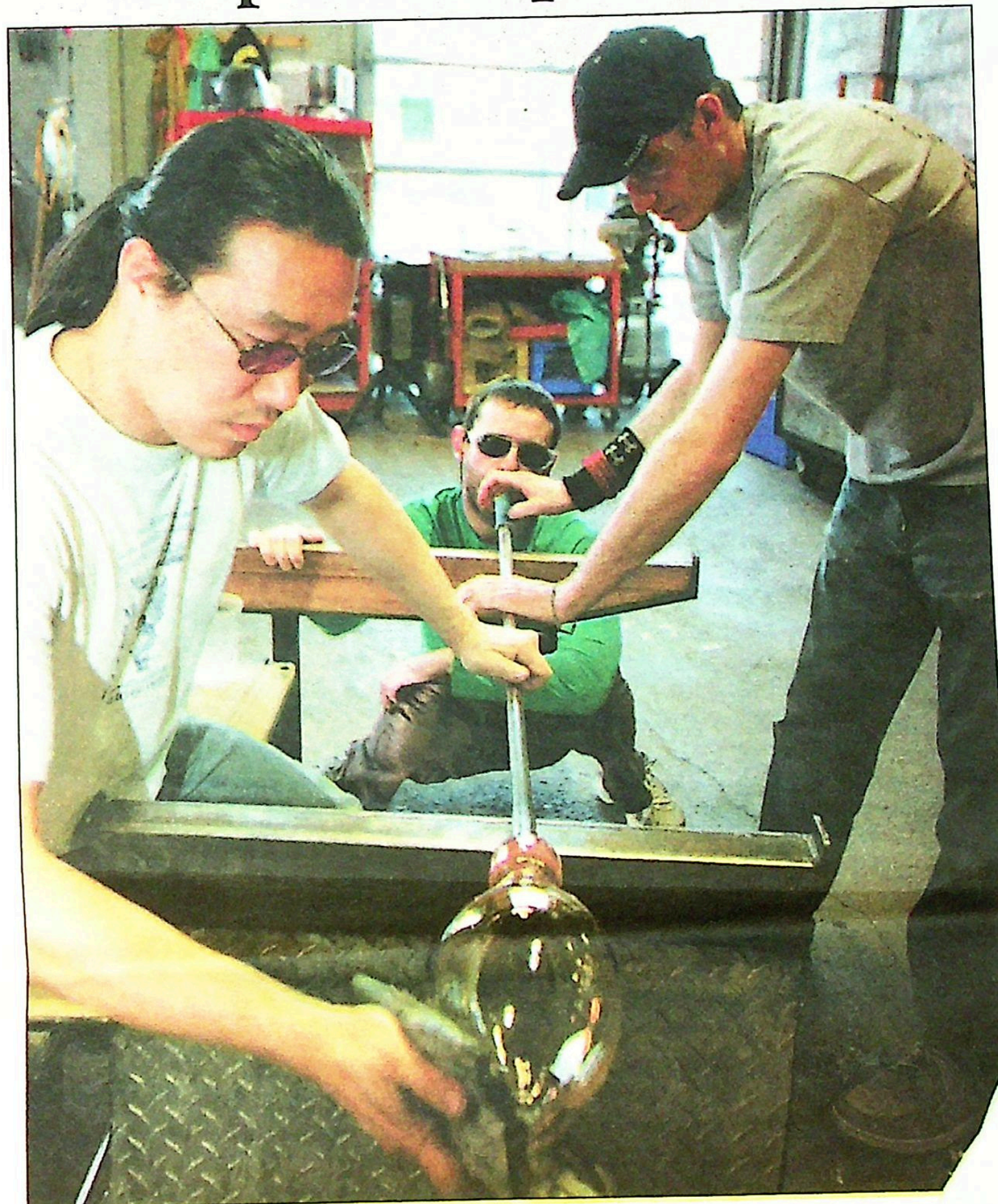
He said for the first 10 years in his craft, he worked lots of odd jobs just to make ends meet and to pay for studio time and materials.

Then he said, there is the cost of the furnaces, heating chambers and gas and electric to run them.

The furnaces, which run on propane and electric, never shut down except once a year for maintenance and are kept at a constant temperature of 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit (about 1,100 degrees Celsius).

"The cost to run the furnace is around \$35,000 to \$40,000 a year," said Choi.

He said that the heating chamber, sometimes called the glory hole, runs anywhere from \$1,000 and up.



John Choi, manager of the GlassWorks at the Banana Factory, front, shapes the hot glass as team member Dennis Gardner, right, holds the pipe and Ryan Eroh blows air through the pipe.

Photos by
Amy Leap

The price of glass

There is also the rising price of glass, which Choi said has to do with the different components the glass is made from.

"Glass that is a really deep color of red has gold in its makeup, and the amount of gold controls the color of the red," he said. "It is sold by the kilos, and a foot-long rod one inch in diameter can easily cost \$60," he said.

Choi said a 9- to 12-inch tall piece of blown glass can use four rods of glass. Just the cost of the glass

in the piece works out to \$240. That doesn't include the cost of the team members or the cost of the furnace or the studio rental time.

Most artists, he said, rent time in a glassblowing studio because of the cost of owning and operating a studio would be too costly for one person.

Creating a small piece or a larger sculpture is no overnight accomplishment, Choi said. Making a commissioned piece means talking with the buyer, and trying

See **Profile** page 7

Business basics

GLASSWORKS AT THE
BANANA FACTORY

- Studio manager: John Choi, glassblower
- Address: 25 West Third St., Bethlehem, PA 18015
- Telephone: (610) 332-1305
- Web site: www.bananafactory.org
- E-mail: klaubach@fest.org

PROFILE

John Choi, manager of the GlassWorks studio, uses a torch to reheat the shaped glass.



FOCUS

CONTINUING EDUCATION, CAREER DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING

PROFILE

Continued from page 6

to establish what the buyer is looking for as the end result. Often, the glassblower has to spend time looking at books and studying the topic for the piece.

"I look at books, brainstorm, develop a concept and get an idea in words" he said.

Then he said he sketches ideas and tests a prototype for colors and form to show the client.

Once the client is satisfied, Choi creates a mock-up usually with a team he has selected to execute the project and work with the glass.

If it is a piece he is working on to show at a glass gallery, Choi starts a year in advance because most shows are planned a year ahead of the actual date of the show.

Artistic passion

He estimated that if a glassblower adds in the costs of materials, studio time and the cost of the team helping him, he only makes around \$10,000 a year profit. But Choi said that the art of glassblowing is his passion, and his artistry isn't always about the money. He hopes to eventually become a master glassblower and then it can be more about the money.

Choi was born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1968. In 1981, when he was 13, he came to the United States.

Graduating from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, he earned a Bachelor's Degree in industrial design, but in 1997 he was introduced to glassblowing. "That's what I have been doing ever since," he said,

He said he started apprenticing with studio glass blowers. After studying the craft for 10 years, he began to create on his own at various studios.

He also worked as senior member of the blowing team in charge of the entire production of a project for several artists, including Einar and Jamex de la Torre, Megan Stevens, Joel Philip Myers, David Leppla and Melanie Guernsey.

Still honing his craft, Choi studied at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts



Glass artist John Choi places a piece of hot colored glass on the outside of a sculpture. As it cools, the colored glass will adhere to the other piece.

in Maine, Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, The Studio at the Corning Museum of Glass in New York and at Contemporary Glass Philadelphia.

He said he has worked as an instructor at Hot Soup Glass Studio in Philadelphia, Pilchuck Glass School in Washington

State, and Pittsburgh Glass Center in Pittsburgh.

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niche in your particular industry or what you have done that has made a difference. Send information to John L. Moore, Editor, EPBJ, 65 E. Elizabeth Ave., Suite 700, Bethlehem, PA 18018. You also can send an e-mail to john.m@epbj.com.



Team member Ryan Eroh quickly takes the heated glass sculpture back to the bench

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