

After loss, she sees glass half full



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Vangie Collins at work in her studio.

By **Hattie Bernstein** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 03, 2017

With handmade glass beads, a New Hampshire artist helps the bereaved.

Vangie Collins found her life's purpose in helping people deal with death.

That might sound like a paradox, except that Collins, a US Air Force veteran, makes cremation beads: translucent, colored-glass jewelry she infuses with a sprinkling of pet or human ashes and fashions into pendants, key chains, and other keepsakes.

It's not what Collins, 57, would have predicted when she began searching for a creative outlet 10 years ago and, by turns, took up knitting, crochet, leatherwork, and the guitar. Nor did she anticipate finding her bliss the day she walked into a bead show in her hometown of Nashua.

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“It was the first and only time I’ve ever seen a bead show in Nashua,” she says, recalling the day she fell “instantly in love” with a glasswork technique called lampwork beadmaking.

Afterward, she signed up for a class at the now defunct Queen City Lampworks in Manchester, N.H. Her husband, Jack, 59, went along, eager to find out how he could help. So while she learned how to make beads, he explored the floor under her workbench, studying the propane, oxygen, and ventilation systems she would need in a home studio.

Within three months, Collins was making beads, selling them at craft fairs, and developing a following, including a woman who asked her if she would infuse a bead with a sprinkling of her beloved dog's ashes.

“Because of her, I made my first one,” Collins says.

She didn’t expect to feel so comfortable listening to people talk about death, given her limited experience with bereavement. Her beloved dog, Rudy, had died in 2001 at the age of 14. But she had never lost a human family member or friend.

“When I made the transition to working with the loss of human loved ones, I wasn’t sure if I could handle it,” says Collins, who retired as a pretrial officer in the federal court system. “As it turned out, it was a beautiful experience. . . . I [knew] that I was doing something good.”

Word spread. Orders multiplied. And soon requests for beads containing human cremains were surpassing those for pets.

Collins was featured in an article in the Nashua newspaper, The Telegraph, and on TV. Eric Rochette, funeral director and owner of the Anctil-Rochette and Son Funeral Home in Nashua, placed a shadow box of her cremation jewelry in his consultation room, a service for his clients.

It takes about a day to make a bead. Glass is melted with a torch, then wound onto a stainless steel rod and turned to create shape, color, and translucency. Sometimes, Collins adds layers of glass: a paw print, for example, or a heart is attached to the surface of the bead and melted into permanence. Afterward, she places the finished bead inside her kiln, set at 960 degrees, where it is annealed, a process that reduces internal stresses and increases the bead’s strength and durability.

Every order Collins fills is preceded by a meeting, usually at her home office, always with a box of tissues on the table, where clients share stories and photographs and decide on a bead and a setting that reflect their loved one’s essence.

A brown dog who loved running on the beach was memorialized with an aqua bead and a brown paw print. A red bead with black dots honored the spirit of a friend's mother who loved lady bugs.

"If I didn't have time to have a conversation, in person or through e-mail, if it was like a factory, that would be the end of it for me," Collins says.

She doesn't advertise but customers find her.

Gloucester resident Carol McKenzie, 61, saw Collins on TV, and last year after her cat, Sydney, died, she went online to search for the beadmaker.

"I've had multiple pets, but there was something special about this one," says McKenzie, a nurse, who drove almost two hours to meet with Collins, share pictures of Sydney, and talk about what her cat had meant to her.

McKenzie, who had three pieces made, each with a bit of her cat's cremains, wears a favorite pendant every day.

"It may sound silly to some, but it keeps him fresh," she says. "He came to me at a time that was very sad: I'd been laid off from a job I had for 30 years; my children were out of the house and married. A friend who fosters pregnant cats showed me this kitten, 4 weeks old, and he curled up in my lap."

Jen Cornell, a veterinarian in Exeter, N.H., has had three beads made with cremains from three beloved pets, and a fourth one, infused with a bit of a rose her late father once wore on his lapel.

"These beads are perfect, and I cherish them," she says.

Last year, Collins said in a radio interview that clients sometimes ask if they can watch while she works, something she doesn't allow for liability reasons. They also sometimes want to know if she has, well, special powers. She assures clients that she doesn't.

“I tell them, ‘There’s nothing mystical about what I do,’ ” she says.

Nevertheless, the finished bead Collins holds in her hand, as intentional as a prayer, reminds her that death is a part of the circle of life and should be handled with care.

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