



heavy metal

WEST PLAINS ENTREPRENEURS FIND SUCCESS
WITH CREATIONS OF COPPER, STONE, AND GLASS.



STORY

Porcshe N. Moran



TOP: At art festivals, the Copper Turtles booth shows the copper critters and other art to its best advantage. ABOVE: Janet Weilbrenner, left, and Stacy Benesh have 11 dogs; this is Harley.

When Janet Weilbrenner and Stacy Benesh mingle with people at art fairs, they're often asked why they chose a creative career path. The duo's humorous response: "We're too dumb to get real jobs and too afraid to steal, so we became artists."

The pair says that answer serves as an icebreaker for getting to know customers, an approach that is at the foundation of their business model. The couple, who venture around the country selling their signature copper animal sculptures, aren't afraid to talk about politics or share details of their personal lives with their patrons.

"I am not the most diplomatic in my booth," Janet says. "I've probably lost a few sales because of it, but by the same token, I know people have bought things because they like that. Part of our success is the fact that people are coming to buy a story. The people who buy our art know all about our lives. We are the type of people who lay everything out there."

The story of how they became artists starts in 1986. Janet left restaurant management to make copper jewelry with her

late mother, a high school art teacher. She taught Janet a technique, called electroforming, where metal is fused onto another medium using a low-voltage electric charge to create a fresh, thick layer of metal. Janet then started her own business and eventually brought Stacy onboard. In 1996, they stopped designing jewelry and launched the Copper Turtles brand. They offer a selection of handcrafted copper reptiles, amphibians, sea creatures, and other animals—accented with stones, shells, or recycled handblown glass—for home and garden display.

"We had been jewelers for several years when I first made a turtle and a frog to use for a pin," Janet says. "That was the beginning of the next phase. Then, Stacy made a frog that was too big to be a pin, and it just sat there. We didn't think anyone would buy it. But we took it to an art show, and it sold immediately."

Janet and Stacy produce their copper critters at their 12-acre residence in West Plains, where they also have three horses, 35 Nigerian dairy goats, a dozen cats, and

11 dogs. They moved to southern Missouri from Des Moines, Iowa, in 1999.

"We have made a sanctuary on our hill," Janet says. "We do our art because it allows us to live on a hill and raise goats."

Two outbuildings on the property house six electroforming tanks and a polisher. Their 1,200-square-foot basement serves as a studio with worktables and a kiln for melting glass, but most of the space holds an inventory of 75 different types of stones, which they buy 1,000 pounds at a time.

"We use a variety of sizes of stones," Janet says. "They range from small ones that we'd use for a two-inch turtle to stones that are as big as your hand."

From spring through fall, the couple travels around the country to art fairs. In the winter months, they create new pieces. The labor-intensive process begins with sculpting the figures from an oil-based modeling clay and reproducing them in resin. Next, they apply the stones, shells, or glass to the resin. Then, they electroform copper around

the entire piece. To finish, they oxidize and polish each critter before sealing the piece with three coats of lacquer to ensure it won't tarnish.

"It's a lot of hands-on work," says Stacy. "There are 12 steps in the process before a piece is completed. There is no mass production here. Every piece turns out completely different."

When pieces are in the electroforming tanks—from 24 hours to two weeks, depending on size—Janet and Stacy have a chance to tend to their personal lives.

"We can only produce so much," Janet says. "It is just the two of us. After you reach 60 years of age, you think, 'When do you start slowing down a tad?'"

Their work has motivated and inspired others—something that keeps the pair going. They welcome local youth to their studio for apprenticeships—a rare opportunity in a small, rural town.

"A lot of our success is what we do for others," Stacy says. "We try to broaden the horizons of some of the young people that haven't been out of the area. They come and work in the studio and suddenly realize they can make something with their own hands."

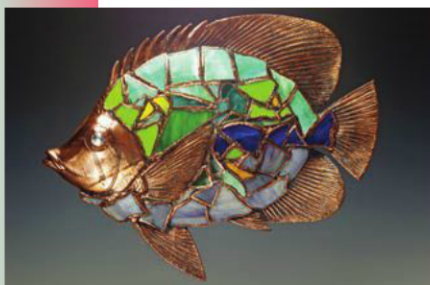
Janet and Stacy have won awards and earned their way into invitation-only festivals and markets. Yet Janet is most proud of their longevity as entrepreneurs in the competitive art world.

"The fact that we have lasted 32 years making a living as artists is my biggest accomplishment," Janet says. "We have survived over the years because we have a unique product. People haven't seen anything else like what we do. I feel really proud that we haven't gotten stuck in a rut. We have kept changing, growing, and coming up with new things."

To view Janet and Stacy's artwork, visit CopperTurtles.com.



TOP: Stacy uses hot glue to apply stone to a mold. MIDDLE: Thousands of stones are stored in the artists' basement workshop. BOTTOM: The seven-inch-tall, intricate dragon is fashioned from copper and abalone shells.



TOP: The artists shaped stained glass in a ceramic kiln and then broke it apart to make the 22-inch-long fish. BOTTOM: The turtle, named Andre, has a shell made of Carnelian stones.