

lighten up

Studio shines light on beauty and artisans far beyond stained glass



Names: Howie Zanto and Liz Woodworth Zanto

Ages: Howie, 60; Liz, 56

Years in the community: Howie, born and raised on Fond du Lac's East Side, with the exception of three middle school years spent in Chicago while yearning to return to Fond du Lac; Liz arrived from Madison in 1988; the couple married in 1998.

Occupation: Co owners of Living Light Studio, established by Howie and a business partner in 1977 and purchased by Howie in 1989.

Location: 314 14th St., Fond du Lac; www.livinglightstudio.net; livinglightstudio@ids.net; (920)821-1902

Reaction to being nominated for a Success section story: Liz: "Delighted and honored." Howie: "Awesome."

To what do you owe your measure of success? Liz: "Customer loyalty. And I attribute my success directly to Howie; I wouldn't be in business for myself without him."

Howie: "We have a really loyal customer base. A lot of our customers share our philosophy to shop local and find something unique. I attribute a lot of my success to my dad, who knew a little bit about everything...we worked together the whole time he was alive."

BY MONICA M. WALK
Special to The Reporter

"This feels like Door County."
"This shop could be in Colorado."

Living Light Studio proprietors and co-owners Howie Zanto and Liz Woodworth Zanto frequently hear comments like these from first-time visitors to their Fond du Lac jewelry and gift shop.

Returning customers tend to breathe a sigh of relaxation when they step onto the vintage wood floors and soak in the surrounding beauty.

While the store nemo is a nod to Howie's 30-plus years of crafting stained glass lighting, the shop now trends more toward enlightenment through beauty — although stained glass remains available.

"We are well-known for our sterling silver jewelry," Howie said, standing among display cabinets made by his late father Robert Zanto, gleaming with colored gem stones in unique settings selected by Liz, as well as other treasures, including wind chimes, boxes, carvings, clay figurines, kaleidoscopes and crystals.

Many of the shop's goods come to the studio via artist representatives and artists the couple have come to know.

Quality and Craftsmanship

"We like people like us who make things," said Liz, who began making jewelry under her grandfather's tutelage at age 12, and went on to major in art and metal work at UW-Madison. "I select items for quality and craftsmanship, reflected in the price."

Fair prices for both customers and artists are

Liz and Howie Zanto sit on the front steps of their business, Living Light Studio, at 314 14th St., in Fond du Lac. The Reporter photo by Patrick Hood

important to Living Light Studio's owners.

"We are conscious of being green," said Liz. "We are conscious of social justice and justice for the planet. We wrap purchases with recycled paper. A huge percent of what we carry in our shop directly supports the artist and most of it is made in America. We walk the line of a responsible business, responsible to the planet and to citizens."

That sense of world connectedness brought Living Light's owners to its most unique product: Nicaraguan pottery. The shop is the largest importer of Nicaraguan pottery in the Midwest.

Along with pottery partner Connie Ramthun and her spouse Bill Volkerl, Howie discovered the beauty of Nicaraguan pottery on a holiday trip in 2006. The 26 pieces brought back to the studio sold quickly.

"I was enamored of it," Howie said of the intricately painted unglazed pots. "It was beautiful. I'd never seen anything like it."

Pottery Pipeline

Liz joined the group on a follow-up trip to purchase additional pottery. Their trained eyes quickly understood the artistry involved in the products and they made a point of meeting and purchasing the art directly from the potters.

The 125 pieces they brought back again sold quickly. Future trips built friendships with a local importer and exporter who knew the potters, and which made shipping 400 and then 1,000 pieces to Fond du Lac much easier.

"This pottery is well-known in Central America," Howie said. "We gave the artists the prices they asked for it. A couple dollars means more to them than it does to us. We want them to smile when they see us."

"We never asked for a deal," Liz affirmed, noting how the clay has to be dug, dried, mixed and stomped before being shaped into vessels on kick wheels, and then carved and painted before firing in wood kilns. "For us, this was recognition of the workmanship and spirit of another artist. We are artists and know how long it takes to make it."

While some of the pottery is displayed in the main store, additional and larger pieces are set up in the showroom referred to as Living Light West, on the corner of Hickory and Division streets, which also houses Liz's massage therapy business.

Each piece of pottery comes with a certificate of authenticity, the artist's signature and a photo of the artist.

Benefit Party

In celebration of discovering the pottery and in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of Living Light Studio, Liz and Howie held a benefit party at the Windhover. Proceeds were sent to fund after-school programs at a library near the potters' homes and businesses in Nicaragua.

That type of community support comes naturally to the couple, who regularly donate items to fundraisers for the Humane Society, Solutions Center, Habitat for Humanity, ASTOP, The Women's Fund and other non-profit organizations.

Sisters Anne Friedrich and Chris Getas were shopping together over the noon hour on a recent September weekday. Friedrich discovered Living Light Studio at a Humane Society fundraiser featuring a donated copper horse bracelet and a set of earrings.

"I didn't know they had jewelry like that — I thought they were stained glass — so I ran over," she said.

The sisters now wear matching pendant necklaces specially retrofitted from earrings by Liz.

"I think our creative environment draws people in. It's a unique setting," Howie said. "I think people feel that."

Liz appreciates their deep Fond du Lac roots and the friendships built through their business.

"Howie has been here so long that people come in and bring their kids in, and now we get to see those kids get married and bring their own kids in," she said. "It's cool to see the generations. I love that."



An example of Nicaraguan pottery and three pieces of jewelry, including an Awe made with butterfly wings (bottom) are shown here. The Reporter photos by Patrick Hood

Friends Reward Idea Benefits Frequent Customers

Living Light Studio co-owners Howie Zanto and Liz Woodworth Zanto cite a commitment to pricing their wares fairly for both artisans and clients.

That means clients aren't likely to find significant sales or mark-downs on items — since the items were never significantly marked up.

Instead, the studio uses a Friends Reward punch card, which can be redeemed for a discount after \$200 in purchases are made.

The winter holidays bring the most clients — and about 70 percent of all male clients — into the studio

during extended daily shopping hours throughout December.

Other high-traffic events include:

- The spring season of Mother's Day, graduation, confirmation, first communion.
- Special birthdays, including Sweet 16.
- Meaningful transitions of births, deaths and retirements.

"We offer unique items, complimentary wrapping and cheerful service," Liz said.