

“Retired ship engineer pursues the perfect octopus”

By Darren Garnick

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P.J. Hicks used a torch all his life to make welding repairs. Now he fires up art.

Having spent most of his professional life at sea traveling the world, retired chief engineer P.J. Hicks has no hesitation diving into new passions.

Five years ago, during a fish scouting trip in Washington state’s salmon-rich Puget Sound, a buddy dragged him into an art glass shop to buy some supplies. “I saw this display cabinet with three dozen little glass fish. They were so entirely lifelike, it was unbelievable. I said to myself, ‘I gotta learn how to do that!’”

On a whim, Hicks blew \$500 on a glassblowing torch and raw materials and went home to “fool around.” A career engine room maintenance chief for several American West Coast shipping companies, he was comfortable with a flame from his welding days. After tinkering with making glass beads for a few months, he took some classes, bought a bigger torch on eBay and began tackling bigger projects.

“I fell in love with marbles,” he says. “I now try to make at least one a day and love experimenting with different color ideas and different design ideas. I give them away to kids at supermarkets. They get excited and so do their moms and dads.”

“It keeps me out of the taverns,” he jokes.

The Northwest corner of the U.S. happens to be a hotspot for professional and amateur glassblowers alike. The cities of Eugene, Portland, Tacoma and Seattle are teeming with glassworking schools, studios and manufacturers.

From marbles, Hicks ventured off to try more ambitious ocean-themed projects such as clownfish, dolphins, seahorses and the occasional octopus swimming in seagrass. It took him three tries to achieve the perfect octopus, which he gave to his mother as a Christmas present. While attaching the head to the tentacles, if the body is not heated evenly, the entire creature can crack. Projects also can shatter in the kiln.

Hicks, 67, has been exploring the tutorial programs for DraftSight, a free 2D CAD product, to design his own glassblowing tools and various art projects.

“I’m still in the learning phase,” he says. “I’m trying to create a maple leaf design inside a cast glass medallion, and want to cast it in a mold. I like to work with simple drawings. I mostly sketch stuff and don’t use a lot of 3D. DraftSight fits the bill for me to quickly whip out some ideas and look them over.”

“You know, I could probably buy some of my glassblowing tools cheaper than it costs to make them, but there’s something more satisfying about making something with your own hands,” he adds.

A lifelong fishing enthusiast, Hicks has a similar do-it-yourself philosophy when he hits the open water – building his own rods and tying his own flies. From September through May, he enjoys exclusive fishing rights at “Lost Lake,” a private lake near his home that he and his friends pay to stock with trout.

His extended fishing trips have included Montana’s Clark Fork River to catch Rainbow and Brown Trout and the Mexican village of Rincon De Guayabitos to catch Dorado – also known as Dolphin Fish or Mahi Mahi, which is Hawaiian for “Strong, Strong.”

“We went out about 27 miles (into the Pacific Ocean) in my friend’s 16-foot open aluminum boat to get the Dorado. It scared the hell out of my fishing partner because he is somewhat afraid of the water.” says Hicks, who claims to have never gotten seasick.

“I highly recommend this retirement gig,” he adds. “It’s everything I expected it to be!”



P.J. Hicks poses with the spoils of his fishing trip in Mexico. The Dorado fish are also known as Dolphin Fish or Mahi Mahi.