

## Art From Ashes:

*Local company makes something beautiful from dust and memories*

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AMHERST – When a loved one dies, it is often difficult to see the beauty in the passing. If a loved one is cremated, often, especially if we weren't given specific instructions, we hold on to that box or urn, not knowing what to do with the "cremains" inside.



Perfume Bottle



Seascape

Turley Publications photos by DEBBI STRAUSS

**From left, Jenny Bourgeois, Jane Giat and Deb Brown of Art From Ashes show some options for turning memories into treasures.**

An Amherst-based Internet company has broken the mold by providing some beautiful options that have hit the Web like lightning. Art From Ashes -- the brainchild of sisters Jenny Bourgeois (a former Human Resources professional), Deb Brown (a former computer programmer and travel agent) and friend Jane Giat (a clinical social worker and therapist) -- offers handcrafted glass memorials that contain the cremains of your loved ones. Since its inception a few years ago, the company has sent pieces all over the country as well as internationally.

"A beautiful piece of art like this keeps a person in mind," said Brown. "It keeps you talking about them. It keeps you close with them."

The concept of Art From Ashes came at a time when all three women were at crossroads in their lives. Their children were getting old enough to either be on their own in college or at least spend much of their day in public school. They were all thinking about what the next step in their own careers might be.

"My grandmother collected glass paperweights," said Bourgeois. "And growing up, she encouraged us to play with them. I've always had an affinity to them."

When the sisters' grandmother was showing signs of aging, the Brown and Bourgeois began to think about what they could do to honor her. They had heard about how glass souvenirs were made using the ashes from Mt. St. Helen. Then they thought about making a special glass paperweight that would hold the cremains of their beloved grandmother.

"I thought it would be a great remembrance of my grandmother," said Bourgeois.

The initial idea seemed a little disturbing to family members, but when Bourgeois suggested the idea of beginning with pet cremains, the business concept began to be easier to digest at first.

"All of us have dogs, cats, and birds," said Brown. "We're all totally invested in our pets."

The three went to Paradise City, a popular area high-end arts and crafts festival.

"We scoped things out, and talked with some of the artists," said Brown. "When we picked a particular one out, we contacted her later at her studio."

Caitlin Burch works together with her father, Robert Burch, who has been working with blown glass for more than three decades, creating exquisite works of art in his Putney, Vt. Studio. The women traveled to Putney to speak with the Burches, and tell them the purpose of their business. It took a while for the concept to sink in.

"Then Robert said, 'This is starting to feel good for me. I'm comfortable with this'," said Bourgeois.

It took a while to get the actual chemistry down regarding how much of the cremains to use without compromising the integrity of the piece. It has to cool slowly and correctly in order to keep the texture, which is virtually unbreakable unless purposefully smashed with something like a sledgehammer. Robert Burch told the women to truly understand their business, they should come to the studio and try to make their own pieces. They learned to roll the molten glass into the cremains, add another layer to encase the ashes, and then add bits of colored glass and metals to create the design. While there are about a dozen choices of basic pieces of art from necklaces (one of the newest items) to perfume bottles (Burch's signature piece), no two pieces ever come out exactly the same.

"Seeing is very different from knowing," said Giat. "But for me, this has been a fabulous marriage of art and clinical skills."

That's because a lot of time and talk goes into creating each piece.

According to Bourgeois, people who live close enough can come to the Pleasant Street offices and talk about how best to memorialize their loved ones. Other times, if the client is from across the globe, all the communication is done via email. Either way, at least one of the three women – if not all – have dedicated hours of time helping customers decide on pieces, or perhaps come up with a custom-made design. They help their clients through the mailing of the cremations process (the U.S. Post Office has regulations to follow), and finally, the elaborate wrapping of the final gift, complete with picture cards of the piece.

"We communicate the whole way through the process," said Brown. "We have been overwhelmed by how meaningful and comforting this has been to people...When we leave every day, we feel really good."

"This is a very personal business," said Giat. "People talk a lot to us about how good it feels to be able to talk out this... A lot of people feel that it is not validated for them to grieve for their pets like they would grieve for other loved ones."

The owners themselves have pieces of their loved ones in their possession. Brown wore an exquisite bracelet that carries the cremains of her dog, Louie. They also have pet cremains in a glass-topped walking stick, a collaboration of Burch's work and that of Kevin Kilgore of Monson, whose sticks are a popular items used by hikers and birders. Remains of their grandmother are in both the perennials (flat paperweights) and hidden treasures (a larger, rounder option). Part of mother lies close to their hearts on necklaces. Their father was a huge college buff, who loved visiting the colleges when his grandchildren were checking them out. When he passed away suddenly, the family had some of his cremains used to create six Phoenix stones (a small glass piece that resembles a "worry stone") that fits comfortably in your hand or pocket. Each grandchild received one at the memorial service.

"My son took it with him when he was taking the SATs," said Bourgeois.

Art From Ashes really took off after they were contacted by the national magazine "Newsweek". An article appeared about a year ago, and since then, the phone calls and e-mails have been steady.

"Before that, we were really just focusing on pets, but the article's focus was not on pets," said Brown. "Instantly, we received orders from all over the country. Now, our business is about 50 (percent pets) – 50 (percent humans)."

Their most famous pet was Washoe, the first chimpanzee to learn American Sign Language and teach it to other chimpanzees. The director of the organization that raised and taught her had 10 pieces made to give to its Board of Trustees.

But there are the less famous pets, too.



"We had people digging up urns of their pets in yards," said Bourgeois. "One woman had three perennials made for her daughters and then one for herself. Then she decided to have a service and let the ashes go in her dog's favorite field. She said it freed them up."

"I recently had a long phone conversation with someone whose son died. He was a silver artist. He (the father) was struggling with what design would be best. He was working through a lot of grief," said Giat. "He was also an artist. Drawing the design really helped him. He chose a commissioned piece – a heart with deep pinks and reds."

Another man wanted to make sure he received his piece in time for his dog's anniversary of his death.

"When he came here that day, he said, 'You have just made me feel that you really care about me'," said Giat. "He also said after his visit that he felt like there was closure and he felt ready to get another dog."

Bourgeois said that people are also seeing this as an option for themselves.

"One man saw the article in 'Newsweek' and told his wife that this is what he wants to see her do when he dies," she said.

Wanting to become part of their community, Art From Ashes joined the Amherst Chamber of Commerce. On one of their first visits to a meeting, the women met the staff at the VNA and Hospice of Cooley Dickinson Hospital. Now, the two are collaborating on a fundraising effort for hospice, involving a specially designed piece, the "heart of hospice".

"It's exciting to have a collaboration with them," said Giat.

Currently, the Art From Ashes owners do not have any immediate plans for offering other services.

"At the moment, we're just hoping to expand our business and perhaps we may add some other artists," said Brown.

With the holiday season approaching, the folks from Art From Ashes said they expect to be busy. Typical orders take 3 -5 weeks, and gift certificates are also available. Prices range anywhere from \$80 - \$425, and a full selection of options is on their Web site, [ArtFromAshes.com](http://ArtFromAshes.com).

