

A gift of glass: Blenko collector donates commemorative birthday pieces to WV

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Photos by Chris Dorst, Craig Hudson, F. Brian Ferguson - Photographers

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John Homburg has found a knack for surrounding himself with delicate beauty.

It's evident in his once-scraggly yard, now so covered with flowers that there's no room for grass.

It's there in the broken shards he's crafted into stained glass windows — 23 of them, to be exact.



And it's there inside his home in Charleston's Edgewood neighborhood, filled with decades of colored creations from one of West Virginia's only remaining glass factories.

His Blenko Glass collection includes everything from the company's iconic water bottles to a rare glass chess set. The Homburgs have thousands of pieces of decorative glass, including about 3,000 in their garden.

The result was a bright, colorful home — a stark contrast to the former legislative attorney's reserved personality.

“Gardening is a form of therapy,” said Homburg, 74, who's also a master gardener. “I earned my living using my mind. That's one reason I like doing glass, it's creative.”

Until recently, his most prized display was there, too: all 38 pieces of Blenko's commemorative West Virginia birthday glass, one issued each year for West Virginia Day.

On Tuesday, that collection made its debut at the state Culture Center, the next step in a fragile journey for the historic pieces and for the man who so carefully brought them together.

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Homburg's collection is one of only five full sets of the West Virginia Day pieces. Blenko began making them in 1980, under an agreement with the Diamond Department Store to produce a signed and numbered vase each year for West Virginia's birthday. The number of pieces produced raises each year to equal the age of the state. That first year, there were 117 pieces.

“He didn't stand in line for the first one,” Kay Homburg said. “He went to the Diamond Department Store and



saw it and thought he'd go down at lunch and buy it. He went back at lunch and they were all gone.”

Since 1981, Homburg has stood in line for every piece. In 1998, he found a man in North Carolina willing to sell him the first piece for \$1,800, and Homburg didn't hesitate to pay the pretty penny to complete his collection.

He's been collecting ever since.

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Last August, Homburg was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given just a few days to live. He's now outlived his original diagnosis by nearly 11 months.

“You need three basic things in order to succeed,” Homburg said. “You have to be tough-minded, and think things are going to work out. You have to have a great support system; my wife and daughter are like rocks, they wouldn't let me get down. And great medical care.”

In February, Homburg underwent surgery. He's now undergoing post-chemotherapy treatment and believes strongly that he will be part of the 1 percent to live more than five years after pancreatic cancer.

“You just have to take the attitude that you're going to get better,” Homburg said. “Even against terrible odds, the percentage of people who survive are really lucky. The alternative is not exactly acceptable.”

A former Blenko employee, Buckhannon glassmaker Ron Hinkle, reached out to Homburg with a purple flying pig — made of glass, of course — to symbolize his hope of beating pancreatic cancer “when pigs fly.”

Homburg ordered 10 more purple flying pigs to give to his support team, which included doctors, friends and family.



John Homburg, with an iconic Blenko Glass pitcher beside him, at Thomas Memorial Hospital in South Charleston

“That's the one nice thing to come out of this, you realize how many great people you know,” Homburg said.

His glass collection is a symbol of the friendships he and his family have made in the glass community.

After his diagnosis, he chose a final resting place for his entire Blenko West Virginia Day collection.

“I think he wanted to have the glass all be together,” his wife said. “If we had sold it, no one person would have had the money to pay for the collection.

“He just wanted it to stay together and he always used to say, ‘It's sad that the Culture Center doesn't have this collection because it's about the state of West Virginia's birthday.’”



Part of John Homburg's West Virginia Day glass collection inside his Charleston Home.

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The Homburgs' daughter, Hillary, is as passionate about Blenko as her father. John Homburg calls her his "chip." The two would go monthly or more to sort through scrap glass together.

"We would go and put on gloves and sort through glass, dust it off and hold it up," she said. "I would get to pick the colors I liked."

Until 10 years ago, Hillary Homburg, 33, owned her own complete Blenko West Virginia Day collection. She donated the glass to West Virginia University, her alma mater, as part of The Blenko Project, which she founded as a WVU Foundation Scholar to raise awareness about the glass factory.

John Homburg began collecting the glass for her before she was born. In 1984, when Kay Homburg was pregnant, she stood in line so her daughter could be present to receive her glass.

Since then, Hillary Homburg has been present each year, by baby carrier or on foot, to accept her birthday piece.

Although those moments have meant a lot to her and her father, Hillary Homburg said she isn't sad about seeing her father's collection go. She wouldn't have room to display it anyway, she said.

"I have all of the memories of us going together, and I still have a couple of pieces," she said. "I'm excited it's going to be someplace where it can be seen and enjoyed and kind of learned about by more people."

Blenko agreed to send a piece of West Virginia Day glass each year to WVU when Hillary Homburg completed her project. The company has done the same for the Culture Center for the past couple of years, ensuring the state's collection will remain complete in future years.

Donating the glass to West Virginia seemed natural for John Homburg, considering his love for the state and his connection to its government. Last year, he was recognized as a Distinguished West Virginian by Gov. Jim Justice.

"Maybe people can appreciate [the glass collection] and realize some of the really



artistic things people do in this state,” Homburg said. “They can have a greater appreciation for some of the historic things that have fallen by the wayside.”

The collection at the Culture Center will feature a plaque to honor his commitment to glass and the state.

Whether Homburg beats cancer by another five days, months or years, his collection will serve as part of his legacy.

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