

NEWS – Sat, December 27, 2008
Spencer, IA 51301

THE DAILY REPORTER

TOP STORIES OF 2008

Curiel's art-inspired vision building area's skill sets

By Kris Todd

Daily Reporter Staff

Why this story is NO. 4

Clay County's growing art community received a boost when Louis "Tony" Curiel chose to establish the Curiel/Reynolds School of Visual Arts in a former Spencer school building. Today, this neon glass artisan is attempting to inspire, educate and appeal to a wide range of interests within his business' walls.



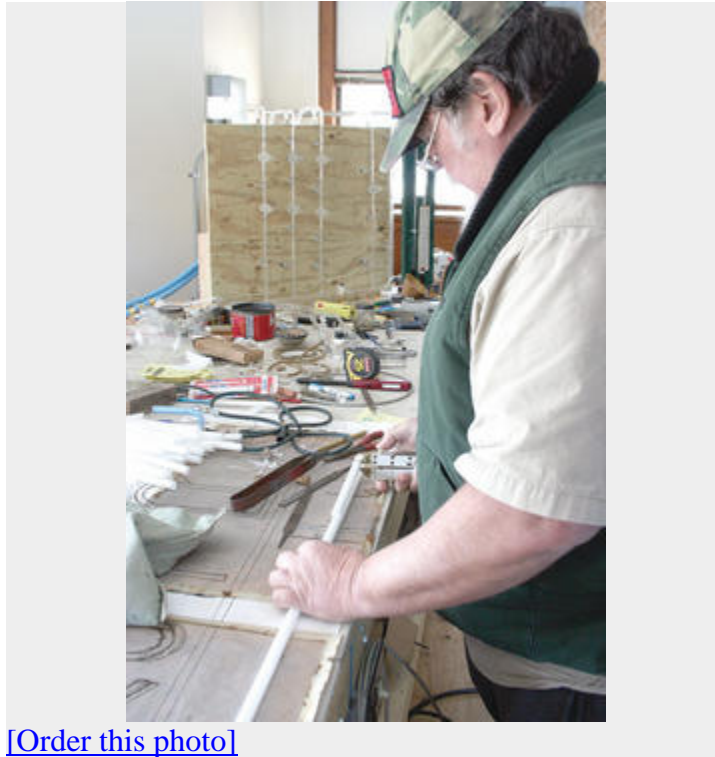
[\[Order this photo\]](#)

Louis "Tony" Curiel was mentored by several "substantial and influential people" during his student days at Rio Hondo Community College in California. The noted neon-glass blowing craftsman is returning that favor today at the Curiel/Reynolds School of Visual Arts.

Even though the 58-year-old could have set up his school's studios anywhere in the world, he chose to establish them in Spencer. Curiel purchased the former Reynolds School building for \$170,507 from

the Spencer Community School District. His facility's grand opening was marked with a July 20 celebration.

Curiel's business, which features different areas for different expertise, hosts lab spaces for ceramics, jewelry and watch making, neon and lamp working, painting and drawing. The school building's former auditorium also houses a gallery used to display students' handiworks.



[\[Order this photo\]](#)

"My vision was to have the availability to do different types of workshops. Not as a full-time educational facility, but more of doing workshops in the community to teach people a new expertise," Curiel said.

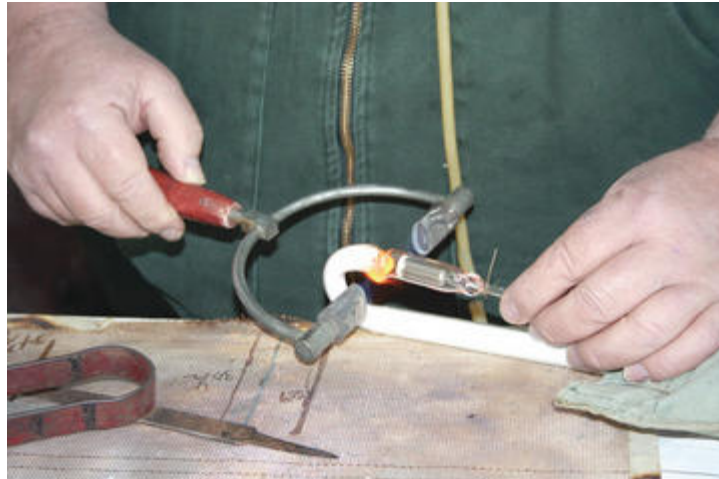
"Success, I think, is more directed toward the ability to get involved with the area," he added. "I know that Spencer, per se, can't support an art school. I realized that when I moved here. My intention is, and was, to bring more people to the area: And that's happening in students and in other working artisans."

A neon glass worker is born

Curiel, who enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps for four years during the Vietnam War, switched his music major to an art-based concentration after being told by his Rio Hondo Community College music instructor Willametta Spencer, "Mr. Curiel, your glasswork is better than your musicianship." It was also at the California school that his "pretty good base" was fostered during the early 1970s by many "substantial and influential people" who served as instructors.

Curiel, who focuses primarily on neon, illuminated and plasma glasswork today, moved from California to Omaha in 1973. In addition to helping lay the groundwork for the Artists' Cooperative

Gallery in Omaha, he operated a glass studio in the historic Old Market area of the Nebraska city for 20 years.



(Photos by Kris Todd) Louis "Tony" Curiel, director of the Curiel/Reynolds School of Visual Arts in Spencer, works on a neon runner for a friend's bakery in downtown Detroit. [\[Order this photo\]](#)

"Percival Roach, the individual who started the first shop there, and I, are still friends. He started the British import shop in 1967 or '68. His wife was the head of the dance department at Creighton University," Curiel recalled.

"We became friends and later shared a studio together. He was a metal worker and I was the glass person; it was named Curiel Glass.

We were on the corner of (South) 11th (Street) and Harney (Street)."

When the area's current riverfront development began taking shape, the shop Curiel was based in was sold and turned into a parking lot.

Following a car accident in which he spent nine months in the hospital and was not expected to survive, Curiel moved to the unincorporated town of Anderson in southwest Iowa for one year before moving to Michigan in 1991. After setting up a shop with friend Paul Klawitter, Curiel spent the next 15 years launching glass shops in the Michigan towns of Grass Lake, Ann Arbor and Detroit, as well as working as a vendor for Ford Motor Company and as an instructor with a Florida-based company.

"I worked with them teaching concepts of illuminate gases and on a neon program that's still in existence with Chris Nordin, who's affiliated with the University of Michigan-Dearborn ... and with the Henry Ford Museum," Curiel said.

The Plymouth, Mich.-based glass worker relocated to Spencer, in part, due to the prompting of Dean Torreson, Spencer's former city manager.

"Dean was a creative guy and he had a lot of good ideas. We got to be friends," Curiel said. "...Since moving here, I really have developed an insight into where I can direct people when they come to this area. There will be more people coming: It's inevitable."

Curiel/Reynolds School of Visual Arts takes shape

A ceramic block, a file, a blow hose and a small hot-wire cutter are the tools of Curiel's trade.

"You learn as you go along. Nobody teaches you that," he said.

"I can bend any sign," Curiel added. "And I've got total respect for anybody who's a neon sign cutter, doing channel letters or whatever they do. Because it is definitely a technique that has to be developed. It just doesn't happen overnight. I also think every neon person should be trained as a sign person first because that gives them a respect for the medium. It also gives them the training that they need to put together a good unit that'll pump and evacuate."

Of his son John, who works at the Curiel/Reynolds School of Visual Arts, Curiel said, "We work a lot of hours around here. You'll see the lights on late at night and early in the morning. ... I try to put in a good 12 hours a day, and that's usually seven days a week. But that's pretty common among most glass people because of the demanding nature of the material."

The veteran, educator and glass worker indicated he's worked out a deal with the Spencer school district to house a foundry its students will also be able to use. Curiel said his plans include constructing another building south of his school to house a hot shop, a cold shop, a blacksmithing area and a fabrication area.

The neon glass turner is also among the people working to build an artist base within Spencer. Besides being instrumental in recruiting Anthony Vodraska, a pottery artist, and Anita Gilbert, a ceramicist, to the area, Curiel reported he's lobbying Des Moines sculptor John Brommel and Perry children's book authors Tom Owens and Diana Helmer to also relocate here. Curiel's recruitment goal was also augmented during his recent illuminated piece display and presentation at the Glass Art Society's 38th Annual Conference in Portland, Ore., where over 1,700 international glass-arts artists, students, educators and collectors gathered.

The ongoing student, meanwhile, does not refer to himself as an artist.

"My feeling about a person who calls himself an artist is he's a little oblivious to blowing his own horn," Curiel said. "There are a lot of people in the glass community. If you're an artisan or an artist, I think that determination has to be made by your peers and also by your constituency, the people who purchase your work."

© Copyright 2008, Spencer Daily Reporter

Story URL: <http://www.spencerdailyreporter.com/story/1489386.html>