



Compliments Trish Biddle

The Business of **ART**

Local Artists
Reveal
Right Brain
Secrets
to Success

By Tracy L. Southers, APR

Starving artists? Not here in Northeast Tarrant County. Surprisingly, the area known as home to corporate executives, professional athletes and soccer moms also has a thriving arts scene, most recently exemplified by the 11th Annual Art in the Square in Southlake and 2010 Bear Creek Art Gala in Keller. Nurtured by organizations such as Arts Council Northeast, Apex Arts League, Young Artists of Texas, city governments, chambers of commerce and community groups, there are year-round opportunities to appreciate the arts.

This influx of culture has become a breeding ground for local talent. With dozens of artist-owned galleries and studios throughout Northeast Tarrant County, it appears that professional artists are catapulting their talent into successful businesses. And at a time when corporate America is struggling to make a profit, it is inspirational to see “right brain” individuals achieving success in business acumen. N.E.T Business Resource examines the affect a creative mind has on the bottom line by profiling three local individuals – Olivia Bennett, Trish Biddle

and David Gappa – in their dual roles as artists and business managers. By combining an inherent passion, natural talent and smart marketing, each has reached national acclaim as a professional artist.

Defying the Odds

Although traveling different paths to arrive at where they’re at today, all three artists recognized their special gift at a young age. Encouraged by family, friends and teachers, Bennett sold her first watercolor for \$50 at age 8, Biddle won a drawing contest and \$2 coupon to Dairy Queen in second grade, and Gappa received \$300 for selling his first oil painting in ninth grade. All agree that after making the first sale, they were hooked.

However, all three initially considered art a hobby versus a full-time career; Biddle and Gappa both held jobs in different, although similar, fields before “taking the leap.”

Bennett, youngest of the trio, aptly summarizes the consensus, “I didn’t go into it thinking it was a career path. Being so young, I

wasn't involved in the art world and I didn't think being a professional artist was even an option. You hear about 'starving artists' all the time...rarely do you hear about artists who are making it in today's society."

Fortunately, this has not been the case for Bennett, Biddle or Gappa. Like most successful entrepreneurs, all three believe networking and getting involved in the local community are essential, but admit that they've had to find new ways to market and sell their work in the current economic environment. In addition, each artist shares their proudest moment and recounts a career-changing opportunity. Although attracting a national audience and selling pieces to customers around the world, all agree Northeast Tarrant County is an excellent location to "open up shop" and attribute an impressive percentage of sales to local patrons.

"The Grapevine area has become a major hub between Dallas and Fort Worth," says Gappa, whose Vetro Glassblowing Studio is located on Grapevine's historic



Compliments Olivia Bennett

Olivia Bennett: The Power of Oprah

Location: Southlake

Medium: Oil on canvas

Best place to find her: Olivia Bennett Art Gallery-
1439 Main Street, Southlake

First sale: age 8

Accolades: Chosen as "One of Twenty Teens Who
Will Change the World" by Teen People.

Best Business Advice: "Treat your art like a business
and a brand."



Main Street. "Being located in this area and close to DFW Airport is a great asset to our business."

When asked what "big business" could learn from taking a more artistic approach, Biddle believes it improves communication and relationships. "People need creativity. It makes them smile, laugh and they relate better to an image than just words. People know what I'm saying in my work and that's one of the great pleasures of having this ability," she explains.

At 20, Olivia Bennett is already an extraordinary success story. Selling her first piece of artwork at age 8, publishing her first book at age 12, and opening her first gallery in Southlake at age 14, there is no denying her ability to paint. But it was her appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show that officially launched her career.

"When I first started selling my work in local art fairs and galleries, the local media was very interested and I was fortunate to have the opportunity to do a few morning shows and magazines early in my career," she says. "The national attention came after I wrote to Oprah. I was featured on her show at age 12 and from that point on many doors opened, from Southern Living to People Magazine, The Today Show, CNN, Teen People Magazine and CosmoGirl."

Since that time, Bennett has done many a media interview and sold nearly 500 original pieces. She also attributes her national exposure to partnering with cancer research organizations, of which she donates a portion of her proceeds.

Trish Biddle: Winning Big at the Kentucky Derby

Location: Westlake

Medium: Oil, acrylic and watercolor

Best place to find her: www.TrishBiddle.com

Accolades: Selected as the official artist for Westminster Dog Show (2009 & 2010) and The Kentucky Derby (2008)

Best Business Advice: "Keep the business side separate from the personal side."

"I took a passion and what I believe to be a calling and focused on it...it was a lot of small steps that lead to a career," Bennett says.

With so much already under her belt, her most recent undertaking is the opening of her new gallery in Southlake Town Square, which she says generates the majority of her sales. Out-of-state and overseas marketing is done via the Internet and she has created a "lifestyle line" of note cards, ornaments and limited edition prints to appeal to a broader audience.

"Owning my own store was definitely the most life changing experience. Now, going into my second store in Southlake Town Square, and having the opportunity to teach (children), I feel like I'm doing exactly what I'm supposed to be doing," Bennett comments. "God has blessed me with so many incredible opportunities and connections and I feel thankful to be living out my dream daily."



Compliments Trish Biddle



Bennett says the best business advice she has received is to treat her art like a business and a brand, which she believes is crucial for up-and-coming artists to know.

"Being an artist is really being an entrepreneur. You have to go out and create your own career path, just like you would a piece of artwork," she explains. "I think the best advice is to get your work out for the public to see as much as possible. I started in local art fairs, coffee shops and galleries. You are building a brand...the more people see your work, the better."

Instantly recognizable, Trish Biddle's artwork portrays her self-described style of "glamorous women in fabulous places." The Westlake resident certainly knows of what she paints. Named the official artist of the 2008 Kentucky Derby, official artist of the 2009 and 2010 Westminster Kennel Club Shows, and an exhibitor at art shows throughout the country, Biddle is going fabulous places.

According to Biddle, her career path was "an obstacle course." She began doing paste and layout for a trade magazine before enrolling at the Dallas Institute of Art. Upon graduation, she continued as a textile designer and fashion illustrator, while continuing to paint part-time and eventually as a freelance artist. After the death of her beloved grandmother, Biddle did some soul-searching and decided to pursue her art full-time. She signed with her publisher, Canadian Art Prints, in 2003 and has never looked back.

David Gappa: Glassblowing for
Barbara Bush

Location: Grapevine

Medium: Glass

Best place to find him: 701 South Main Street, Grapevine

First sale: an oil painting as a teen, \$300

Accolades: creating a signature piece for Barbara Bush

Best Business Advice: "The ability to adapt and change is critical for an artist to be successful in business."



Photography by Geno Loro

Compliments David Gappa



In Biddle's case, imagination can truly take you places. Citing inspiration as her two daughters, fashion, travel and a need to escape, her paintings reflect the Art Deco era so convincingly you can't help but wonder how she transported herself to capture that lovely era. Her motto is to inspire others, especially girls and women, helping them reach their goals by setting a positive example.

Biddle attributes her national acclaim to quite simply, perseverance, and says the down economy has forced her to expand and diversify.

"We are now approaching licensing opportunities with manufacturers, which isn't easy but it's forced me out of my comfort zone," Biddle says, noting a major goal this year is to partner with QVC for a line of licensed products including note cards, calendars, mugs, posters, t-shirts and hats.

Biddle manages her fast-growing business with the help of her husband, Bryan, who oversees her website, books and other projects so Biddle can be free to produce. Although she admits it is difficult, the best business advice she received is to keep the business side separate from the personal side.

Claiming 25 percent of her customer base as local buyers, Biddle's work can be seen at local art festivals, Art 251 in Keller, Stems in Grapevine and Farpointe Wine Bar in Southlake.

Biddle's out-of-area sales are boosted by direct mail, social media and online marketing.

Like Bennett, Biddle believes strongly in giving back to the community, which includes numerous charities and organizations in North Texas.

"Being a part of this community allows me to contribute to a better cause and have access to great people," Biddle says.

Growing up in Fort Worth, Gappa spent much of his childhood at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History, taking every art class available including painting, sculpting, sketching and drawing. As a teenager, he sold his first oil painting for \$300 to a local bank – a decision he regrets today, wishing instead he had kept it.

Not yet realizing the possibility of being a professional artist, he pursued a career in industrial engineering at The University of Texas at Arlington, before switching to architecture, which was a much better fit. "I quickly realized the left brain wasn't well suited for me," he says.

It was during his senior year of graduate school at UTA that fate stepped in. He embarked on his passion for glassblowing while assisting with the founding of the University's glassblowing program. Thus began his vision of opening Vetro Glassblowing Studio, which came to fruition in 1999 and moved to its current location in downtown Grapevine in 2005.

After graduation, Gappa took a job with Quorum Architects where he spent 10 years while working at the studio in his spare time. Eventually, his work week at Quorum lessened to four days, then three days and he finally joined the studio full time in November 2009. His crowning achievement thus far was being asked to create a signature piece for Barbara Bush during her keynote address at the opening ceremony of The Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders in Fort Worth.

He credits his architectural training for the ability to see things spatially and sculpt glass that tells a story, citing faith, nature, love and pain as his sources of inspiration.

Offering regular tours, demonstrations and classes, Gappa works closely with the Grapevine Convention & Visitors Bureau and concierges at nearby hotels to draw tourists into the studio. Combined with local visitors and annual street festivals held in Grapevine, Gappa attributes 70 percent of his sales to in-studio traffic.

As he prefers staying close to home with his family, Gappa's out-of-market sales are primarily through strategic partnerships, including interior designers and other artists. A joint venture currently underway is a series of wine decanters that will be launched nationwide this year.

"We were originally targeting mid-level clients in the \$300-\$500 range, but our business plan had to change with the economy," states Gappa. "We had to be creative and come up with new ideas at both the affordable and exclusive ends. The ability to adapt and change with the circumstances is critical for an artist to be successful in business."

Young Artists of Texas: The Next Generation

Paving the way for the next crop of local talent is Young Artists of Texas (YAT), a non-profit organization whose mission is to educate and promote young Texas artists. Established in 2005, the YAT Gallery opened in Keller in 2006 and has welcomed more than 50 young artists through its doors.

With four gallery nights hosted each year on-site, and the opportunity to participate in 12 off-site exhibits, students get plenty of hands-on experience. To help the artists become business savvy, YAT also offers classes on finance, marketing, tax guides and legal aspects. College scholarships for art majors and internships for college students are awarded annually.

Gappa believes it is important to teach young artists both left and right brain skills. "Artists are emotionally inclined and business can encroach on our creative side," he states. "A successful artist needs to use this fear to take on the business of art."

Tracy Southers is a principal in WordPlay, Inc., a public relations agency with offices in Grapevine, Texas and Naples, Florida. The company's services include consulting, copywriting, marketing campaigns, publicity and special event planning. For more information, go to www.wordplayinc.com or call (817) 756-1233.

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Jenny Tilbury: The Next Generation

Location: Keller

Medium: Education in the Arts

Best place to find her: The YAT Gallery-
246 South Main Street, Keller

Best Business Advice: Artists can learn more about how to establish a career in art at one of YAT's quarterly speaker nights."



Matt Tilbury Photography