

A new window on the world

Adult education students in Fulham are learning the ancient craft of stained glass with one of Britain’s leading artists in the field as their tutor. Kathy Shaw, whose work graces the Human Genome Campus, near Cambridge, as well as churches and theatres across the country, tells h&f News how she is helping to keep this medieval skill alive



by Phil McCorkell

In 1977 Kathy saw a course in stained glass advertised in the adult education guide Floodlight and decided to give it a try. Now, nearly 30 years on, she is one of the country’s foremost practitioners and tutors. She teaches a growing number of students at Sands End Community Centre, in Fulham, and Central St Martin’s College of Art and Design, in Holborn.

Kathy began her own apprenticeship in this highly-specialised art form as a part-time student at the City Lit Institute, in Covent Garden. Her growing interest led her to apply for a full-time diploma at Swansea Institute, one of the UK’s leading centres for creative and architectural glass-making. There Kathy won a national award and achieved the highest marks in her year.

From there her interest took on a more international feel. She won a scholarship in 1990 to travel to the Czech Republic to research stained glass for the Glaziers Company. And



Pieces of stained glass assembled on the lightbox at the Sands End Centre. The work is by one of Kathy’s students Jo Lively, who took her inspiration from a medieval window in the Victoria & Albert Museum

Tutor Kathy Shaw pictured with student Mina Martinez during one of Kathy’s stained glass classes at the Sands End Centre

she began to draw on her mixed Maori and European background in an exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute, in Kensington. Kathy’s mother is Maori and the culture of New Zealand’s indigenous race is an important influence on her work. “I have dual citizenship and travel back and forth to New Zealand like a yo-yo,” says Kathy. “A lot of my work features that connection and I have

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done commissions over there as well.” Her projects in New Zealand have included an altar window for Whakapara Church.

One of the highlights of her work has undoubtedly been the inaugural window for the Human Genome Campus, in Hinxton, Cambridge. This five metre by five metre window, based on the tree of life, is one of her proudest achievements and biggest projects so far. Kathy says: “The Human

Genome Campus is set in beautiful parkland. If you look out from reception, part of the oak tree in my window superimposes itself onto the oak tree in the park. The oak tree in my window is the tree of life and has plants, animals and people coming out from it. I also used DNA spirals and genome sequences in the side panels.” The scale of the project and tight deadline meant Kathy had to enlist the technical support of a glass studio in Germany to help.

More recently her work has received international recognition in the prestigious annual New Glass Review publication of the Corning Glass Museum, in New York. Her latest project is a joint exhibition with Tim Cunliffe, also an accomplished stained glass artist and tutor at the Sands End Centre, in Fulham. Kathy and Tim’s work will be on show at the Cochrane Gallery, in Holborn, from the end of July and throughout August next year.

With the closure of several stained glass courses in London, including the City Lit course where Kathy got started and later taught, the Sands End course attracts students from across London.

Among the borough residents learning the craft is Mina Martinez, a retired BBC graphic designer from Hammersmith, who is now in her third term on the Sands End course. She has been designing and making stained glass windows for her home and is delighted with the results. “The one I am working on now is a lavatory window,” she says. “I have also made a half-moon window for my front door. I had some really boring glass in there before but it looks really good now.” Mina says there is far more to stained glass than church windows. “It is used an awful lot in modern architecture to give colour and light. It’s a skill that should not be lost.”

Adult education centres across the borough offer hundreds of part-time courses in art, craft and design as well as many other subjects. Pick up a course guide from your local library or adult education centre, visit www.courseinfo.co.uk or enrol by phone on 020 8600 9191.