

“It was never a direct decision,” Winship says of getting into the industry. “I was doing Saturday Market.” Winship began tinkering with glass in the late ’80s, and in the early ’90s he started procuring borosilicate glass for other artists.

“Jerry Garcia was still alive. The Dead were touring. So I was getting this glass for this particular glassblower and he was sending it off on the road to the Grateful Dead parking-lot scene,” he remembers. “That progressed on through the mid to late ’90s. In the late ’90s into the two thousands it just continued to grow.”

Harris and Mohtadi, both glassblowers, set up Jerome Baker Designs and began selling glass across the country.

“JBD was the biggest manufacturing company in the world,” says Joe O’Connell, owner and manager of Cornerstone Glass’ campus smoke shop on 13th. “They were killing it.”

“There was maybe five shops that were comparable to Jason’s that were pulling down millions of dollars and supporting 50 people or about. It was a large scene,” Snodgrass recalls. “Instead of going to a convention in Las Vegas to buy pipes, you’d run an ad in the paper that you were going to be in Eugene and that you were an interested buyer of glass pipes ... Head shop buyers would come to this town.” He pauses, “That went away.”

Shattered Glass

On the morning of February 24, 2003, a team comprised of the DEA, the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, U.S. Marshals, Secret Service and the Postal Service, under the guidance of then-Attorney General John Ashcroft, swept through smoke shops, distributors and manufacturing businesses across the country — 55 people were charged for violating federal drug paraphernalia laws, specifically U.S. Code Title 21 Section 863, which forbids selling, importing, exporting or using the mail system to transport drug paraphernalia — defined by the U.S. government as “products that are primarily intended or designed to be used in ingesting, inhaling or otherwise using controlled substances,” which includes everything from bongs and scales to small zipper storage bags.

Jerome Baker Designs was shut down and the merchandise confiscated. Higher Source, the smoke shop affiliated with JBD, was raided and closed, as well JBD’s distribution websites jeromebaker.com, ghettoweb.com and smokelab.com.

“It just ruined a lot of people,” Winship says. “One day you’re doing business and the next day there’s no revenue. No one is buying glass anymore. Everyone was shitting bricks. I laid everybody off.”

Jason Harris says he still hasn’t fully recovered from the bust.

“It was spooky, you know, getting arrested and having everything, my entire life, swooped out from under me,” Harris says over the phone. “One day I was paying taxes on 70 employees and the next day I was getting my door banged down and every single thing I had and material possession was destroyed, gone.”

He continues, “I was 20-something years old, I was doing millions of dollars a year. You go from that to dead stop and owing hundreds of thousands, then it flips the switch real fast. It’s not like a sob story — there’s tons of people who go out of business for many different reasons. Lesson learned and I try to keep moving forward.”

Harris now lives in Maui, where he makes art glass. Before relocating to Hawaii, Harris did leave Eugene with a lasting legacy: the glassblowing program at the UO. “While I was on probation, most of the entire time I was working at the University of Oregon,” he recalls. “I got hired to build their glassblowing program at the EMU Craft Center.”

From the Flames

“It dispersed everyone,” Winship says of the raid’s aftermath, but he adds, “Everyone runs for the hills. They wait a minute and now they’re all guerilla.”

When Operation Pipe Dreams hit Eugene, Cornerstone Glass was only in its fourth year of business as a pipe and glass distribution company.

“We were pretty low profile and underground. We weren’t like a big name company like we are now,” says Justin Sheppard, founder and owner of Cornerstone. “The

people who were buying glass from us were going to jail and the other people who were buying glass from us that didn’t go to jail were closing their doors and shutting down and not answering phones and just hiding out because they didn’t know what to do.

“So our business went from manufacturing and packing and shipping and selling thousands and thousands of dollars in glass pipes every week to zero. We had a lot of infrastructure set up and bills to pay.”

Joe O’Connell, manager of the Cornerstone Glass campus shop and Sheppard’s partner, remembers that time. “I had about \$36,000 worth of glass out to four or five distributors the day of Pipe Dreams. Everyone just shut and locked all their businesses,” he recalls. “It was really scary for a while. No one would buy glass.”

After the bust, Sheppard started roofing while making wine glasses and peddling them to local wineries. “There was a big adult toys rush,” O’Connell says. Several glassblowers started making glass dildos; some local manufacturers like Glass Prodigy still do.

Surprisingly, the local glass industry, depending on whom you ask, only took about a year to begin to recover.

“You’ve got 2,000 people who know how to blow glass,” Snodgrass says. “The lampworkers didn’t go anywhere.”

The lampworkers may not have left Eugene, but other glass communities were popping up around the country.

“There are definitely a lot more blowers and so many people have started back up again and there’s so many new artists, and not just in Eugene,” Sheppard says. “The glass community in Colorado has blown up. The glass community in Philadelphia has blown up. The glass community in Austin, Texas, has blown up. So what happened in Eugene in the early ’90s, now I’m seeing it in other cities.”

About 18 months after the bust, Cornerstone opened its campus in the Whiteaker, which has grown to include a retail store, a large studio where artists can rent space and a glassblowing school where Snodgrass occasionally teaches. Cornerstone is also in its sixth year of hosting the annual Degenerate Flame Off (see ArtsHound), a competition and festival that attracts top glassblowers from across the globe.

Several glass manufacturers and distributors now speckle the valley, such as Noble Glass, Sky Glass, Trident, Sweet Tooth Glass and Moon Stone Glass. In 2009, Winship’s Winship Designs merged with Colorado’s Glasscraft, becoming one of the largest glass suppliers in the West. Winship says that the current functional art glass economy in Eugene and Springfield is somewhere around \$20 million.

“The market is growing for all things weed,” Winship says. “It’s hard to say but there’s definitely tens of millions of dollars.”

Glass Houses

The federal drug paraphernalia laws that took down Jerome Baker Designs haven’t changed, yet the glass scene has managed to bounce back.

The industry takes precautions. Cornerstone Glass will not do any online sales (one of the actions that brought JBD to the attention of the DEA), and every smoke shop and functional glass artist *EW* spoke with stated that the products they sell and make are for tobacco use only, and then only to adults. Several business owners said that if a customer uses the word “bong” in their store, the customer will be asked to leave. Smoke shops like Hunky Dory and Midtown Direct have signs plastered everywhere stating “For Tobacco Use Only.”

“It’s illegal for me to sell you a bong,” says Marianne Slason, owner of the Santa Clara Smoke Shop. She points to a sticker notice on her counter that says the shop will refuse service to anyone who uses the terms bong, weed, pot pipe, cook spoon, straight shooter, crack pipe or tooter. Sheppard also points to politics.

“It starts with George Bush being the president at that time versus our president now,” he says sitting in his office in the Whit. “Right now, there’s a lot bigger fish to fry than someone making a pipe or a bong, especially with what’s going on in Colorado and Washington. They’re taking a big look at that and making sure that’s under control and in line.”

The shift has been palpable since the heady “War on Drugs” days of Ashcroft and Bush. Twenty states have

legalized medicinal use and Colorado and Washington legalized recreational use last year. In 2013, Attorney General Eric Holder announced that the Department of Justice will no longer challenge state marijuana laws. And we have a president who not only admits to trying pot, but inhaling. As of 2014, the Obama administration also allowed banks for the first time to provide financial services to state-licensed marijuana businesses.

Closer to home, the Oregon Cannabis Tax Act to legalize recreational marijuana of 2012 failed at the polls, with 47 percent voting in favor, though a statewide poll conducted in 2013 found that “57 percent of likely voters in Oregon support a proposal to tax, regulate and legalize marijuana for recreational use” in 2014. Pundits predict that Oregon will be the next to go full on recreational at the polls come November.

The Green Rush

Nick Brewer has worked at the Purple Haze smoke shop in Denver for two years. Before that, he worked at Midtown Direct smoke shop on 13th in Eugene, formerly the site of Higher Source, for nine. When asked if Colorado’s recreational legalization of marijuana has been a boon to his business, he laughs.

“There used to be just one person working in the store all the time, now we’re actually having to have two openers, two closers and a mid-shift,” he tells *EW* over the phone. “We opened a fourth store, which is like, not even enough.” He says their glass has been marked up 300 percent and “people don’t even bat an eye.”

The same could happen for Oregon, Brewer says. “The one thing I noticed living there the jobs were very sparse and few between, which is really sad,” he says. “It’s creating a whole new job market. I think it would help the economy.”

Others in Eugene aren’t so sure.

“The fact that Colorado was the first out of the gate with recreational gives them a little advantage,” Winship says. He also notes the “implications for our borders,” meaning widespread legalization could lead to cheap imports flooding the market.

“For the most part, the glassblowers in the U.S. have enjoyed a protected status. They have not had to compete with low-cost production in foreign countries. It’s been the perfect environment for art to flourish,” Winship adds, “These pipe makers are doing things that have really never been done in the 5,000-year history of glass. It’s not a renaissance, it’s brand new. It’s incredible.”

Sheppard of Cornerstone says that cheap imports have already made it past customs. “China and India and other countries are already illegally importing glass pipes into the country, so that’s what we’re competing with and we have for some time,” he says. “There are stores here in Eugene that carry import glass from China with drilled out holes they’re making in factories over there without ventilation, very unsanitary and unhealthy environments, and paying people in dirt basically.” Sheppard, along with O’Connell and others, say that L.A. is also rife with glass “sweatshops.”

Slason of Santa Clara Smoke Shop buys from more than 150 local glass artists — 95 percent of her glass products are made locally. “There’s more glassblowers per capita in Eugene than anywhere else,” she says. “Why not buy local?” She says she expects there will be a boom in glass sales with legalization, but she worries that dispensaries might corner the market.

“We’re not interested in competing with them,” says David Evans, owner of the Emerald City Medicinal dispensary on 6th. “We recognize that they’ve built up an area of strength as well as inventory.” Emerald City Medicinal does sell a small collection of local glass pipes, Evans says, but they are more utilitarian than the art pieces you see in shops around town.

Back in the bus, Snodgrass says he considers legalizing recreational marijuana as mostly a positive for the industry.

“It’s going to make it better. Maybe people will start coming back here instead of going to tradeshow all over the country. Maybe we’ll have our own tradeshow,” he says, purple John Lennonesque shades resting on his nose. “They’re going to say ‘That’s art.’ I always thought it was,” Snodgrass says, and returns to his torch. ■