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WVU student's passion for Blenko Glass unbreakable

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Imagine receiving \$2,500 to study and sightsee in Europe, but choosing instead to use the money right in your backyard.

That's what Hillary Homburg, a West Virginia University dental student, did with the stipend she received as a 2002 Foundation Scholar.

Winners of WVU's top academic award for high school seniors receive tuition and fees, books, room and board and other expenses for four years, plus qualify for a stipend of up to \$2,500 for academic enhancement opportunities. Most students use it to study and travel abroad.

But Homburg's passion – besides her studies – is trying to keep the kilns fired at the world renowned Blenko Glass Co.

"Watching glass made at Blenko is a delightful experience," she said. "If you haven't done so, I would suggest you go and spend an afternoon watching these amazing people spin hot, wet glass into beautiful bowls and other objects."

Homburg, a biology major as an undergrad, grew up in Charleston – just a 30-minute drive from Milton, home to the 112-year-old hand-blown glass manufacturer.

A lifelong glass enthusiast, her favorite childhood memories include making trips to Blenko Glass to gather scrap glass for her dad whose hobby was making stained glass.

So, when Homburg heard the manufacturer was making major cutbacks because of skyrocketing heating bills and could be forced to shut its doors, she knew she had to do something to preserve the company that meant so much to her family.

That something turned out to be The Blenko Project, a full-fledged campaign to get community and political support for the company.

"Benko has third-generation families working for the company because it treats the employees well," she said. "I think now it's time we step up – advertise Blenko as part of the state's tourism, put it on our state maps and assist Blenko in any way we can."

After enlisting some help, Homburg began a three-fold project. First, she conducted surveys in shopping malls in Boston, Charleston, Columbus, Huntington and Pittsburgh to see if people knew about Blenko Glass and purchased any of the company's products. (more)

The next step was to visit the factory to interview eight retired and eight current glass workers for a documentary about the company.

"This is a project that isn't finished," she said. "I hope to do more interviews during Christmas break. This will result in a video and also a photo journal of Blenko

collectors and their collections, which will be available for people to view."

The third phase of The Blenko Project is advocacy, and Homburg's message is already resonating across the state. At her request, Gov. Joe Manchin and his wife, Gayle, met with Blenko Glass CEO William Blenko Jr. in August.

"We asked Gov. Manchin to assist and help find ways the state could help Blenko in these times of increasing natural gas prices and a flood of cheap imported glass in our market," she said.

In the future, the WVU student expects other state dignitaries to become involved, and she is planning to ask college presidents to buy and display Blenko products in their homes and use the glass as awards.



Hillary Homburg, seen here with Gov. Joe Manchin and his wife, Gayle, is a West Virginia University dental student who started The Blenko Project, a campaign to preserve the Blenko Glass Co. in Milton. The 2002 Foundation Scholar used her stipend to fund the project instead of a summer trip to Europe.



Hillary Homburg

"Blenko can etch and engrave almost anything and the cost is remarkably inexpensive," Homburg said.

"We all love and appreciate the fact that the glass is made in West Virginia by West Virginia craftspeople," she added. "We will continue to make the public aware of the struggling glass manufacturing companies. West Virginia has seen more than 50 companies close in the two decades I have been alive. I want Blenko to survive."

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