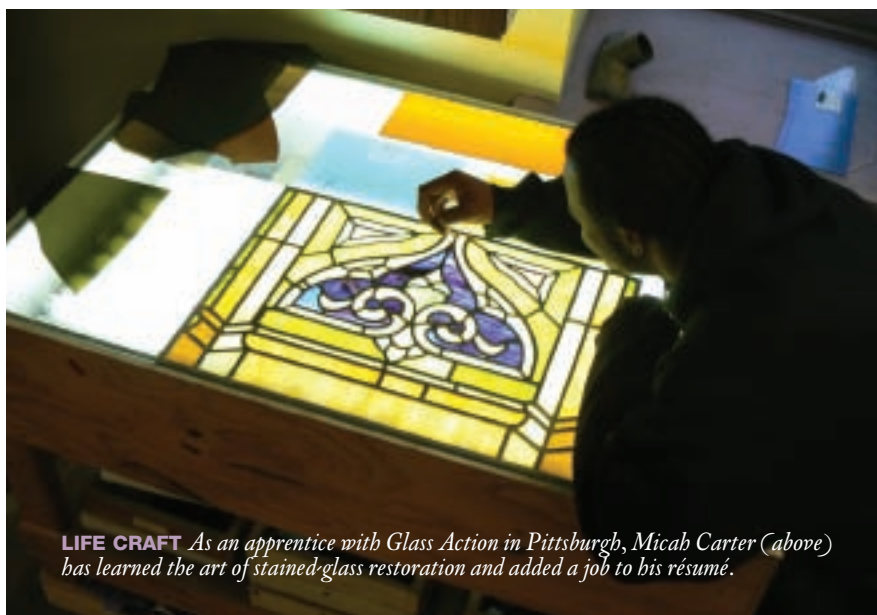


## Windows of Opportunity

*A Pittsburgh nonprofit gets into the stained-glass business to save historic buildings—  
and ends up changing lives.*

By ANNA DUBROVSKY



**LIFE CRAFT** *As an apprentice with Glass Action in Pittsburgh, Micah Carter (above) has learned the art of stained-glass restoration and added a job to his résumé.*

Micah Carter didn't wear a suit for his job interview at Pittsburgh's Union Project, a community center housed in a former church. He was sick of wearing a suit, sick of explaining his patchy work history to interviewers, and sick of hearing no. He wore jeans and ratty sneakers. He didn't

hide the tattoos adorning both arms, which include an angel on bended knee and smoking gun barrels.

"I have a criminal record, and it was just hard for me to find a job," says Carter, 26. "It was frustrating—real frustrating. I was getting angry about it. I was just like, 'Mom, I don't know what I'm going to do. This is going to make me go back to doing what I was doing that got me put in jail.' She said, 'Be patient, be patient.'"

It was his mom who told Carter about the job opening at the community center that's a short walk from their home. Carter had no experience relevant to the position—apprentice to a stained-glass artist. He got the job anyway.

He takes a break from restoring century-old windows to talk about that interview and other life-changing events. His arrest at 19 for selling drugs was one. "Time in jail turned me around," says Carter, who spent about two weeks behind bars. "I met guys who'd been in the business of breaking the law. They said this is not the business to be in. They were schooling me." Getting stabbed in the head while working as a jitney driver was another turning point. That's when he started donning the suit and looking for a safer line of work.

### NEW LIFE FOR AN OLD CHURCH

The Union Project job "saved my life," Carter says. He celebrated with a new

tattoo on his left arm. "Death B4 Dishonor," it reads. The tattoo represents his commitment to do right by his 2-year-old girl, to provide for her, and to teach by example. "It means I'd rather die than dishonor my daughter."

The Union Project, a 6-year-old nonprofit, is proving that an ancient art form has the power to uplift not only one man but an entire community. It borders East Liberty, a neighborhood Pittsburghers regard as blighted at worst and transitional at best. Light floods the community center from more than 100 stained-glass windows. It's taken several years to turn the windows from grimy to luminous. But it hasn't cost a penny.

In 2001, a group of young Mennonites bought the Gothic church building for what sounds like a steal: 15,000 square feet for \$125,000. Abandoned by a dwindling congregation in the 1990s, the former Union Baptist Church had succumbed to time and vandalism. Holes in the roof and cracks in the windows let in rain and snow. The plaster was crumbling, and the plumbing was shot. It had all the makings of a Halloween haunted house; yet its buyers saw a vibrant community and arts center.

A pair of loans from Mennonite Church USA and an anonymous individual covered the purchase price and left \$25,000 for fixes. They patched the roof. Then they turned their attention to the windows.

### HOW TO PAY? A BRILLIANT SOLUTION

Repair estimates ranged from \$600,000 to almost \$1 million. It was a tab the fledgling organization couldn't afford. At a community meeting, its founders floated a peculiar game plan: offer classes in



**APPRENTICE** with teacher Catherine Berard (left).

stained-glass restoration, charge people to take them, and use the building's windows as materials. Stained-glass artist Catherine Berard was in the audience.

People paid to restore the windows. In fact, so many people signed up that the Union Project held two eight-week courses simultaneously and started a waiting list. Classes were taught on-site.

"At the time, the building was very rough," Berard recalls. "There was very little light, no heat, a makeshift bathroom. But the people who took the classes—no body complained. We were in coats and gloves sometimes, because it got so cold."

Over three years, Berard taught her craft to more than 150 people. Most of the students were Pittsburghers, but some came from as far away as Seattle. She scheduled weekend workshops for out-of-towners. With each class, the number of

Today, the Union Project is a bustling gathering space. It hosts youth talent competitions, concerts, craft sales, farmers' markets, and writing workshops. Local clay artists fashion mugs and bowls in the basement ceramics studio while other area residents practice yoga in the atrium. The Union Project leases offices—all with stained-glass windows—to other nonprofits and small businesses. Its Great Hall and boardroom are rented for meetings, reunions, weddings, and other gatherings. Culinary arts students from a nearby high school help run a café and catering service.

Work on the windows continues. Union Project organizers hope to reinstall

*The Union Project is proving that an ancient art form has the power to uplift not only one man but an entire community.*

"I raised my hand when they said that was their vision," Berard says. "I said, 'If you think people will pay you to restore your windows, I'll teach the class.' I was very skeptical."

cracked and sooty windows shrank. The converted church grew brighter.

"I don't think there's anything like it," Berard says of the project. "They were geniuses to think it up."

the last panels later this year. And they plan to stay in the stained-glass business. Recently, the Union Project began offering restoration services to the public. Glass Action, as the enterprise is called, aims to

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preserve historic structures whose tenants can't afford market-rate restoration.

"There are so many churches in Pittsburgh and in Western Pennsylvania

whose windows are deteriorating, and often the congregations are small and can't afford that kind of money," says Justin Rothshank, associate director and cofounder of the Union Project. "The windows deteriorate, and this often leads to the church building deteriorating and the congregation moving."

### BRINGING JOBS TO THE COMMUNITY

Glass Action can offer cut-rate restoration services because it will put its clients to work. A church whose parishioners learn to dismantle and clean stained glass can slash its costs by about 30 percent, Rothshank says. Already, one church has signed on. Glass Action also has won contracts to restore about a dozen residential windows, and it has stained-glass making services, too.

Stained-glass windows are ubiquitous in parts of Pittsburgh thanks to its history as an industrial powerhouse. The region had more than 100 glass factories at the turn of the 20th century, making it the

*To learn more about the Union Project, visit [unionproject.org](http://unionproject.org).*

largest glass producer in the country. Riches were being made in steel, too. Lavish homes and cathedrals called for lavish windows, and Pittsburgh's tycoons commissioned stained-glass art from the likes of Louis Comfort Tiffany.

Most of the glass factories and steel mills have closed, but the windows remain. Many are long overdue for a makeover. There's plenty of work for Pittsburgh's glass artists and room for a new player, says Berard, who owns a stained-glass business.

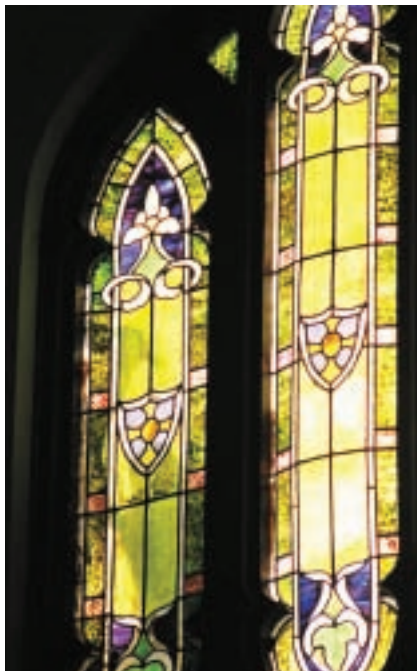
"Our program is designed to take on those windows that other studios don't take on," says Rothshank. "The contractors can pick the most interesting jobs and turn down ones where the windows aren't that interesting or the funding isn't there."

Demand is such that the Union Project plans to expand Glass Action, adding to its two-man team. Studio projects manager Michael Bellinger is looking for more apprentices like Micah Carter: hard workers who have a hard time finding work. The Union Project has received federal funding to create jobs for people with barriers to employment. Having transformed a building, the nonprofit is busying itself with transforming lives.

Playing a hand in transformation is the best part of his job, Carter says. He takes a filthy window—"like an unpolished diamond"—and turns it into a thing of beauty. He's proud of his work. "I had no interest in it at first," he says. "I was just trying to get a job. But now that I'm doing it, it's like, I actually know how to build a window."

Carter doesn't plan on a career in stained-glass restoration. He's taking business courses at a community college and plans to move to California in September. He dreams of becoming a lawyer and having more children. "When I'm fifty and my son breaks a window, I can build a new window or fix the window," he says. "It's knowledge that's going to stay with me the rest of my life." +

*Pittsburgh-based yoga teacher Anna Dubrovsky is a contributing editor of Yoga+.*



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