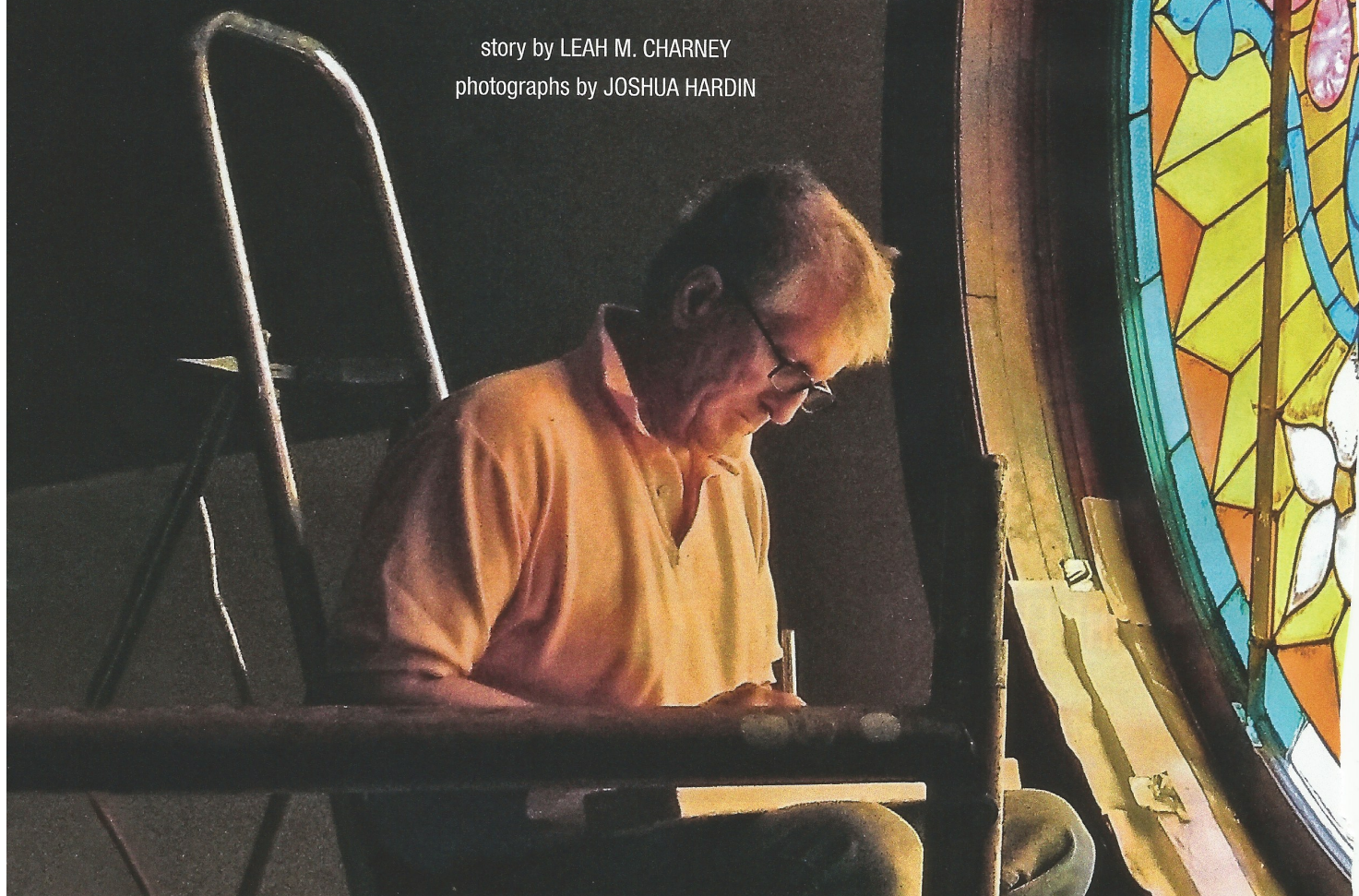


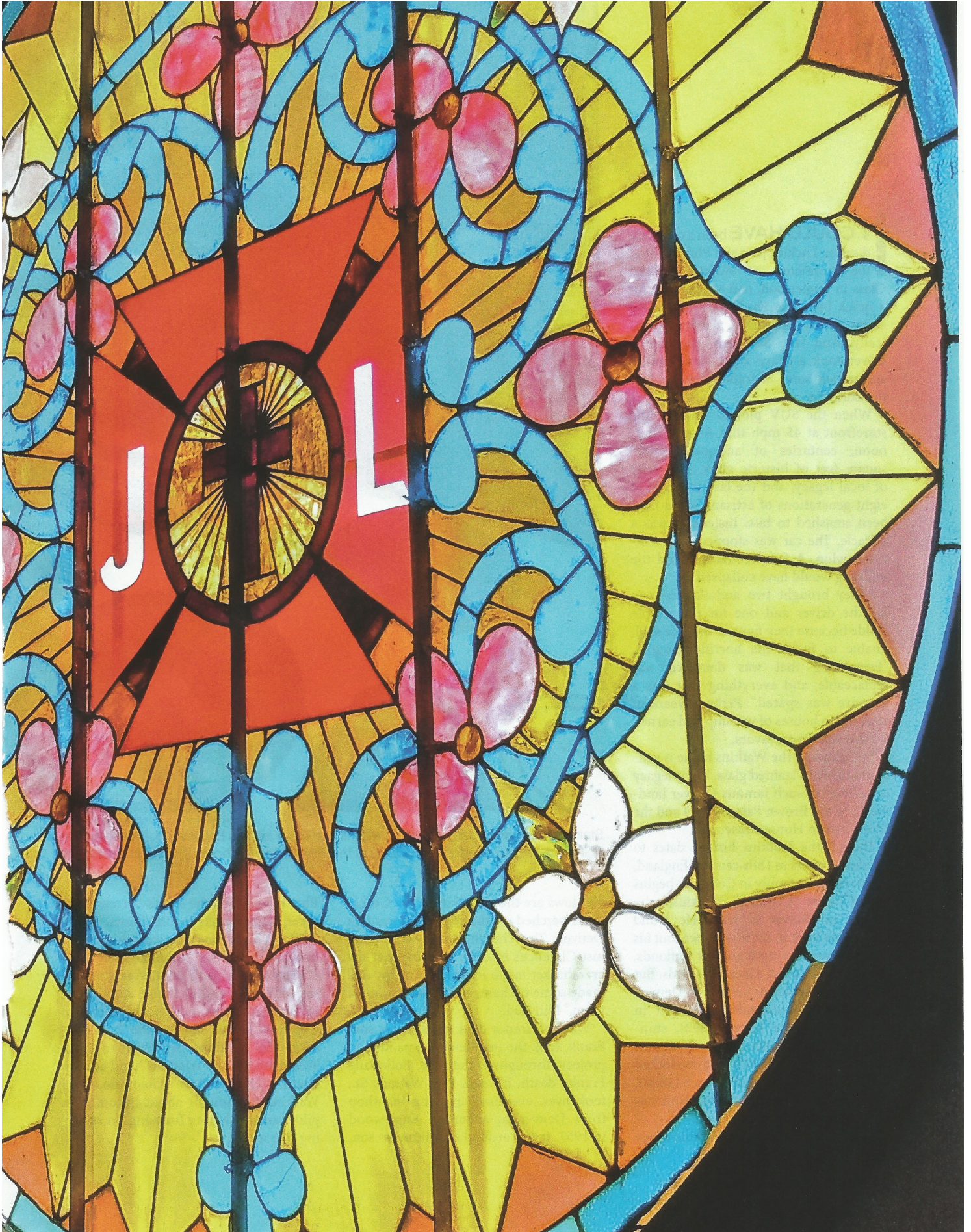
Denver's power couple of
**STAINED
GLASS**

Four generations of Colorado
windows are Watkins-made

story by LEAH M. CHARNEY

photographs by JOSHUA HARDIN





T COULD HAVE been a complete disaster. Luckily, Jane and Phil Watkins, the proprietors of Watkins Stained Glass in Englewood, had stepped out for a quick bite. The Ford Expedition sped along South Broadway, driving erratically. And fast. Suddenly, the elderly driver took a sharp right turn, cutting across two lanes of traffic, directly into the building.

When the SUV plowed through the storefront at 45 mph that August afternoon, centuries of antiques, 20,000 square feet of historic glass, 150 years of local legacy, and the last stewards of eight generations of artisans could have been smashed to bits. Instead, it was a miracle. The car was stopped by a concrete pylon. A few feet farther, and the building would have collapsed.

“They brought two ambulances: one for the driver and one for the people inside because they figured ...” Jane said, unable to finish the horrific thought. “Everything that was damaged was replaceable, and everything that was a treasure was spared.” Perhaps years of working in houses of worship had earned them a few divine favors.

In Colorado, the Watkins name is synonymous with stained glass. Their legacy is evident on such famous Denver landmarks as the Brown Palace Hotel and the Molly Brown House Museum.

Though the Watkins history dates to window-makers in 18th-century England, the story of the family in Colorado begins with Charles “Clarence” Watkins, who arrived in Denver in 1868. He found immediate work in the boomtown, but his first 20 years of output are lost to floods, fires, bulldozers and a lack of records. But plenty of his creations survive in Denver, including the breathtaking skylight in the Brown Palace Hotel (1892), stunners at mansions like the Molly Brown House Museum (1889), and bedecked Trinity United Methodist Church (1888). Over the years, his great-grandson has repaired or restored all of them.

The oldest documented Watkins-made



Previous page: Courtesy Watkins Stained Glass

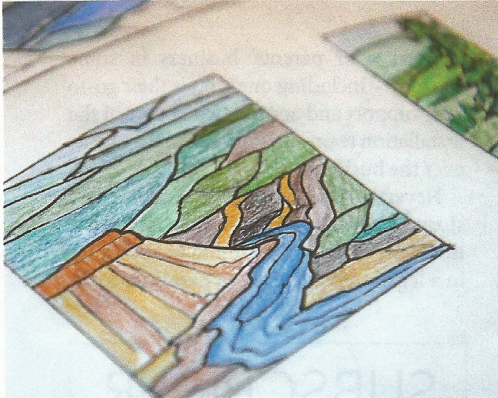
Stained-glass artists Jane and Phil Watkins work as a team in Englewood. Preceding page: Phil spent six years restoring windows at the First United Methodist Church in Cañon City.

windows are those at Trinity, the Gothic jewel perched on the edge of downtown Denver. The church holds more than just Clarence’s history: “I know that my grandfather made some of them, my dad made some of them, and I made some of them,” Phil said.

When Clarence died in 1910, his son, Frank, took the mantle and expanded to projects throughout the state. Following Frank’s death, his son, Phil Watkins Sr., took over, eventually moving the shop from Denver to suburban Englewood in 1957. It was around that time his son,

Phil Watkins Jr., the shop’s current caretaker, started sweeping the floors.

Though the line of succession seems obvious now, the Watkins men have accepted their craft only after attempting different paths. Frank spent time in several states before returning to Colorado at the start of the 20th century. Phil Watkins Sr. returned from World War II and tried his hand at crop dusting in Southern Colorado. Phil Watkins Jr. thought about becoming a pilot himself, before focusing on studying fine art.



The sketch on the left is destined for a Grand Junction project, and the columbine cartoon fulfilled a window in Vail. Right, Phil Watkins acquires glass from as far away as the United Kingdom.

THE PETITE WOMAN at his side is more than just an office manager or artist's wife. After meeting in a Colorado history class at University of Colorado Boulder, Phil and Jane have been married more than 45 years and raised three daughters together. Though she demures that she's "unskilled" labor compared with Phil, Jane holds her own.

In preservation circles, the joke is that Phil couldn't do what he does if Jane didn't do what she does. It's not really a joke.

"Phil was termed as 'technologically pure' in that he does not answer the phone, a door, answer an email, thinks computers are stupid and was brought kicking and screaming into the 20th century," Jane said, ribbing her sweet husband.

She's crammed her 5-foot-tall frame into claustrophobic spaces, hauled windows out of historic buildings, kept meticulous records of the projects they've worked on, and handled all client relations, correspondence and press requests. She's the reason Phil can focus on the art.

Together, they've had more than a few glass-related adventures.

Jane and Phil laugh and take turns telling a story about St. John's Cathedral, the seat of Colorado's Episcopal Diocese a few blocks east of the Colorado State Capitol. In 2007, Phil was hired to evaluate the clerestory windows, which sit above the aisle windows. (They are 30 feet off the floor and stretch about 70 feet high.)

"I was outside looking at it, and I put up my ladder and I crawled up about this far off the end." Phil gauges at least two feet with his hands. "My ladder didn't reach, and I thought I could come back down, but I couldn't." Her husband trapped like a cat in a tree, Jane sent for the sexton. His ladder wasn't high enough, either, but the intrepid sexton put the ladder in the bed of a truck to rescue poor stranded Phil.

In nearly 60 years of working glass – his first solo project was created and installed at age 12 – Phil discovered that some of his favorite assignments are creating windows for new churches. One of the most fulfilling in recent memory is a re-creation of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* for Granby's Our Lady of the Snow in Grand County.

The process of making a window is formidable enough: There's the initial design consultation, sketches, color selection, creation of a full-size cartoon, transfers to patterns, cutting glass, and any additional painting or firing. All that happens before the lead is soldered and stained-glass cement is rubbed between the glass and lead to make it waterproof and airtight. The complete window is then cleaned and, finally, installed. Re-creating a master's masterwork was a whole new challenge.

Joan Chandler has designed stained-glass windows with Phil for 30 years, including the grueling, yet gratifying *Last Supper* project. "*The Last Supper* window ... was truly a spiritual journey," Chandler said. "I believe it represents our

LEARN *from a* STAINED-GLASS *master*

Stained glass gave Phil and Jane Watkins lifelong careers, and they hope to find others to follow in their footsteps.

Artists interested in learning the medieval craft from master glassmaker Phil Watkins Jr. can apply to the Watkins Stained Glass internship program. Would-be interns should be meticulous, obsessing over details and quality. A passion for preservation and understanding of religious texts is also helpful, given that much of Watkin's work is done in places of worship.

Those with a fear of heights need not apply: Many installations and restoration projects involve tall buildings, scaffolding and working with heavy glass at great heights.

The Watkins family has enhanced Colorado's beauty one window at a time for 150 years. To keep the art from fading away, email the studio at watkinsstainedglass@gmail.com.

best work together, and personally is one of my most satisfying accomplishments.”

It took just under a year to complete the 15-panel, 10-by-20-foot creation, with its nearly life-size disciples. Their 16-inch kiln ran at 2,000 degrees for nine months straight. “Probably that would be his most daunting task,” said Jane. “How in the world do you make Leonardo’s *Last Supper*? But he did.”

MANY OF PHIL’S JOBS are fixing other people’s mistakes. Some of them are big mistakes. Panels in the glass globe atop the Capitol, which sits just above that famous gold leaf dome, for example. “The asbestos mitigation guys took the glass out with a crowbar and broke about four of them,” said Phil, one eyebrow raised.

The number of pieces statewide that Phil has either created or restored is staggering. He’s made windows for 400 churches alone – and estimates he’s made more than 10,000 windows and restored many thousands more. He’s the only man the federal government trusted to remake and move the windows from the



old Veterans Administration hospital in Denver to the new campus at Fitzsimmons in Aurora; they practically sent a convoy to convince him to take the job after he twice refused. Though these projects account for only part of the business, Phil is well-known for his restoration skills.

He hopes to pass the knowledge on. They have partnered with Spectrum General Contractors to offer internships for stained glass preservationists and custom creators. Though their daughters

support their parents’ business in some capacity – including one who is their go-to tech support and another who’s part of the installation team – neither has plans to take over the business.

Nevertheless, the Watkins Stained Glass story continues by reviving the craft for a new generation. It’s a shining next chapter in a legacy already eight generations long.

SUBSCRIBER EXCLUSIVE

BEHIND-THE-SCENES *Tour*

In a special arrangement, the Watkins family will open their Englewood studio for two *Colorado Life* subscriber tours on Friday, March 15: 1-3 p.m. and 3-5 p.m. The tour is free, but space is limited to 10 people per tour. Reserve your spot by calling *CL* offices at 1-970-480-0148 or by emailing cthompson@coloradolifemag.com

Phil Watkins’ grandfather Frank continued the family stained-glass tradition. One of Phil’s projects was this reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* at Our Lady of the Snow Catholic Church in Granby. Right, the glass skylight in Denver’s famous Brown Palace Hotel was created by Clarence Watkins in 1892 and restored by his great-grandson Phil in 1985.

Below: Courtesy Watkins Stained Glass





Where to find WATKINS WINDOWS

Finding a Watkins-made window in Colorado is relatively easy:

The former residence of the “Unsinkable” herself, Denver’s Molly Brown House Museum underwent a \$1.3 million restoration over the past two years, including the stunning Victorian-era windows. Winter museum hours are 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; noon-4:30 p.m. Sundays. For more on the venerable Margaret Tobin Brown, see *CL* March/April 2018, “Margaret Brown in life and legend.”

Those climbing the stairs at the Boulder County Combined Courts Building in Longmont are often trudging up to do unfortunate business with traffic or divorce court. Luckily, they’re greeted by a cheerful, multicolor, mid-century modern gem to absolve some of the drudgery. The building is open during standard business hours.

At Trinity United Methodist Church in Denver, four generations have made their mark on the windows at this grand dame, which sits on the northeast corner of Broadway and 18th Avenue, kitty-corner from the Brown Palace. Self-guided tours are welcomed 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 8:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Friday; docent-led tours are offered on Sundays at noon.

Littleton High School, just a few miles south from the Watkins Stained Glass studio, is home to a regal-looking lion, surrounded in royal purple (one of the school’s colors). This gift from the Class of 2004 is most easily viewed during a public performance by one of the bands, choirs or theatrical group.

The Fairmount Mausoleum at Fairmount Cemetery, on the border between Denver and Aurora, boasts one of Denver’s largest collections of stained glass. The mausoleum is open 9 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays and 9 a.m.-2 p.m. on weekends.

Mountain churches also offer a variety of windows to watch. The site of *The Last Supper* window is Our Lady Of The Snow Catholic Church in Granby. Every window at Lake City Community Church in Hinsdale County features Watkins-made stained glass. One at Breckenridge’s Father Dyer United Methodist Church features an image of namesake John Lewis Dyer cross-country skiing.

Another homage to Colorado history is on display at the Buffalo Bill Museum And Grave on Lookout Mountain in Golden. The glass visage of William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody overlooks the bison herd of Genesee Park, preserved through conservation efforts. 🐾