



## ART CHANGES EVERYTHING

BY ANN TRONDLE-PRICE

GLENN OLCERST BELIEVES ART CAN CHANGE LIVES. In fact, he believes it can transform entire communities. Having directly experienced the healing power of art in his own life as he deals with pancreatic tumors, he is now taking it to the streets—literally—in his Mexican War Streets neighborhood. Last summer, on the side of his restored 150-year-old brick row house at Resaca Place and Eloise Street, Olcerst unveiled a 3' x 7' exterior mural he composed of more than 2,150 painstakingly cut pieces of granite and porcelain, some less than 1/16" wide. "The image is of columns and balustrades. I titled it *First Historic District* because this was architecture preserved from antiquity that has been celebrated over the ages." This stunning piece—joined by an interactive poetry display in front of his home and an *Art in the Alley* photography banner at the rear—makes a simple statement: art changes everything. "I'm looking to inspire other artists, musicians, poets and writers all over this neighborhood—world-class talents. Displaying their art publicly for visitors and neighbors to enjoy will be transformative.

A labor lawyer by trade at the firm of Marcus & Shapira, Olcerst's first exposure to the personally transformative power of art

was teaching himself woodworking decades ago when he first moved to the Mexican War Streets. "Then I got married and my wife challenged me to brighten up our home, so I learned how to make stained and beveled glass windows." His next passion became stonework, again self-taught. Today, in every room of his home, his meticulous designs in stone come to brilliant life in the form of breathtaking mantels, tabletops, backsplashes, even a shower stall featuring a granite mosaic inspired by a Japanese quilt. HGTV produced two shows on his stonework. "I am an obsessive perfectionist," he admits. "I cut patterns in contiguous pieces of stone so the grain inherent in the stone remains uninterrupted. If one piece breaks, I'll redo the whole thing." Perhaps it's the lawyer in him. Details... fine print... to his eye, it's all important and utterly essential.

These days, it's his photography that most energizes Olcerst. His work is part of PNC bank's preexisting permanent Corporate Collection, and has been reselected for the new skyscraper. The photos he took across Italy can also be seen at the flagship Brio! restaurants on the East Coast. "But I'm now doing something with my photography that is truly different," he says with unbr-



Opposite: Chihuly at Phipps. Top: First Historic District.

Above: Bear Stampede-Vancouver.

Right: Glenn Olcerst in front of Naples Reflection.

dled excitement. "I am bending images with flexible mirrors and using a state-of-the-art process where the metal is lightly brushed, inkjet printed and heat sealed. The resulting image can be seen through the sheer high gloss coating, creating an almost 3D look. This in-depth finish bounces light off the image and enhances the colors in unusual ways." The effect is head-turning, as are the digital photos hanging throughout his home that everyone thinks are paintings. "When people say, 'Wow, what is that?' it's my highest compliment."

Perfecting and pioneering new techniques in both film and digital photography are as invigorating to Olcerst as shooting the subjects themselves. Olcerst is also known for another photographic process, an "ultra high-contrast" black-and-white technique he perfected. "I use rare slow-speed film that's no longer available. I push the film in the camera, then the film is developed in special chemicals that develop the images in 8 to 12 minutes, not the usual 8 to 10 seconds," he explains. At every step, something is tweaked to create a high-contrast image similar to a

drawing that is unique to his work. "I look for a new challenge in every art project so I can figure out how to teach myself something new."

Today, Olcerst is happiest when he is fine-tuning his photos, but he is always attuned to the bigger picture: How can art change things for the better? With his wife, Barbara Talerico, Olcerst is focused on the continuing renewal of Pittsburgh's North Side. He points to the Allegheny City Central Community Master Plan that strongly confirms the power of public art on streetscapes to attract residents and businesses, and to enhance safety and community involvement. He also applauds City of Asylum/Pittsburgh, a local haven for international refugee artists, for working to integrate public art into places where people live and work. Ideas for future projects include installing photographs of local exiled writers around the neighborhood, or taking pictures of the homeless to simply show the world that "They're here. They exist." For Olcerst, art with a social purpose adds a new dimension. He hopes his neighborhood will join him on the journey.

Visit [glennolcerst.com](http://glennolcerst.com) to view more of Glenn's work.

