

Whitehouse company preserves childhood in glass ornaments

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After Esther Nixon was born in 2004, her parents wanted to freeze time.

"Man, they grow up fast!," her mother, Rachel, marvels.

Mrs. Nixon and her husband, Daniel, found a way to do it, and for the past five years they've been sharing their idea with parents across the United States and beyond, as far away as Germany, Lithuania, and the United Kingdom.

Their Whitehouse company, Pinkies & Piggies, produces 3-D glass keepsakes that preserve the fine lines and gentle curves of a tiny hand or foot, capturing a moment in time that will refresh memories even when those baby hands are holding a high school diploma and the feet are wearing men's size 10s.

And while photos and videos are nice reminders of childhood too, "this is touchable," notes Heather Bellian of Maumee, who has a glass model of her son Drew's foot, made when he was about a month old. He's now 21 months' old.

"The first thing I saw when I delivered him was his toes," Mrs. Bellian says. "He has the most adorable feet, so we just had to try to capture that."



Rachel Nixon displays some of the 3-D glass keepsakes she and husband Daniel produce.

The process starts with a kit that is sold at several online sites including the company's pinkiesandpiggies.com, in retail stores, and places like arts and crafts fairs. The kit contains a circular tray of modeling compound, five inches in diameter, into which parents press their child's hand or foot flat to make an impression.

"It's pretty fool-proof," Mrs. Nixon says. If you don't get a good impression the first time — or the first many times — just roll the modeling compound into a ball, flatten it out, and try again, she adds. "I tell people: 'Don't overthink it.'"

The customer then packs up the tray and mails it to Whitehouse Glass, the name of Mrs. Nixon's home studio, where she uses it to make a glass replica of the palm and fingers, or sole and toes. They come in clear, pink, or blue, and can be etched on the

back, usually with the child's name and birth date or the date the impression was created. The piece can be made with a hole for hanging.

"This has really taken off more than we ever would have thought," she says. "I want to be a mommy at home right now, and it allows me to stay at home and be with the kids." In addition to Esther, now 6, they have a son, Abraham, 4.

The Nixons made their first pinkies and piggies in bright green glass for Christmas, 2004.



The Pinkies & Piggies kit contains a tray of modeling clay into which the child's hand or foot is pressed. The tray is mailed to the Whitehouse company, which uses it to create the glass memento.

"We had been given two old kilns, and my husband and I wanted to play with glass," Mrs. Nixon begins. What could be done with those kilns, they asked themselves.

At the same time they were looking for a unique Christmas gift for family members. What could it be?

Esther, then about 6 months' old, provided the answers and inspiration.

"I had this idea and I ran it past Dan ... I said we should capture her hands and feet in glass. It took many, many tries."

They figured it out and gave the pieces as gifts that year.

"The reaction was just huge," Mrs. Nixon says. They began thinking: "Maybe we have a product here."

They did indeed.

The price of their kit is \$69.99; duplicates made from the same impression are \$40 apiece. The company currently offers free shipping and handling for online purchases. The buyer pays to ship the kit back to the studio, approximately \$4 via U.S. Postal Service, Mrs. Nixon says. In three to four weeks, the customer receives the finished piece.

Who's buying them?

"A lot are baby shower gifts," she says. "And a lot [of buyers], when I go to an art festival, are grandparents. They tend to see the sentimental value and appreciate how fast time passes."

There's usually a flurry of word-of-mouth business that follows sales in a new area, she says. And because customers often reorder for gift-giving, she keeps impressions for a year.

Mrs. Bellian, the Maumee mom, received her kit as a shower gift from co-workers who bought it at the Birds & the Bees shop in Maumee.

"I had never even heard of it. I didn't know anything about it," recalls Mrs. Bellian, who ordered multiples of her son's foot keepsake for herself, her husband, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. In April, she bought kits for her sister's twins.

Marilyn Joyner, of Monclova, says they have become her standard baby shower gift. "They're just so adorable. ... They're just a wonderful keepsake, and you forget what those little hands look like, and those little toes."

The kit can be used for children up to 4-5 years old. Some customers take it to the hospital to use right after their baby is born, as the Nixons did with their son. Some make annual impressions to record the growth of their children, as the Nixons also do with their children.

But some won't get that chance.

A small, sad portion of the business comes from parents who have lost their children. People have called from hospitals and funeral homes, she says, and in those cases the keepsake is made for free.

"We had one mother who said she felt as though she could still hold the baby's hand," Mrs. Nixon says. As a parent, she finds those painful to create, "but at the same time those are the most meaningful, because they don't have much left."

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