



Gogo Jewelry



Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods





BY ALISON MILLER

# MEET THE MAKERS

**“CREATIVITY TAKES COURAGE,”**

*Matisse said. It also takes grit—particularly if you want to make a living at it. These Georgia creatives arrived at success via persistence and a tenacious belief in themselves and their craft.*



A Few Wood Men

**THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES REPRESENT** a combined \$29.2 billion in revenue in Georgia, according to the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, encompassing not only visual and performing arts, but also advertising, architecture, design, software, video games, publishing, and of course, music, TV, radio, and film.

All told, it represents 4.2 percent of the state’s total gross state product. But does that translate into opportunity? Can you really make a living producing art? And how does an artist monetize their work without compromising their vision and craft?

While there’s no magic potion for turning a dream into a reality (much less a reality that pays the bills), there are some words of wisdom worth heeding from those who’ve paved the way.



BLUE RIDGE

# BET ON YOURSELF

BILL & SHANNEN OYSTER  
*Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods*



Entry-level Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods start at \$2,950 and take about 40 hours to complete.

It's not unusual for a heavily engraved rod to take 150 hours and sell for \$15,000 to \$20,000. Some Oyster rods have sold for well over \$30,000.

The waiting list for rods ranges from three to nine months.

The Oysters employ six full-time and three part-time staff.

Bill Oyster and his team teach 230 people per year how to craft bamboo fly rods. The classes fill up 18 to 24 months in advance.

Bill and Shannen Oyster

**BILL AND SHANNEN OYSTER WERE WELL-PREPARED** for an economic crisis when Covid-19 struck in March 2020. Twelve years earlier they sat across from an attorney, ready to sign a loan on a workshop and guesthouse for their handcrafted bamboo fly rod business. And then Lehman Brothers fell. “Are you sure you want to do this?” the attorney asked.

“Go big or go home,” Bill said, before he and Shannen—husband and wife and 50-50 owners of Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods—signed the agreement.

The Oysters laugh about that moment today, but serious financial difficulty ensued. They responded by doubling down on themselves—and working even harder.

Bill, an avid fly fisherman who grew up in Wyoming and graduated from the University of Georgia, began crafting bamboo rods in 1994 using a technique popularized in the northeastern United States in the 1840s. He was already traveling the country to teach tying and casting at fly fishing shows. Eventually he brought along his rods.

Anglers took note of his craftsmanship, and in 2000, an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* story introduced a wide audience to his wares. “I woke up Sunday morning to a whole bunch of messages on the answering machine,” Bill says. “It

PREVIOUS: BLACK ART IN AMERICA, A FEW WOOD MEN, OYSTER BAMBOO FLY RODS; KAYLINN GILSTRAP; GOGO JEWELRY; ELIZABETH CECIL

was all these people wanting to buy rods from me.” There’s been a waiting list for Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods ever since.

Bill treasured the art but was far from making a living from it. Shannen understood that for the business to flourish and sustain their growing family, they needed to diversify and expand their reach. So Bill started custom-engraving the reel hardware. Then he led rod-making workshops. When e-commerce emerged, the Oysters were quick to adopt it.

Bill quit his day job in 1998. Shannen worked double duty selling real estate and managing the company’s finances and marketing until 2006, when she joined full-time and they lived on what they made from the rods, “which was nothing at that point,” Shannen says. That vulnerability compels most people to quit, but the Oysters pushed on.

The fishing industry demanded inexpensive products made quickly from manmade materials, but the Oysters never veered from their labor-intensive, high-end rods. “We’ve always bet on ourselves,” Shannen says. “But you have got to expect to grind it out and fail constantly. And you’ve got to leave those failures behind fast.”

Bill still obsesses over the craft. Shannen still obsesses over the numbers. The Oysters took a hit on the building they financed in 2008 but stayed afloat, and in 2011, built Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods’ current home: a 6,000-square-foot store and workshop topped by two floors of guest rooms in downtown Blue Ridge, Bill’s favorite place to fish.

They receive a lot of calls from craftspeople asking for business advice. Their response is always the same: “Make it your only source of income,” Shannen says. “If you’re serious about doing it, you can’t be afraid to invest in yourself.”

Clockwise from top left: Bill Oyster at work hand-planing a rod section; a hand-engraved reel seat; Bill binding the rod sections; an Oyster Master Series rod in a custom carrying case; Bill flaming bamboo cane to curate its color

