

A hand holding a piece of green glass against a bright blue sky with sun rays and trees. The sun is high in the sky, creating a lens flare effect. The background shows a clear blue sky with some light clouds and the silhouettes of trees and a hillside in the distance. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.

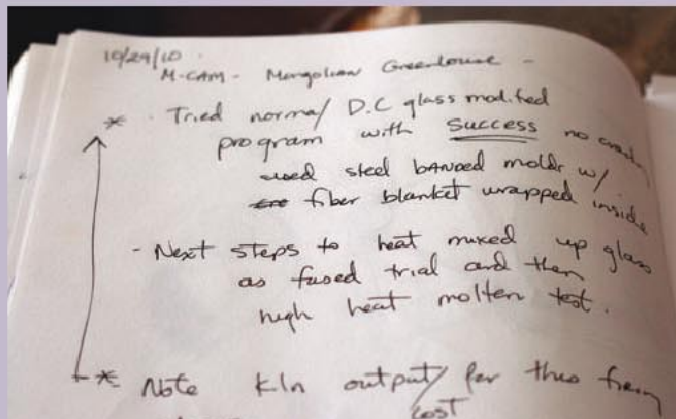
the great mongolian greenhouse experiment

STORY by JENNIE TAL WILLIAMS
PHOTOGRAPHY by HAYLEY OSBORNE



Glass from old Mongolian vodka bottles.

It has a way of bringing people together.





Mongolia is halfway across the world. But that isn't stopping a Charlottesville intellectual property firm and an Afion-based artist from helping the very large, but sparsely populated, country that lies between Russia and China. The country has very little arable land, and after an unusually cold streak last winter, many Mongolians were left with little to eat.

That's where Ken Dabkowski of Charlottesville's M-CAM, Nelson County glass artist Bill Hess, and the vodka bottles come in.

That's right, vodka.

Apparently, Ken explained, when Mongolia was under Russian influence, they acquired a fairly large number of now-empty vodka bottles.

He thought that it would be completely possible – and highly interesting – to use this glass to build what many Mongolians are already looking for – a way to grow vegetables.

Ken works with M-CAM and a program called the Global Innovations Commons to help spread ideas to people who really need them – like the greenhouses they plan to construct in the Gobi



Desert and the Arkhangai regions of Mongolia.

But before he could start construction on those greenhouses, he needed help from someone who knew a thing or two about glass.

And that's where local artist Bill Hess and his kiln enter the scene.

Bill was on board right away and started thinking of ways to turn shards of glass bottles into thick, glass panels that could both let in enough sun to nurture plants and withstand the harsh weather of Mongolia.

So Bill invited Ken and some other people working to make this project a reality to his studio to test some real Mongolian glass.

"We did this testing and I'm just like, 'Oh my gosh, here we are melting Mongolian glass in Nelson County,'" said Bill who said that this project is not easy, but is definitely worth it.

"It's really quite an adventure," he said. "We feel like it's a fun way to help the planet, people and also be technically challenged."

The team is hoping to begin construction next spring once Mongolia thaws out from its winter. **NCL**

