



# Art lover

*Leslie Jackson Chihuly fell in love with the art—then with the artist. That's when the fun began.*

Written by Stephanie Fillion

PHOTO BY SCOTT MITCHELL LEEN

When

Leslie Jackson Chihuly met her husband, Dale Chihuly, she was a student in Russian studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. Dale, a famous glass sculptor from Tacoma, Washington, known for incorporating his glass sculpture art into a variety of indoor and outdoor environments, was preparing for an exhibition in Venice, Italy, called "Chihuly Over Venice". At the time, Chihuly was already an experienced volunteer and had also done some documentary work.

"I was so compelled by his vision and what he wanted to do that I just jumped in and said, 'Well, I want to help you with that,'" she remembers, smiling.

The show was the first one the two of them worked on together, and out of it came a PBS documentary and a show that is still, to this day, Chihuly's favorite work. In this 1995 special exhibition, Dale traveled with his team of glassblowers to four countries (Ireland, Mexico, Finland, and Italy) to work alongside local artists, creating unique pieces of glass that were hung in large-scale, colorful compositions installed all over the floating city and its romantic canals.

This unique relationship, which resulted in the couple's marriage in 2005, has evolved into a multimillion-dollar arts organization committed to creating arts experiences and to ensuring arts access to everyone. Chihuly now leads their family business, Chihuly Inc., and its philanthropic branch, the Dale and Leslie Chihuly Foundation. Work, art, and philanthropy are all intertwined in the couple's lives.

## Giving back

Chihuly's vision as a philanthropist goes back to her mother, a native of Oklahoma City as well as an educator and a volunteer; Chihuly was brought up giving back to others.

"When I think of philanthropy, I go back to my mother, Jo Morgan Jackson, who was just always involved in organizations and I think taught me a value system from a very young age that had to do with giving back," Chihuly says.

The arts, especially music, have always been important in her life—she started playing the piano and the flute when she was five years old, and she believes in the power of music and the other arts to heal and help others.

"I think for me," she says thoughtfully, "being involved in music and playing and practicing music gave me a lot of peace. It gave me a place to go. No matter what I was feeling, I could go to my music, and it would always elevate me and take me to a different place. I felt from a young age that literature, art, and music are all there to help us sort of understand human nature better and help take us to another place and give us some perspective."

When Chihuly met her husband in the 1990s, she found not only love but also a partner sharing her vision of working to help others.

"From the minute I met Dale, I thought he was one of the most empathetic and generous people whom



Chihuly, Dale Chihuly, Team Chihuly, and Hilltop Artists

I've ever met," she says.

Very quickly, business and philanthropy became central to the couple's relationship. In the 1990s, Chihuly started as project director on the Venice project and worked her way up to lead Chihuly Inc. in 2015. Throughout the years, she has built a management structure for Dale's studio, worked with her team to commission special projects, and represented the organization globally through events and speaking engagements.

When they met, Dale had already created a program for giving back to the elderly through the arts, called Seniors Making Art. As a couple, they have launched an unrestricted grant program, called the Arts Innovator Award through Artist Trust, which provides two \$25,000 grants annually to talented artists to help nurture their creativity.

The couple also launched the Dale and Leslie Chihuly Foundation in 2009 to fund public education for all forms of the arts, which is one field that influences the couple's approach to giving back. The founda-

tion currently funds seven projects, all related to art and music, and regularly makes contributions to the University of Washington's School of Art + Art History + Design lecture series, the Pratt Fine Arts Center, and the Aspen Institute.

"I think it really came out of something much deeper, in the sense that my love of music and art informs all of the philanthropy that I do with my husband," Chihuly says, "and that we do through the studio, which tends to focus on arts and arts education, and certainly doing work around mental health."

### The sound of philanthropy

Chihuly's relationship with art has been highly influenced by her early passion for music. She has served on the board of the Seattle Symphony for 15 years, including nine as its chair.

"In my thirties and forties, I started to get involved with nonprofit boards and I learned a lot about how those boards work to support a mission," she explains. "The first board that I joined was called Chamber Music Northwest and that was my entry into ultimately working with the Seattle Symphony, which has been a real focus of my own personal philanthropy and volunteer time for 20-plus years now."

In July 2022, Chihuly organized a music festival in the Sun Valley of Southern Idaho, called Warm Spring Productions.



Far Left: *Wallas Wallas* by Dale Chihuly in Venice, Italy

Left: *Rio delle Torreselle Chandelier* by Dale Chihuly

"It has to do with my love of music and hospitality and events of nature," she says. "And it's focused in the Wood River Valley and Sun Valley, Idaho, where I spend time each year usually in the winters."

While no money was given to organizations this time around, the goal is to establish a philanthropic event in the region.

"As a start-up with significant start-up costs, we were not able to donate to nonprofits the first time out," Chihuly explains. "We hope to be able to do that once we are more established."

Somehow, Chihuly has managed to dedicate much of her time to her various passions on top of running Chihuly Inc. For her, there is one secret to being able to juggle everything.

"It really all comes down to teams," she says with an easy smile. "I can feel very comfortable that on a day-to-day basis at the studio, we just have the best of people working on commission projects, working on gallery shows and museum exhibitions, working on publishing, and so forth. We just have a very mature and powerful team. So I would say that's how I do it: I do it by having a good team and getting good support."

With so much professional and philanthropic work already started, Chihuly's simple hope for the future is to see the people and artists the couple

has supported continue to flourish.

"I look out into the future, and I look at the seeds we planted, that Dale and I planted together, the things that we both care so deeply about," she says. "I think the goal in the philanthropy we've done is not only to give to the organizations and artists and causes that we care for but also to set an example for others that this is a way to live."

But there is also a clear path to continue the Chihulys' work. The couple's son, Jackson, is still in the early stages of his career, but Chihuly hopes that he will build on his parents' legacy.

"We surely hope that our example of philanthropy and volunteerism carries over to him," she says. "In time, he will learn more about our foundation, and I am sure he will participate in some way."

With that in mind, Chihuly continues her work trying to make the world a bit better each day. **LM**