



by Megy Karydes

FAIR TRADE

HELPING WOMEN AROUND THE WORLD

The holiday season may have just ended, but Kelly Weinberger is already planning this year's holiday season collection of women's jewelry and accessories for WorldFinds and working with female artisans from Nepal, India and Indonesia.

Kelly and her husband David were 30 when they decided to quit their jobs and travel the world for a year. Their friends thought they had wanderlust. Their families thought they were crazy. What they didn't realize was how transforming the trip would be. "The time was right for us to get away and see what the world had to offer," Kelly says. "What we found were these amazing people, and we learned more about their culture. We also found devastating poverty and a real need for work in some of these countries."

So, with a vision and a desire to make a difference in the lives of women around the world, Kelly and David launched WorldFinds while in Kathmandu, Nepal. "We were traveling and realized that we wanted to help the artisans we met during our trip by selling their handmade items to retailers in the United States," Kelly says. "We decided not to wait until we returned from our travels, so David and I went to a nearby cyber café in Kathmandu, registered our domain name and built our first site in that very café. We went from an idea to a web site in a week."

That was November 1999. Today, Kelly and David have almost 500 retailers as loyal customers. And they make regular trips to Nepal, India and Indonesia to work with their artisan partners.

Stories like this may sound unorthodox to many business schools teaching entrepreneurship, for example, since they teach students and budding entrepreneurs to do their research, see if there is a demand for the product or service and then draft a business plan. But stories like

this are actually commonplace among those within the fair trade movement. And what a movement it is! "Membership has increased by more than 20 percent in the past year alone," says Carmen Iezzi, executive director of the Fair Trade Federation. And it's growing.

By definition, fair trade is a system that not only aims to pay fair wages, but also ensures environmental sustainability, supplies financial and technical assistance to artisans in Third World countries, respects cultural identity, offers public accountability and educates consumers about the choices they can make in their regular shopping habits. Its origins are within the coffee trade, but since then it has included gifts, home accessories and, most recently, fair trade wine.

Since women make up the majority of those who live in poverty, it is no surprise that women are a strong force in the fair trade movement. "Approximately 70 percent of fair trade production is done by women, usually mothers who are also able to take care of their homes and families while working," says Carmen.

Kate Robertson began Mayu after a two-year stint in the Peace Corps. She immediately realized how important fair trade could be for artisans in Third World countries when she began working with women artisans in the Andes Mountains of Peru.

"Knitting for Mayu allows women to have stable incomes," says Kate. "Many of them are widowed or separated from their husbands and have children to support. Most of the income they make is used to cover costs such as food, rent, healthcare and electricity. Now, however, they usually have enough money to pay for school supplies, clothing, higher education and trips to the city.

"Our goal is to provide employment to women in the rural community," Kate continues. "We capitalize on their

natural knitting skills and compensate them according to fair trade standards." The business has become sustainable since Kate left Peru, and the women can successfully implement the processes and use the business systems that they created together.

Fair trade also means dignity and hope to artisans. Sometimes, you don't have to look across the border to find groups making a difference.

WomanCraft hires women artisans from Deborah's Place, a nonprofit organization that is breaking the cycle of homelessness for women in Chicago. The women are employed as artisans making handmade, recycled paper and unique jewelry items. "Our social mission is achieved by operating a business," says Nancy Phillips, general manager of WomanCraft. "All proceeds help women work to create new beginnings." In addition to making 100 percent recycled stationery, the organization specializes in wedding invitations, which comprise more than half the sales.

So why are Americans finally seeking out fair trade products? One of the reasons is that we are finally learning what fair trade means. "Choosing fair trade not only enables producers to legitimately earn their way out of poverty (instead of being dependent on charity), but it also allows them to send children to school, it empowers women, preserves culture, and a host of other benefits," says Carmen.

"Fair trade is a holistic process—one that not only provides fair wages in a local context, but also supports participation in the workplace, seeks to ensure environmental sustainability, respects cultural identity, supplies financial and technical assistance, educates consumers and offers public accountability," Carmen adds. "I think the message does and will

continue to resonate with American consumers."

Nancy Jones, executive director of Chicago Fair Trade, agrees. "Fair trade products are finally making their way into mainstream America, although slowly," she says. "More and more retailers are responding to consumer demand, some by incorporating fair trade products into existing stores, others by establishing new fair trade stores."

Indeed, Chicago has been active in promoting fair trade. Chicago Fair Trade has already begun the process to make Chicago a fair trade city. Three cities have already claimed their title as fair trade towns, which involves various criteria being met including access to fair trade products and educational events. Chicago has also seen growth of fair trade products through several recent store openings including GreenHeart and the Fair Trader. Also, the Andersonville Galleria hosts four stores that sell only fair trade items.

"We're thrilled to have opened GreenHeart," says store manager Katherine Bissell Cordova. "Our shop carries a wonderful selection of eco-friendly and fair trade products from around the world, and the response from Chicagoland has been nothing short of amazing. People are hungry for ways to make a difference, and by shopping stores like ours, we can support environmentally conscious producers and artisans." Says Nancy of WomanCraft: "Our work makes a real difference for women, and that's the most important part of this movement." ♦

WHAT'S FAIR?

Fair trade means an equitable and fair partnership between marketers in North America and producers in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and other parts of the world, according to the Fair Trade Federation (FTF). FTF criteria for membership are:

- Paying a fair wage in the local context
- Offering employees opportunities for advancement
- Providing equal employment opportunities for all people, particularly the most disadvantaged
- Engaging in environmentally sustainable practices
- Being open to public accountability
- Building long-term trade relationships
- Providing healthy and safe working conditions within the local context
- Providing financial and technical assistance to producers whenever possible

Source: Fair Trade Federation

WANT TO SEE MORE?

Please visit these fair trade retailers:

Etica.com (fair trade wine)

ShopMayu.com (100 percent alpaca wool scarves, shawls)

WomanCraft.net (100 percent recycled stationery)

World-Shoppe.com (gifts, women's jewelry, home accessories)

Megy Karydes is a freelance writer and founder of www.World-Shoppe.com, a fair trade e-boutique.

