

30 Years of Fair Trade

Thirty years ago, after cattle were chased off the runway, Denise Attwood (SGS Class of 1977) and Ric Conner's plane touched down at the old Kathmandu airport.

"We had no idea the defining moment in our careers had taken place," said Denise, "but after 30 years, almost as many trips, a civil war, abdication of the monarchy and the transition to some sort of democracy, our lives and work are still bound to Nepal."

While that country has seen many changes, it remains one of the poorest countries in the world.

"Our initial foray into what we now call 'fair trade' began innocently with the purchase of two wool sweaters from a Tibetan refugee family. We are proud of our association with the Tibetan community and we wouldn't be where we are today without their honesty and hard work," Ric said.

It became apparent to Ric and Denise that many talented Tibetan artisans and craftspeople could use what they could provide, access to the U.S. market and a fair wage. Within a few years, they established relationships with 12 cottage industries and development aid projects, most of which—like the Association for Craft Producers (ACP)—they still work with.

Their venture has grown into a full-time business. Now Ganesh Himal Trading LLC helps support hundreds of craft producers in Nepal and sells to more than 250 retail outlets in the United States and Canada.

Principles of fair trade provided a template for their interactions in Nepal, even before there was a fair trade movement.

Those principles are: "Treat people with respect, make sure they get a fair return for their work, provide continuity over time, safe working conditions, design assistance and financial support," Denise said.

"Over the years, we have provided other assistance to our Nepali family. Education in Nepal can help alleviate poverty," she said. "We have seen people we work with save everything to put their children through school. Now the next generation uses their education to help others.

"Our trekking guide and good friend Ram, who has a first-grade education, has two boys, whom we are putting through school. Pradeep, the eldest, helps his father with business, leads groups of college students to remote parts of Nepal and dreams of building the first school in his village," Ric said.

Denise's friend, Laxmi, a village weaver who organized weavers, used money she made to send her daughter, Sudha, to high school, college and graduate school for social work.

Sudha came back to take over her mother's work organizing village weavers and creating new products.

Kesang, the middle daughter of Tibetan producer partners and friends, has a family who values education. Her father, Namgyal, escaped Tibet as a child and went to school and college in India. Her mother, Pemala, has just a sixth grade education.

After finishing college in the United States, Kesang went back to Nepal. Following in her parents' footsteps, she started a knitting group, called Padhma Creations, on the Nepal/India border. Padhma Creations works with women who



Denise Attwood '77
in her backyard

are victims of abuse, abandonment, civil war or the threat of trafficking.

Over the years, Ganesh Himal has supported the "girl child education fund" of the Association for Craft Producers, a nonprofit that provides low-income women with skills training and employment.

"Two years ago, learning there wasn't enough money in the fund to keep girls in school," Denise said, "we promised to do what we could, and the Power of 5 was born to raise donations to fund the project each year so 180 children stay in school."

With the success of that campaign, and the establishment of the Baseri health clinic, Denise, their son Cameron and co-worker Austin Zimmerman formed the nonprofit, Conscious Connections Foundation.

It is an exciting time for people in Nepal as children grow up and take their parents' place in the struggle for dignity and fairness, Denise said.

"Fair trade is a growing idea, whose merits appeal to more consumers," Ric said. "In addition, the value of girls and women in education and in the marketplace are being recognized."

— Mary Stamp, *The Fig Tree*