

Weaving a silk road for women in Afghanistan

BY LIDIA SEMRAU

A little loom goes a long way.

When Christine Mockett joined a local weavers' and spinners' group a few months ago, she never imagined her art would be affecting the lives of other weavers living thousands of kilometres away in a foreign country.

Along with fellow members, Mockett is donating various pieces of her art to the "Weavers Helping Weavers" fundraiser at this year's annual Ottawa Valley Weavers' and Spinners' Guild exhibition and sale.

A majority of the proceeds are going directly to the Artists for Afghanistan Foundation's ArteZan Designs project which supports the weaving of pure silk into shawls by Afghan women and their families in Kabul.

The project was born in 2004 to resuscitate the traditional art of silk weaving and to help women become self-sufficient, and financially and socially independent. The proceeds will help to pay for the weavers' salaries, supplies, and a larger space to create.

"Supporting them is important," says Mockett. "The fact that they get the opportunity to weave is fantastic."

Up until the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, all forms of music, art and poetry were condemned in Afghanistan because they were seen as "expressions against God."

"Silk weaving, sculpturing, painting, embroidering, glass blowing and wood carving... all of these things which Afghanistan was known for, you could hardly find any of it," says Khorshied Samad, founder and president of Artists for Afghanistan. "So many beautiful traditions of arts and crafts had literally been destroyed under approximately 30 years of war, invasion and political upheaval."

The project gives women the opportunity to work and earn income for their families. In addition, daily classes in reading and writing are given to the women during their workday.

Under the Taliban regime, women and girls were banned from receiving education. Although the political and cultural position of women has somewhat improved over the years, only 30 per cent of girls in Afghanistan have access to education and 87 per cent of Afghan women are illiterate.

Apart from security issues, it is socially frowned upon for families to send their younger daughters (aged 10 to 12) to school because their place is seen as working in the home.

Samad is hoping to raise enough funds to turn ArteZan Designs into a sustainable business at a larger location. Currently, the project is run out of a private home because retail space in Afghanistan is extremely expensive.

"We have women lining up every week asking for work, but we can't give it to them because we just don't have the space," says Samad.

The Guild hopes its upcoming exhibition and sale entitled, "No Animal Fibres, Please" will attract a wide audience and help to generate donations for the fundraiser.

This year, exhibition-goers will be exposed to artwork made by non-traditional fibres such as bamboo, stainless steel, tofu, beech trees, and chitin which is made from shrimp and crab shells.

Various creations such as wall hangings, shawls and placemats will be on display with their raw material counterparts to allow the public to see and feel the origins of the finished products.

"Who knew that bamboo could be spun, knitted, or woven into something?" says Nancy Ingram, event co-ordinator. "It's going to be an eye opener."

The exhibition, sale, and fundraiser events are scheduled to run from Nov. 2 to 4 at the Glebe Community Centre, located at 175 Third Ave.

[Previous Page](#)