

A GROWN SYNERGY

Aid to Artisans Teams up With Peace Corps Volunteers to Show the World that Craft Means Business

by Joanna Smiley

When Lisa Smith arrived in Boujad, Morocco two years ago as a Peace Corps Volunteer, a group of women weavers welcomed her into their homes.

Lisa quickly learned that home, in Moroccan culture, meant more than blocks of concrete shelter. It signified family, friendship, and a communal approach to life that seemed all too unfamiliar back home in the U.S.

In her first week as a PCV, the women brought Lisa into their day-to-day lives. She joined them for afternoon meals. She started learning how to weave carpets. She began speaking in Arabic, their native tongue.

As the days went by, she realized these artisans were not only talented weavers, but equally skilled multi-taskers who smoothly juggled work, socializing, and parental roles. She saw how important it was that they weave from home—it allowed them to watch their young children play on the dusty roads right outside their doors.

Lisa soon became an informed and passionate advocate of artisans. She felt privileged to be among women

who were under acknowledged and underpaid masters of handmade craft.

Though these artisans were immensely skilled weavers, Lisa, who was fresh out of The Wharton School of Business, learned where her help was needed most—business training. The women had only very basic literacy and arithmetic skills, as most of them attended school up to the 6th grade.

“I worked to transfer many of my business skills to the group’s project coordinator. He knew Moroccan culture, how to get things done there and also was a great product designer, but he lacked basic business skills, such as accounting, setting up a balance sheet, marketing, and expectations of foreign buyers. With the women, I worked on pricing and costing of their products, making products to specification and on time so that we could accept custom orders, and sharing larger orders amongst themselves to increase efficiency,” Lisa said.

As part of her Peace Corps training, Lisa participated in a two-day workshop with Aid to Artisans (ATA), which had a project in another area of Morocco. For

anyone who is unfamiliar with ATA, the 32 year-old international nonprofit creates economic opportunities for artisans around the world by helping them to build sustainable businesses inspired by their handmade traditions. ATA has a long history of working with Peace Corps

Volunteers in dozens of countries.

While Lisa had a great deal of economics knowledge from her academic experience, ATA staff brought real world Moroccan examples into the classroom, giving practical tools for teaching artisans business skills despite potential language and education gaps. They showed the volunteers how to conduct pricing and costing workshops, explained many of the principals involved in exporting crafts, and provided training materials that could be used on site.

“ATA’s workshop was great. Later in training I also had the chance to visit another volunteer’s site whose artisans were working directly with ATA on a project, and I was extremely impressed by what I saw,” Lisa said.

A previous PCV in Lisa’s town had already been teaching the women that their carpet designs could be versatile. For example, they could transform their material into a handbag with an added zipper. Their traditions could be maintained yet enhanced with product innovation that would appeal to an export market, thus bringing artisans the lasting income they deserved. This type of product development training is exactly what ATA strives to teach the artisans it works with.

Perhaps most importantly in the course of her project, Lisa watched first hand as the weavers began to realize their talents could translate into income-generating craft businesses. She saw them gain pride and confidence in the economic viability of their crafts, another critical mission at ATA.

When Lisa began looking at jobs after her service ended, she knew she wanted to continue using her business degree to help people like the weavers. She also knew she had been inspired by ATA and the sustainable incomes she had seen the organization bring to artisans in the



Four Tawli weavers show off their wares.



Peace Corps Volunteer Lisa Smith attends a craft fair in Morocco.

field. She perused through various job postings before spotting a marketing coordinator opening at ATA's home office in Hartford. The rest was history. She relocated to Connecticut and officially joined the ATA team.

"It's great for us to hire Peace Corps Volunteers," said Mary Cockram, Director of Programs at ATA who first interviewed Lisa over Skype. "They have an understanding and sympathy of challenges, conditions of artisans, and life in other countries. I give a second look if a job applicant is a PCV."

PEACE CORPS CONNECTIONS RUN DEEP AT ATA

Lorraine Johnson, ATA's Regional Director in Africa, is a former PCV in Liberia. She has lived in Africa for nearly 16 years and has authored two books: *Who We Are: Voices from Mozambique* and *We Are People: Voice from Mozambique*.

ATA's Small Grants program, which provides up to \$1,500 to eligible artisan groups in need of immediate help, relies heavily on PCV recommendations.

"Their vetting is invaluable. They can monitor grants, spending and fill out grantee follow-up information. We always feel better about awarding small grants when a PCV has vetted the group. Out of 40 small grants ATA awarded this year, 14 came from

PCV recommendations, which is a large increase from previous years," said Joanne Heard who manages ATA's Small Grants program. She also noted that another advantage to working with PCVs on small grants is that they see artisans' needs first hand.

Last year, a PCV pleading for a small grant to assist artisans in Ifrane, Morocco wrote Joanne a heartfelt recommendation letter. She described a bus ride she took with a handicapped artisan, capturing details that only somebody working in country could see. The PCV wrote how "one undeveloped leg in a brace" didn't stop that artisan from traveling nearly 10 hours in a day, negotiating all of the necessary details she needed to bring income to her community.

With the help of this recommendation letter, these artisans were awarded a small grant.

ATA's own president, David O'Connor, is a former Volunteer and former Peace Corps Country Director. He spent nearly six years overseeing operations in China, Nepal, and Moldova and has a keen understanding of the invaluable synergy between ATA and Peace Corps.

"We are working with Peace Corps Volunteers in several of our projects right now from Mali to El Salvador," David said. "PCVs are fantastic. They live right in the communities and are

working with and understanding artisans, who themselves are creative entrepreneurs.

In the future, David hopes that ATA can offer more PCV workshops in business training. He hopes that as PCVs are on the ground working with artisans, they can show them that the craft sector, with proper business training and product development, is a major engine of economic growth. In fact, craft constitutes the second largest sector of rural employment after agriculture in the developing world.

According to the Peace Corps, in 2007 at least 15% of current PCVs were working in business development, many within the artisan sector.

As ATA and Peace Corps continue to expand their operations in regions across the globe, the possibilities for continued collaboration are limitless. ATA invites PCVs around the world to join its mission—change the world with the power of handmade.

Joanna Smiley is Communications Manager for Aid to Artisans. For more information about Aid to Artisans, please visit www.aidtoartisans.org.

Aid to Artisans

critical resources for us." Since Peace Corps' founding in 1961, nearly 200,000 PCVs have completed service. Many of the Volunteers have MBAs, law degrees, and a variety of other academic qualifications. Others have real life experience running retail businesses, web sites or successful start-ups. And yet others come from professional pottery backgrounds, are renowned photographers, or artists. This colorful mix of life experience is another asset when