

INK Publications – August 2007

## **AID TO ARTISANS: A Helping Hand Around The World**

BY: Lisa Mikulski

As our world community becomes smaller, and celebrities call out for us to help and support various worthy causes, fascination and involvement with developing countries and new cultures has become a vogue activity for those wishing to help support our neighbors in need. Internet, TV and still images from around the world open our eyes to some very sobering situations in what was once considered far away lands. We all want to help someone in need. And we now have a greater understanding that helping someone around the globe is indeed helping them, helping ourselves and helping our global community.

While we see the need we should also look to the successes of global partnerships. Prior to the idea of giving becoming a political or fashionable statement, Clare Brett Smith and her successor David O'Connor at Aid to Artisans, have been overseeing 30 years of diligent work assisting artisans in countries such as Haiti, Columbia, Mozambique, Kenya, and India.

ATA's mission is simple and yet far reaching: To help a world community of craftspeople become successful entrepreneurs. In providing an extensive knowledge base, ATA assists the artisan with the business skills needed to improve their lives, the lives of their families, and communities.

While not a direct seller of goods, this NGO (non government organization) provides what they call the "market link" and works with talented artisans to assist and train them in product development, production, business skills and marketing. By "linking" artisans to key buyers ATA creates relationships, opportunities and jobs. This increase in business acumen thereby empowers the artisan and enables them to move successfully into a larger market arena. It opens up options which in the past meant only selling at the local bizarre or market. In this way, ATA also brings the spirit of cultural craft making to end consumers worldwide and fosters new understanding and feelings of goodwill between people and nations.

Because of the efforts put forth by ATA, we here in Connecticut can find unique and authentic multi cultural crafts at Pier 1 Imports, Pottery Barn, Crate & Barrel and Saks Fifth Avenue. Product can be anything from woven baskets from Bolivia, pottery from Peru, or beaded items from South Africa. The individual purchasing such products here in the US, can know that they are purchasing something that wasn't mass manufactured and that their dollars are contributing to the livelihood of an artist in a developing country.

An often misunderstood aspect of dealing with peoples in developing countries is the notion that they are the abject poor and unable to help themselves. To the contrary, these people have skills and "assets they don't even know they have, and they have things we don't have. It's really important in the world's diversity," says Clare Brett Smith. "These people are self reliant, creative and they are skilled craftsman. By helping this section of the world's people it gives them a choice and improves that area's economy. And that's the goal."

Aid to Artisans is not an intrusive organization. Their idea of how to best help artisans is not to intrude or linger in any given country. It is to get artisans into the real market so that their

businesses will last and be sustainable. ATA teaches them business skills and then they are able to oversee their own businesses. "In short, we are match makers - big time," says Smith.

Established in 1976, ATA has helped create sustainable livelihoods for over 100,000 artisans in 110 countries. In addition to the Hartford, CT office, Aid to Artisans maintains offices in other countries as well. Staff and volunteers in those countries work "hands-on" with the artisans, provide seminars, offer exposure at New York City and South Africa trade shows, and create customized programs to solve the challenges of bringing craft into the market from sometimes very remote places. One good example of this type of challenge can be seen in the work ATA is doing in Afghanistan. Working to help mostly women in this conflict-riddled area "Almost everything is a problem to be solved: raw materials, transportation, and buyer connections," states Smith in ATA's Fall 2007 Hand/Eye publication. But thus far, ATA has solved many problems in many countries, and has contributed \$30 million dollars directly to the businesses of artisans.

In addition to teaching the business side of craft, Aid To Artisans also looks for and supports ways of providing technological advances in production which can have a huge impact on a country's ability to export items. One such important initiative is the lead-free initiative in Mexico. Leaded products cannot be exported to other countries and so ATA along with another organization in Mexico has developed a technology to remove lead from the production process. "This could have a huge impact for thousands and maybe millions of people," states ATA president, David O'Connor. "This creates new jobs, better health for the artisans, new kilns and has a positive environmental impact." There is now interest in this technology in India, Turkey and Morocco.

Like many non-profit organizations serving in this capacity, Aid To Artisans gets its funding from private citizens and businesses and major corporations such as The American Express Foundation, Ford Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and receives active support from designers, importers and retailers around the world. Aid To Artisans has won numerous awards and has garnered support from Senator Hillary Clinton who made a generous donation to the Hartford organization.

*"The most satisfying element of my work with ATA is that I create employment for others who are in a similar position to where I was when I first started out. My life motto and advice to others is: never give up or lose focus." - Willard Musarurwa, South African Artisan*

*"Artisans of Haiti embody two great features of the country: a deep-rooted sense of independence and an irreplaceable need to add color and beauty to daily life, in spite of life's hardships." - Chantal Regnault*

To learn more about Aid To Artisans, visit their website at:

[www.aidtoartisans.org](http://www.aidtoartisans.org)

**Aid to Artisans, Inc.**

331 Wethersfield Avenue  
Hartford, CT 06114 USA

Phone: (860) 947-3344

Fax: (860) 947-3350