

Hope springs eternal

Local businessmen
craft fair practice deal

By RACHEL CREE SHERMAN

Hope for Women, the largest distributor of fair trade greeting cards in the United States, is one of a growing number of Vermont companies involved in providing products based on the principles of fair trade and sustainable living, concern for humanity and the environment.

The company, founded by Evan Goldsmith and his father, David, provides women in India with livable wages, long-term employment as they create note cards featuring locally grown flora.

Hope for Women was the inspiration of Evan Goldsmith in 1993. He serves as president of the organization. His father, as chairman, contributes more than 40 years of business experience.

The idea evolved as Evan Goldsmith worked with a nonprofit group in India devoted to the development of women's and environmental issues. As he saw artisan women designing

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he realized they had no way in which to sell their products reliably, and the women received little compensation for their considerable skills and work. He said a foreign company provided funding and training to produce the cards for each holiday season, but subsequent orders weren't forthcoming. The women were left with no sustainable income for themselves and their families other than subsistence farming.

Most men in the region migrate to New Delhi. The women are left to do 95 percent of the work to sustain the family. They plant and harvest gardens, care for animals, see to their children's education and contribute to their communities as best they can. Yet they are not the primary decision-makers in their households. Due to that reality, Goldsmith and his consultants went to New Delhi to meet with the women's husbands and were able to reach an agreement.

Since then, the effort has grown and now is in the process of expanding. The company is in the process of creating the Hope for Women India Trust, a nonprofit that will function on a peer-to-peer basis with HFW's current non-government organization partners. The craftswomen will work directly with the trust, allowing them more control over their work, increasing profits and giving HFW better ability to implement social programs.

Hope for Women is a certified member of the Fair Trade Federation and a member of Co-op America and Vermont Businesses for Social Responsibility. As such, they operate under fair trade principles. These include providing a safe, healthy work environment, a fair, livable wage at above-market rate wages with payment in advance, and a profit-sharing program, providing a "retirement/emergency fund for the women that they can access in times of need." Environmentally sustainable production practices are followed.

HFW's stationery and envelopes are made from the hand-pressed flowers, grasses and herbs of the Himalayas, where the women live, using vegetable-based ink on a heavy paper made from recycled scraps of tree-free cotton and encased in corn-based plastic protective packaging. Mountain,

meadow, valley and garden are all represented, comprising 75 different designs.

HFW cultivates and plants two garden plots the size of three football fields to grow seasonal botanicals that were once gathered in the countryside. The plants are not treated with chemicals and "retain their beauty as long as they are not exposed to moisture or direct sunlight," he said.

Hope for Women started with four women and now has 50 women creating cards, two of whom are employed full-time. As for the artisans, "many women tell us that their work with Hope for Women has given them confidence and a newfound voice in their community," Goldsmith said. "The income the women receive from their work leads to better living conditions, better health and nutrition, and opportunities for schooling their children."

The cards are available on the company's Web site, hopeforwomen.com, and at more than 500 locations in 47 states, including Whole Foods Markets and Wegmans.

HFW is working on three new projects, two of which will be different from the cards, and it has a line of boxed holiday cards in the design process. The company recently partnered with two artisans groups — Arte Comasagua, located in the highland volcanic area of El Salvador; and Aid to Artisans, a nonprofit organization based in Hartford, Conn., which "offers assistance to artisan groups worldwide, working in partnerships to foster artistic traditions, cultural vitality, improved livelihoods and community well-being." The El Salvador craftswomen's designs offer a differing creative approach, also utilizing the botanicals of their own region.

And that is just the beginning, Goldsmith says.

"As we move forward, we have plans to offer health care and child care, provide entrepreneurial development training for women who want to branch out and start their own business, create a sponsored education program, and provide upward mobility opportunities via management level positions," Goldsmith says. "Many of these benefits are extremely rare or not available in India (and other places around the world), but for us are key parts of who we want to be as a company ... I am thrilled to be focusing all of my time and effort on this important work." ❖



These note cards, created by craftswomen in India, show locally grown flora.