

# SEVEN DAYS

## Crafting Connections

<BUSINESS>

Vermont-based importers help women help themselves

**W**hen Evan Goldsmith and his father David look at one of their company's products — a greeting card with dried ferns and flower buds pressed into a graceful pattern — they think more about who made it than about how it's doing on the market. In this case, the creator was Babli, who lives in the state of Uttaranchal in northern India. She's one of 35 crafters who are now earning a monthly wage through the Goldsmiths' Burlington-based wholesale card distribution business, aptly called Hope for Women.

STORY  
AMY  
LILLY

IMAGES  
JORDAN  
SILVERMAN

Creative Women  
Holiday Sale,  
Friday, November  
30, 1-8 p.m.,  
and Saturday,  
December 1, 10  
a.m. - 6 p.m.,  
Chace Mill,  
Burlington.

www.creative  
women.net

www.hopefor  
women.com

www.believein  
bangladesh.com

In Babli's remote Himalayan village, where subsistence agriculture is the norm, women do "99 percent of the work," says Evan — they plow the fields, raise the kids, and haul the firewood. Yet despite all this labor, they rarely earn any money. The few paying jobs available to women, in domestic help or street sweeping, net about \$1.50 per day. Because of the Goldsmiths, these women are earning five to seven times that, using the region's natural resources and their own creativity. Hope for Women pays their monthly

mother Kathleen Swanson's home in South Hero.

It's no secret that the reduction of poverty starts with the financial empowerment of women. Bangladeshi Muhammad Yunus won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize not just because he pioneered the micro-credit loan, but because those tiny loans have the specific virtue of enabling women without collateral — traditionally shunned by banks — to open their own businesses.

What happens when third-world women earn their own money? Overwhelmingly, they send their children to school. Evan Goldsmith discovered this when he interviewed each woman who produces his company's cards: "Not health care, not better houses. Education," he confirms. "Especially for their girls."

**The Goldsmiths — Evan, 37, and David, 67 —** founded Hope for Women as an e-commerce company in 2003, selling boxed card sets made by four women in Uttaranchal. The project was an unlike-



DAVID AND EVAN GOLDSMITH

wage up front, plus extra for each card the women make, regardless of how fast the products move in the U.S. "The margins are thin," Evan concedes with a wry smile.

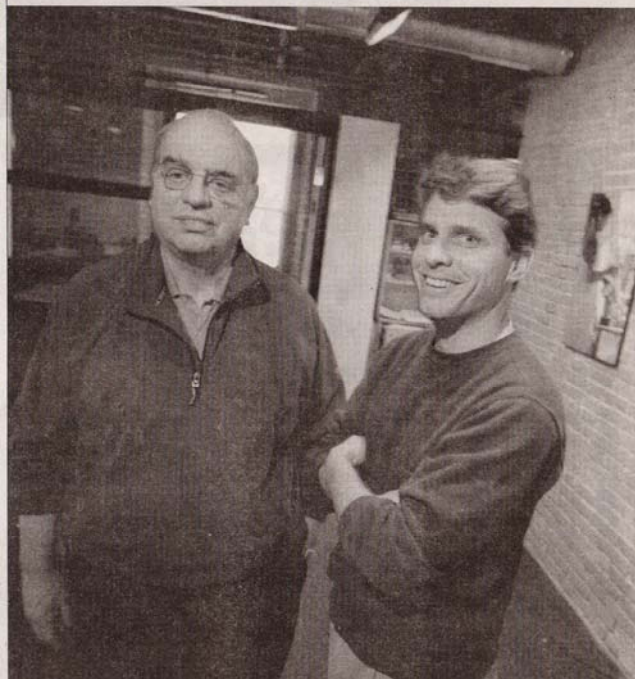
The Goldsmiths' business, operating from a Main Street office, is one of a growing number of Vermont enterprises that aim to assist women in the developing world. Creative Women, another wholesale distribution business based in Burlington, was started by Ellen Dorsch of Grand Isle to give weavers and seamstresses in Ethiopia and Swaziland a larger, steadier market for their hand-woven home décor products. And Peace Corps returnee Shelagh Cooley's B.E.L.I.E.V.E. in Bangladesh, a combined online textiles store for brothel workers and charity for street children, is headquartered in her

ly one for both son and father, but a perfect collaboration. Evan had spent 15 years in the nonprofit world, beginning with two years in India after college working with the NGO Women in Sustainable Ecosystem Rehabilitation (WISER). David, a businessman, had spent a lifetime reaping profits, eventually serving as vice-chair of a major NASDAQ company. "I was, like, 'Just stamp the dollar sign on my forehead!'" he says with a laugh about his former life.

The father and son finish each other's sentences. David shows his flair for boardroom persuasion in a New York accent — from Westchester County — while Evan tells stories of his stint abroad, when he wrote home on cards made by rural women.

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We see fair trade where organic was 10 to 15 years ago: It's just beginning to become more mainstream.

DAVID GOLDSMITH, HOPE FOR WOMEN

The Goldsmiths widened the scope of their wholesale distribution in September 2006 to provide the card makers with more stability and consistency of income. Hope for Women now distributes individually packaged cards to 400 stores in 45 states. Local venues include Scribbles, Healthy Living, City Market and the Peace and Justice Store. The company's 35 Indian artisans produce an incredible 15,000 to 20,000 cards per month.

Evan trusts his best friend from his WISER days, Saji, to oversee quality control and wage payments, and he visits twice a year to check in with the women. The rest of the business is handled via the Internet — which, notes Evan, not only covers India's remote mountain states but does so with fewer dead spots than online service has in Vermont.

The Goldsmiths also registered Hope for Women with the Fair Trade Federation. As David puts it, "We see fair trade where organic was 10 to 15 years ago: It's just beginning to become more mainstream." With the buzz about fair trade already happening, Evan adds, it's likely

that mainstreaming will happen more quickly.

The company recently added 15 women in El Salvador to its payroll. Evan traveled to the operation in a mountain region — this time with a translator — to meet with each of the women, as is his custom. "I'm not going into business with anyone I don't know," he explains. Such a policy could limit the business' ability to expand, but the NGO-worker-turned-entrepreneur isn't rattled by this suggestion. "I hope the biggest problem I have is that I have to keep traveling to different parts of the world," he says with a grin.

**Ellen Dorsch meets the** Goldsmiths for coffee regularly, she says, to discuss the latest developments in her wholesale textile-crafts distribution business, Creative Women. Dorsch, 65, "knew nothing about business" when she launched the company five years ago. Her first career was in public health, where she helped Planned Parenthood set up training programs for family planning professionals in Central America and Eastern Africa.

Then her daughter Sara spent two years in Ethiopia. During visits there, Dorsch realized that aiding the women in their march toward economic independence was just as important as talking to them about their reproductive freedoms. What she's doing now, Dorsch says, "has about the same effect."

From its office in the Chace Mill, Creative Women distributes hand-woven, high-end table runners, pillow covers, shawls and other textile products made by two women-owned businesses in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and one in Piggs Peak, Swaziland. The Ethiopian women have few other employment options apart from, say, hauling bricks for a dollar a day — Addis Ababa is experiencing a construction boom. "With our women, the less trained ones are making five times that," Dorsch estimates. Like Hope for Women, Creative Women is registered with the Fair Trade Federation and pays for its products up front.

Upscale catalogues and museum stores are on Dorsch's growing list of markets. She attends two trade shows a year, in New York and San Francisco, to garner more clients and listen to

their ideas. Twice a year she also visits the women weavers, dyers and finishers — and, in keeping with Ethiopian tradition, male weavers — to share suggestions about what will sell best.

"At one New York trade show, a Soho gallery owner loved one of the blankets," Dorsch recalls, pulling a beautiful white silk one from a stack, "but wondered if it could be made in a beach-towel size for her customers who vacation in the Hamptons. I said I'd look into it."

Dorsch's visits to the women in these countries don't necessarily involve deep personal exchanges. "We show each other pictures of our children, but there's a bit of a cultural gap," she says. "I may be the only American — and maybe the only white person — they've ever met."

Dorsch does feel a personal responsibility to the women her business serves, however. The trade-show experience "has given me a little glimpse of what it's like for an artist to put their paintings — their soul — on the wall and have people comment on them," she says. Meanwhile, the women business owners she works with often assume she can easily get them access to a huge market. "They have high expectations of me. I feel a real commitment that, in my bleaker moments, is really difficult,"

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Dorsch admits.

Still, as her employee Linda Li reminds her, Creative Women has already accomplished a lot. Says Li, who's arranging the office for its annual holiday sale, "We're not only bringing beautiful things here, but we're creating jobs on the other side of the world."

**B.E.L.I.E.V.E. in Bangladesh** is the nonprofit brainchild of Shelagh Cooley, 24. Using a single website, it facilitates the efforts of two Bangladeshi-founded NGOs in Saridpur and

"My goal is to support these two NGOs," Cooley says by phone from Dorchester, Mass., where she works full-time as an after-school coordinator. "They know the community best; they're the local leaders. I'm not just coming in as the 'Western' intent on improving things."

Cooley taught English at both organizations during her 2005 stint in the Peace Corps. What should have been a 27-month service term in Bangladesh ended abruptly after eight months — the U.S. government couldn't guarantee the

pride," Cooley says. Both organizations give the children access to fresh water, school supplies and uniforms — all crucial to overcoming the huge barriers to education that exist for street kids and the children of sex workers.

Begun in July 2006, B.E.L.I.E.V.E. in Bangladesh is happy to take online orders for the women's products or to accept donations. "It's whatever people are interested in," Cooley says. She still relies on word of mouth to spread the word. Her aunt recently hosted

The women get all the proceeds, not charity. It gives them a lot of pride.

SHELAGH COOLEY, B.E.L.I.E.V.E. IN BANGLADESH

Dhaka — Women Orientation and Rural Life Development (WORLD) and World for All (WFA). WORLD trains prostitutes and battered women in tailoring, sewing and traditional batik cloth-dyeing techniques, and runs two schools for their 50 children. WFA currently runs a school for 40 street children. All three schools are designed to give these otherwise socially shunned kids a shot at entering the government-run education system. Cooley's online nonprofit sells the shawls, blankets and wall hangings made by the women, and accepts donations for the children's schooling.

workers' safety and evacuated them with just a day's notice. Cooley chose not to be reassigned to a different country. She had spent months learning the language and culture and had become deeply attached to the people she met. She has since returned to Bangladesh once, for a two-month summer trip to film an informational video on the women and children.

Most Bangladeshi women, Muslim or Hindi, don't leave their homes to find jobs, so WORLD gives them a way to earn money at home. "The women get all the proceeds, not charity. It gives them a lot of

a "Banglabash" in New York City, catered by Cooley's cousin, at which 60 attendees learned about the mission.

Cooley's choice of acronym spells out that mission — Bring people together; Empowerment of women; Literacy and learning; Income generation; Economic development; Valuing diversity and culture; and Exchanging culture and ideas. It's a list of goals shared by all three of these socially responsible, Vermont-based efforts to address third-world poverty — and, during the holiday gift-giving season, a welcome reminder that how you buy matters. ⑦