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Cultivating Creativity as a Natural Resource

We were driving down a mountainside in the heart of Kyrgyzstan, on a long, winding dirt road, with a van-load of cowboys from Wyoming. We were on our way to the small village of Karasuu to put on a rodeo. It was early November, snowing, early evening and the daylight was gone. None of us in the van – driver, guide, cowboys or myself – had ever been to Karasuu before and we were feeling lost. Everyone was quiet, staring out the windows into the falling snow. Suddenly, on the road ahead, an apparition appeared – a small woman sitting on a large, white horse behind a veil of snow. It was Altyn, our host in Karasuu, who had ridden out to the road to flag us down at the turn-off and guide us to her home and to light, food and laughter. Altyn, who is less than 5 feet tall, always wears very high heels – and this occasion was no exception. There she was, in 3” heels, sitting on the horse by the side of the road, covered with snow, waiting patiently for the rodeo cowboys from America.

We were in Karasuu with Vista 360°, an American non-profit that is the largest distributor of Kyrgyz traditional handicraft in the U.S. Vista 360° partners with makers, women’s cooperatives and small artist-led businesses in Kyrgyzstan to import the traditional wool felt rugs, as well as a wide assortment of other handmade felt items – dolls, slippers, bags, pillow covers, embroidered hats. In the U.S., Vista’s staff travels all over the country, bringing Kyrgyz folk art and handicraft to fascinated customers at trunk shows, fairs and festivals.

This vocation grew at Vista 360° as unexpectedly as Altyn’s emergence from the snow... and with the same beauty, warmth and fun. Our handicraft program grew spontaneously out of a cultural exchange initiated by Vista 360° in 2003. Vista 360° is dedicated to fostering cooperation among mountain people around the world, with the goal of helping to preserve mountain traditions and strengthen mountain communities. Its first project was an exchange between Wyoming and Kyrgyzstan, beginning with a festival showcasing Kyrgyz nomadic traditions, which was presented in Jackson Hole. This feast of Kyrgyz culture, presented by musicians, fashion designers and yurt makers, was the beginning of an ongoing exchange between Wyoming and Kyrgyzstan. Out of this exchange came cowboys in Karasuu -- and the opportunity to support both cultural preservation and rural economic development through a program to market Kyrgyz folk art and handicrafts in the U.S.

Beginning with a small trunk show in Jackson Hole in 2005, Vista 360° now markets Kyrgyz traditional craft at trunk shows, fairs and festivals all around the country on a year-round basis. We also work with artists who are building small creative businesses, using traditional techniques in new ways. This multi-layered partnership with Kyrgyz textile artists and artisans includes an intriguing diversity: sponsoring a booth for the Altyn Kol Women’s Handicraft Co-operative at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market; stylish pop-up stores in California for Kyrgyz designers; bringing rugs to sheep

and wool festivals in Idaho and Vermont; fundraising in the U.S. for small business loans. Vista 360° has become a “full-service” marketing partner for a number of Kyrgyz artisans and artists, with a partnership-centered business that supports itself and provides a sales outlet otherwise not available in Kyrgyzstan. We also continue cultural exchange as an integral part of our program, so that the relationships we build between Kyrgyz and American partners contribute to mutual understanding as well as mutual benefits.

What is most exciting and hopeful about Vista 360°’s success is the fact that it is part of a grassroots, creative movement that is taking shape, with many variants, to connect artisans and artists in the developing world with highly-motivated customers in the U.S. and Europe. Vista 360° is just one of thousands of enterprises, both large and small, which are blossoming all over the world. This movement is building upon the foundation created by pioneering organizations such as Aid to Artisans and Ten Thousand Villages, taking advantage of new digital marketing opportunities and a fundamental shift in consumer consciousness which has been building for decades – the hunger for authentic, handmade items, the idea that individual purchasing decisions can be transformative.

Mostly what we do at Vista 360°, day to day, is carry shyrdak around. We load a truck, unload, display, load, unload, display, with the rhythm of the traveling salesman. We have found a way to make the connection from there to here. With the help of partners in Kyrgyzstan and customers in the U.S., we carry the shyrdak from the high pastures in the Tien Shan mountains to customers in Ojai and Portland and Pt. Townsend. Along with the rugs, we carry photos and stories. When a customer brings home a rug or a scarf, he brings home a filament connecting himself and his family to its maker. And, in this small way, when something happens to the people of Kyrgyzstan, it also happens to us.

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SIDEBOX: Some Lessons Learned

As part of the UN Mountain Partnership panel at the 2009 United Nations conference for sustainable development, Vista 360° introduced one of our partners, Mairam Umurzakova, master shyrdak maker and co-founder of the Altyn Kol Women’s Handicraft Cooperative in the village of Kochkor. Altyn Kol now has more than 700 members, shepherd women who produce just one or two wool rugs each year with their own wool. The sale of these rugs can double their families’ income for the year, allowing traditional agriculture to continue and avoiding the out-migration of men to city jobs in distant places. Yet the distance is still very great between the shepherds in their high pastures in the Tien Shan mountains and the customers in Idaho and California. How can Mairam and her colleagues transform Altyn Kol’s products into high-value, consistently high-quality items? How can they access niche markets, compete and command premium prices? How can they assure that broad-based community benefits will result?

Vista 360° is acting on four ideas to respond to these questions. First, we are offering a different class of product, signed by its makers, one of a kind, of the highest possible

quality. We are moving from the anonymous artisan to the named artist, supported by a system of awards that recognize mastery. Second, we are asking the government of Kyrgyzstan to recognize masters as national treasures and to create an apprenticeship system (based on the Japanese model) to support teaching and learning of traditional crafts. Third, we are seeking to develop more ways to identify and support new talent, including artist residencies, exhibits and artist exchanges, opportunities which are well-established in the U.S. but very rare in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, we are seeking to take advantage of digital technology to introduce customers in the U.S. more fully to the makers in Kyrgyzstan. Taken together, we hope that these four initiatives will help Mairam and her colleagues to find dependable markets for their goods around the world.

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