

Remarks at Dinner, March 8, 2007 Women of the Mountains Conference Utah Valley State College

If you plant a field, cook over an open fire, beat your clothes on a river bank to get them clean, are ill because you don't have fresh vegetables and fruit, or ride hours on bumpy roads in a crowded bus to get food, see a doctor or pay a bill, what do you do to make life better? You weave a beautiful cloth; decorate your horse, your hut or yurt; you sing; you dance; you dress your children in their best school outfit and send them with flowers on the first day of school. You do your best to make your life bearable. You hope that your children will have a better one.

This is the fate of many women in the world today. I see it almost everywhere I go and especially in those cultures that not only have the usual limitations of poverty, illness and little education but have the added disadvantages of isolation and high altitude. I have tried to capture with my camera, the positive images as well as document the ones that disturb us. I marvel at the artistic skills and gifted hands I find in remote villages. I warm to the smiles, the hospitality and the curiosity of those whose days are harder to navigate than anything we know in the developed world. The women who have little in the way of material things, have much to offer us in their commitment to hard work, their resourcefulness, their determination to transmit their culture to the next generation and their belief in the importance of family. I show their images, I tell their stories, I wear their products, I sell their goods.

I have been traveling since 1985 as a photographer and visual ethnographer and it is people that motivate me when I am frustrated with the bureaucracy, tired of dragging my equipment across continents, and when I feel that there is so much to be done and so little I can do. But pictures do speak to us and so I have chosen to educate, with my images, the young who need to expand their world and the adults whose world is too small by choice. I try to work with people I meet in my travels who have talent—be it artistic or entrepreneurial—to bring them to a wider audience so that they might honor us with their skills and we might give them something for their hard work. I hope, with my images, to share the gift that life has given me—the chance to meet and learn from others whose life is so different from mine yet whose aspirations are the same – food on the table, a roof over one's head and a healthy and joyous life for one's children.

The goals of this conference are admirable. The task is daunting. I hope that my photos and the stories that go with them will, along with your research and implementation, contribute to more awareness of the needs of these women and to solutions in their quest for a better life. I want to thank the sponsors of the conference, particularly Dr. Rusty Butler and Ambassador Bakyt Abdrisaev for giving me this opportunity to contribute. Thank you.

Hermine Dreyfuss