



# weaving Threads of HOPE

SU's Students in Free Enterprise partner with Guatemalan women to build a business they hope will transform lives in a rural community

BY AMY SPEACH



SU-SIFE member Kelly Le '11 (right) and a local weaver lift a cinder block during work on the weavers' thread store in Chumanzana.



Sierra Fogal '11, SU-SIFE chapter president for 2010-11, organizes threads with a Chumanzana weaver.

**IN A TINY, IMPOVERISHED VILLAGE IN THE HILLS OF GUATEMALA LAST JANUARY, A GROUP** from Syracuse started to make a dream come true for the women in the community. For eight days, the group—five members of the SU chapter of Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE), their faculty advisor, and the owner of the Syracuse-area Fair World Marketplace—worked side-by-side with the Mayan residents to set up a business they hoped would improve life there. They traveled to Chumanzana to work with the women's cooperative to open a thread store, providing easy access to raw materials for the nearly 25,000 weavers in the area. From the start, the SIFE students were enchanted by the good-natured, intelligent women who welcomed them and made them feel at home, despite language barriers. They were also swept off their feet by the children, who ran in and out of the work space throughout each day and cheerfully shouted, "Okey-Dokey!"—the only English phrase they knew.

In fact, the SU-SIFE team members were pretty much head-over-heels with the whole experience, which not only gave them the opportunity to help the women of Chumanzana, but also allowed them to befriend and appreciate their hosts. "We had absolutely no idea what to expect when we got there," says retail major Kelly Fisher '10, a four-year member of SU-SIFE and the project's leader. "We basically just showed up. We had never met the women and didn't know what kind of progress they had made on the physical maintenance of the building for the store, which was nothing but a concrete storage shed when we

arrived." The team worked quickly to transform the shed into an appealing retail space, clearing it out, scrubbing it down, and applying fresh paint and floor polish. Collaborating with the women, they determined the inventory, deciding on appropriate colors and quantities of thread for the store. "Everything we did took a lot longer than we planned, because we had to translate from K'iché [the indigenous language] to Spanish to English," Fisher says. "But within a week, we had a relationship with the women that went far beyond what I was expecting. They were comfortable with us. The kids were coming up and giving us hugs. And when





## Instilling Entrepreneurial Spirit in Djibouti

FOR FIVE STUDENTS AND two faculty members in the Whitman School of Management, spring break provided an opportunity to apply classroom concepts to a real-world situation where the need is great. They traveled to Djibouti in East Africa as part of Empowerment through Entrepreneurship, an initiative that promotes new business innovation in a country with few resources and high levels of unemployment, poverty, and malnutrition. The project was developed by the SU-SIFE team, along with retail management professor Amanda Nicholson, the group's faculty advisor, and

entrepreneurship professor Neil Tarallo.

This project brought together Whitman entrepreneurship students and faculty with PAE, a Lockheed Martin company, and the U.S. military to empower emerging businesses in Djibouti. The team trained five PAE employees and five members of the military on the basics of starting a business in a series of Saturday instructional sessions in the fall semester. They also hosted weekly conference calls among members in Washington, D.C., Syracuse, and Djibouti, and assisted in developing

online instruction that began in February. During spring break in March, they traveled to Djibouti to work with the military and emerging businesses. While in Africa, SIFE students participated in classroom and group teamwork sessions designed to help local entrepreneurs begin new enterprises. Back in Syracuse, they continued to work with the military and PAE participants to provide ongoing assistance and development to the Djiboutian entrepreneurs. "Being involved in this was really rewarding from my perspective," says SU-SIFE president Daniel Kinney '10.

"It was great to be pioneers of this initiative, and to be changing lives and helping people become more successful."

Dean Melvin T. Stith G'73, G'78 echoes Kinney's appreciation for the program's benefits. "These kinds of hands-on learning experiences truly put our students to the test and give them the skills and confidence they need to succeed in the real world," he says. "In today's competitive business environment, it's important that we develop leaders through international programs, enabling them to compete at a global level."





we left, there were tears everywhere.”

Called “Threads of Hope,” the project has a broad goal of creating sustainable incomes for Chumanzana women, whose weaving supplements the town’s primary industry of agriculture. It is part of a larger effort led by SU-SIFE’s Team Guatemala, which four years ago began establishing business partnerships in the Central American country through fair trade organizations. In 2007, a team traveled to Guatemala to help train a group of Mayan women in jewelry-making with the aim of selling their pieces and other Mayan handicrafts at the SU Bookstore and other college stores. The endeavor has since returned more than \$40,000 to Guatemala. In a community where 90 percent of the people are illiterate and few children attend school, such projects are a vital aid to economic development. “The women in Chumanzana are very aware,” says faculty advisor Amanda Nicholson, a retail management and marketing professor and the SU-SIFE Sam Walton Fellow in the Whitman School of Management. “They would like their children to go to school and move forward to have better lives. So we hope what we are doing can help make a difference for them and for their children’s futures.”

The new thread store significantly cuts time and travel expenses for the weavers, who previously traveled half a day to Guatemala City to purchase thread for their weaving projects. Thanks to Threads of Hope, they now have supplies on hand in their own community. To further ensure the store’s success, SIFE students worked with the women to develop business strategies, educating them about store ownership and retailing principles, and empowering them to run the local shop independently. They continue to mentor the women through weekly conference calls. “The most important thing was giving them the confidence to run a successful business,” Fisher says. “I left there fully believing that these women can succeed, and that their success will have an impact on the economic development of the whole community.”

## Global Network for Good

Founded in 1975, SIFE is a global nonprofit organization that helps students develop communication skills through learning, practicing, and teaching the principles of free enterprise on their campuses, in their communities, and beyond. Projects emphasize teamwork, leadership, and outreach. With more than 1,600 participating colleges and universi-



SU-SIFE members (top of facing page, left to right) Sierra Fogal '11, Tamara Feld '10, Kelly Fisher '10, Emily Sherrin '12, and Kelly Le '11 join Maurine McTyre Watts of Fair World Marketplace, and Professor Amanda Nicholson during a work break in Chumanzana.

Members of the Chumanzana weaving group (top left) gather with SU-SIFE faculty advisor Amanda Nicholson and Kelly Le '11. Le (top right) paints a beam in the Chumanzana thread store. Dona Raphaela (above), leader of the women’s group at Chumanzana, selects thread colors.

Kelly Fisher '10 (left-side facing page, second from left) meets with the owners of the Artisan Store in Djibouti and Brian Mailloux of the U.S. Air Force.

Working together in Djibouti (right-side facing page, left to right) are Major Reginald Kornigay, U.S. Army civil affairs; Matt Gartner '12, president-elect of SU-SIFE; Major Jesus Rodriguez, U.S. Africa Command, Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa; David Jones, Lockheed Martin; and the owner of an auto parts store.

# REACHING OUT TO CAMPUS AND THE COMMUNITY

Additional SU-SIFE projects:

## Environmental Sustainability: Converting Organic Waste (COW)

This project partners with the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in seeking alternative uses for food waste at SU and raising awareness through a cross-campus educational initiative focused on innovative methods of waste disposal and management. The team built an anaerobic digester model on campus that successfully took in more than 150 pounds of waste per week during a 2009 pilot study, producing 2,000 gallons of liquid fertilizer and 1,300 cubic meters of biogas. The COW team also conducted food audits at campus dining centers and entered Ernst & Young's Your World, Your Vision Competition to secure funding for project development. In May, the team submitted a proposal to the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment Steering Committee at SU, which has pledged the campus will be carbon neutral by 2040, and received the committee's endorsement to continue developing the idea with a long-term view of building a permanent digester to take care of all food waste.

## Personal Success Skills: Chadwick Residence

Objectives of the Chadwick Residence project are to increase the self-sufficiency of women residents coming from battered-women shelters, homeless shelters, and drug rehabilitation facilities; to move clients from welfare to work; and to instill confidence and optimism in an at-risk group. Activities have included offering weekly one-on-one GED tutoring sessions and holding seminars to improve skills in interviewing, resume building, and living on a budget. They also hope to expand workshop topics and enhance residents' skills in independent living.

## Financial Literacy: Get Smart

The Get Smart team seeks to develop the financial literacy of elementary, high school, and college students and instill the concept of savings in all student groups. The team's programs have resulted in a 40 to 75 percent increase in knowledge of financial literacy for all school groups, based on pre- and post-program testing. The team also conducts a financial literacy program for senior citizens at the Westcott

Community Center. Goals include extending efforts to SU residence halls this fall and reaching out to more senior citizens.

## Business Ethics: RESPECT

This project strives to raise awareness of unethical recruiting practices in Greek life across campus, reduce instances and severity of hazing during the new-member process, and lower the dropout rates of new members during pledging. The project has reached more than 1,300 students through special events. The team distributed anti-hazing cards and fliers across campus, and gained a commitment from the University for the RESPECT campaign to be a permanent part of the recruitment process. Goals include increasing activities to reach all Greek members on campus and further curtailing unethical pledge practices.

## Retail Therapy

This initiative targets Syracuse retailers who need help improving their businesses. This year the team worked with a young entrepreneur who imports baskets from Ghana and makes her own peanut brittle, helping her establish brand identity and increase channels of distribution and sales.



Whitman School students Zach Brown '13 (left) and Bryan Lovera '13 work with two seniors at the Westcott Community Center as part of SU-SIFE's Get Smart team that conducts financial literacy programs.





Kelly Le '11 (left) and Kelly Fisher '10 share instructions on retailing basics with the Chumanzana women.



Dona Raphaela, sporting a Whitman School cap, and fellow members of the women's weaving group celebrate after cutting the ribbon at their new thread store.

ties in 40 countries and territories, SIFE is one of the world's largest university-based organizations, bringing together a diverse network of students, academic professionals, and industry leaders with the common goal of making the world a better, more sustainable place through the power of business. SIFE participants contribute their talents to projects that improve the lives of people around the globe, demonstrating that individuals who are knowledgeable and passionate about business can be an important force for positive change. "The idea is that students take the knowledge and expertise they acquire in the classroom into the world and make a difference," Nicholson says. "The students are the center of it all, on literally hundreds of campuses."

It was Nicholson who first approached Whitman Dean Melvin T. Stith G'73, G'78 five years ago with the idea of starting a SIFE chapter at SU. Supportive from the start, Stith has played an important role in the group's success, providing encouragement as well as financial resources to help with travel and other expenses. "SU-SIFE continues to raise the bar for community engagement," Stith says. "The many dedicated and passionate members are skilled at spreading their enthusiasm. The bulk of the funding for building the store in Chumanzana was raised from Whitman faculty and staff who were won over by the tremendous efforts of these students and their faculty advisor."

Additional sources of funding for SU-SIFE include grants and contributions from company sponsors and individuals, including members of the team's business advisory board. Students also compete with other SIFE groups for prize money, both regionally and nationally. "Last year we competed in three different topic competitions and earned about \$7,000 in prize money," Nicholson says. "We've been to nationals every year, by winning a regional competition league—which is a big deal.

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—AMANDA NICHOLSON

We just returned from Minneapolis and placed second out of some 600 teams at the national competition, which was very exciting. I believe that competing is important. It keeps everyone on their toes and engaged. And it gives students the added benefit of learning how much organization it takes to make something happen on a small budget."

SU-SIFE has 70 active members working on several distinct projects (see page 40). While most participants are Whitman students, membership is open to everyone on campus. "Because of the types of things done in SIFE, members tend to be housed in business schools," Nicholson says. "But we welcome anyone who is interested and demonstrates a high level of commitment." Being in SIFE isn't easy, she cautions, but the rewards are as plentiful as the demands. "It isn't like going to summer camp," she says. "The projects can be risky. You don't know if one

will work, and things often go wrong. Doing something outside your safety barrier is tough. It is messy and it can be upsetting. But it can also be empowering to realize that by sharing what you have learned, you really can do something to help people who haven't had the same good fortune as you."

Fisher agrees that the benefits of participating in SIFE are well worth the hours she dedicated to the organization during her time at SU. "I could go on for days about what SIFE has meant to me," says Fisher, whose SIFE connections helped her land a marketing job with Unilever consumer products in the New York City area. "When I joined in my freshman year, I had no expectation of traveling the world, going to Guatemala, and working with groups like the women in Chumanzana. It completely opened my eyes and let me see there was more to school than taking classes. SIFE helped me develop my skills, but I was giving back at the same time. And that's something I don't think I could live without now."