

Giving new life to a tribal tradition



Melissa Chee / The Idaho Statesman
Fair Trade participants and mother and daughter do beadwork together. On the left, mother Elizabeth Marsh, left, and her daughter Cordelia carry on the Shoshone-Paiute tradition of doing beadwork. Elizabeth works on a coin purse while Cordelia works on a beaded checkbook cover. Above right, Elizabeth Marsh uses a needle with nylon thread to sew seed beads on a coin purse. A geometric pattern design accents the piece. Patterns are passed down through families.

Boise group helps women in rural Idaho expand their reach, sell handcrafted products at fair prices

By **Melissa Chee**
The Idaho Statesman

Shoshone-Paiute artisan Elizabeth Marsh sits in her home on the Duck Valley Reservation with her deerskin thimble and sews seed beads on a coin purse in a geometric pattern.

After 50 years of practice, she has perfected her beadwork.

At 75, Marsh still beads all day and sells her work locally to supplement her family's income.

But Shoshone-Paiute artisans often sell their beadwork for half the price of what the product is worth, said Nancy Egan, president of a Boise-based group called Women of Color Alliance and a member of the Shoshone-Paiute tribe. The Boise group is trying to help change that.

Marsh is one of five Native American women who are the first participants in the Women of Color Alliance's Fair Trade

program, designed to help women in rural Idaho sell their products for fair prices.

"It's giving women some form of sustainability," said Sonya Rosario, WOCA executive director. "These women make their living off their beadwork. It's a skill, a talent and an ancestral history passed down from generation to generation."

For Marsh, the beadwork started as a hobby, but now she does it from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. every day.

"I depend it on it now," Marsh said. "I get Social Security and SSI (Supplemental Security Income), but it's only enough to pay some of my bills."

The women live on Duck Valley Reservation, at the southern tip of Owyhee County on the Nevada border. The econ-

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At IdahoStatesman.com
Link to Women of Color Alliance

Ten Thousand Villages

Ten Thousand Villages began in 1946 when Mennonite Central Committee worker Edna Ruth Byler of Akron, Pa., visited Mennonite volunteers who taught sewing classes in Puerto Rico. They were looking for ways to improve the lives of their students, many of whom lived in poverty.

Byler brought several pieces of embroidery home to sell to friends and neighbors. The crafts were popular, and soon she added cross-stitch needlework from Palestinian refugees and hand-carved Haitian woodenware to her inventory. In the early 1970s, the flourishing project moved out of Byler's basement and became an official Mennonite program. Mennonite Central Committee is the service, relief and development agency of North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches.

There are now more than 180 stores across North America, including one in Boise's Hyde Park at 1609 N. 13th St.

Source: Ten Thousand Villages Web site

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Melissa Chee / The Idaho Statesman

Melanie Crutcher, a member of the Shoshone-Paiute tribe, shows some of her beadwork including moccasins, necklaces and barrettes.

Fair Trade

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omy is bleak. About 75 percent of the people who live on the reservation are unemployed.

"Women need to become the check writers of their own destiny by becoming owners of their own businesses," said Noemi Herrera, WOCA Fair Trade program developer.

The program's first accomplishment is getting Shoshone-Paiute beaded products — purses, coin purses, earrings and salt and pepper shakers — on the shelves at Ten Thousand Villages, a store that specializes in handcrafted goods from Third World countries in Boise. It's a new market for their products, Rosario said.

"WOCA asked if we would be able to expose the work of these women who are very marginalized, and we felt it was right to support our own local communities," said Keziah Sullivan, Ten Thousand Villages store manager.

The store works with the International Fair Trade Association, a coalition of Third World handicraft, agricultural organizations and non-governmental organizations designed to benefit artisans. The main objective is to improve the artisan's quality of life through ethical business practices that do not exploit people by, for example, paying artisans only a fraction of what their goods are worth.

"I think the movement was born from the idea that rather than giv-

Women of Color Alliance

Who: 600 members across the state.

What: A non-profit organization started in 1999 when a group of women gathered around a kitchen table and began to discuss issues relating to racism, classism and sexism in Idaho.

Where: Two local chapters, at Boise State University and the University of Idaho.

Why: Their goal is to empower women and girls of color, encourage them to participate in politics in Idaho and build alliances between communities of color.

Future event: The Women's Campaign School at Yale will be held at the University of Idaho in Moscow on Sept. 23-25. The school teaches women campaign skills, strategies and tactics to run a winning campaign. For information, call Karen Caffrey at 885-7716.

ing people handouts, you allow them to create and to sell. That really makes them feel dignified," Sullivan said.

Until now, the Shoshone-Paiute artisans have only been able to sell their beadwork locally, Egan said.

"They don't really have the opportunity or the income and transportation to go out and promote the actual selling of their products," she said. "Right now it's being sold at a fraction of the price that it's really worth because they need the additional income."

Without transportation and the ability to sell their products at other markets, the women sell their work wherever they can, said Corliss Garcia, a daughter of Elizabeth Marsh.

"One month I made \$1,000 and the next month I made \$500," Garcia said.

Garcia can finish a small beaded

purse in one day, which she says is 12 hours. Currently, she sells the purse for \$50, but in a larger market the same purse would sell for \$100, she said. That would boost the value of her work from \$4.16 an hour to \$8.33.

The beadwork provides the only income for Garcia and her five children, who range in age from 6 to 16.

"It will probably all go to them," Garcia said of what she would do with any extra income from the Fair Trade initiative.

Besides the time, the cost of beads is another consideration for how much a beaded product is worth. Melanie Crutcher estimated she spent \$80 on the cut beads to make a belt buckle. Cut beads are smaller than seed beads and made of glass, she said.

Although beading provides money, it's also a tradition.

"We sit around and talk with my family, and everybody just picks up a needle and starts going to town, and before you know it a project is done," said Cordelia Marsh, another daughter of Elizabeth Marsh.

Now Cordelia Marsh's two daughters, 28-year-old Carrie and 19-year-old Kristen, carry on the family tradition.

"Elizabeth Marsh is well known and respected in native communities in our area," said Maria-Carmen Gambliel, folk and traditional arts director at Idaho Commission on the Arts. "She has taught her children and other members of the Shoshone-Paiute tribe the traditions of hide processing, beadwork and the creation of traditional dance dresses."

For Women of Color Alliance members, these five women are just the beginning. The organization hopes to place more products at stores across the nation and expand the number of participants in the Fair Trade program.

"We're taking baby steps," Rosario said.

WOCA wants to empower women and help them reach economic stability.

"We can't ask women to run for political office when they're hungry," Rosario said. "We can't encourage women to take up all of their time to run for the education board when they have to put food on the table for their children."

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