

Compassion

People Who Make A Difference

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CHANGE IS BEAUTIFUL: Local Non-Profit Transforms the Lives of African Women

By Ann Davenport

We hear a lot about massive challenges in Africa: disease, poverty, the degradation of women; the list goes on. It all seems impossible to change from our homes here in southern Colorado. Yet local non-profit Keza makes a significant difference in the lives of Rwandan women every day.

Keza, pronounced KAY-za, means 'beautiful' in the Rwandan language. Founded several years ago by Jared Miller, Keza helps disadvantaged women make new lives for themselves by going into business as crafters of stunning jewelry. "They don't want a handout, they want a hand up," says vice president Justin Burns, who

works tirelessly as a volunteer for the organization. "It's business with a cause."

Social entrepreneurship is a crucial aspect of Keza, and the organization's efforts are having far-reaching effects in Rwanda. Keza provides pro bono business development for groups of women; the proceeds from sales of the gorgeous, unique jewelry sustain both the workers and the parent organization. "We're all about sustainable organization. How can we create a sustainable model that will not only empower this group of women, but enable the organization to empower tens of thousands of women?" Burns asks. After three years of research and

development, working with different crafts and business models, he says, "The conclusion was that they needed to start a business of their own."

The best product for that business to focus on, Miller found, was fashion, and specifically jewelry. It's a good fit for several reasons, Burns notes, but perhaps most importantly, "The women really liked it. They love fashion, jewelry, and being beautiful," he says. "So we found a synergy of helping, and in keeping with our name, helping women become beautiful inside and out."

The remarkable necklaces are made with a traditional rolled-paper technique. "We really liked the recycled paper idea, because it went along with our sustainable business model," says Burns. "It's sustaining the earth, and these women are sustaining their lives." The resulting jewelries are truly works of art, with vibrant colors and eye-catching styles that look both modern and timeless. The necklaces are primarily sold in the United States, raising vital funds for and crucial awareness of Keza's projects.

The years of hard work that Miller, Burns, and other dedicated volunteers have invested in helping disadvantaged women reached an exciting turning point recently, with a fabulous fashion show in Colorado Springs. Burns partnered with Gazette Charities to bring Los Angeles to the Springs, creating a couture environment replete with red carpet, bright lights, and a forest's worth of tropical plants, courtesy of Harding Nursery. "We literally transformed the whole lobby of the Plaza of the Rockies into an African savanna," Burns grins.

The event was a community effort with many local sponsors, and it included donated food, alcohol, and electronics. Local models also volunteered their time, as did the emcee, Romi of Magic 98.9, and DJ, Eric J (Eric Jackson). The successful event not only raised money and brand awareness of Keza's work, it also served as a template for fashion shows in other cities. Upcoming Keza shows in Nashville, TN and Peoria, IL will also expose people to the transformative power of Keza's jewelry.

Brand recognition is vital to Keza's future. "Without

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the brand, this would just be arts and crafts from lots of different people," Burns says. "Our desire is for Keza to be a global luxury fashion brand of items created by women in Africa."

Burns calls Keza's efforts a work in progress. "We never went to Africa with the concept of creating a fashion label. After years of listening to the heartache, pain, tears and joy, the fashion label kind of found us," he says. "We're always hearing about oppression in Africa, about starvation, global pandemics, poverty, war, hate crimes, genocide... Our desire is to elevate the continent and specifically the women within that continent to create identity, culture, and global recognition."

"We really do feel like, through this brand, we're shining a new kind of spotlight on Africa, one that tells the story of the beauty of its land and the excellence of its people," says Burns. The best part is, it's no fairy tale, but it ends happily-ever-after, one woman at a time.

Learn more about how you can get involved in Keza's many projects through their website, www.keza.com.