

Lantern Moon

Portland, Oregon

BY DARYL BROWER

It all began with a basket and a promise. In 2000, after several years of living and working in Vietnam, Joel and Sharon Woodcock returned to the U.S. with a few traditional Vietnamese rice baskets and a commitment to help the women who made them. A year later they founded Lantern Moon, a company that has become an unfailingly innovative source for beautiful things for knitters. “Basically we design and make handcrafted items to enhance the experience for those who design and make handcrafted items,” says Joel.

Sharon Woodcock discovered the baskets that launched Lantern Moon in Saigon, where she volunteered with a women’s social work group that was making and selling them. Recognizing their beauty and functionality, Sharon, a designer, saw a simple way to help make a difference in the lives of women who were working to pull themselves out of poverty: export the baskets to the U.S. and develop a market for them. She hand-carried a few samples on the flight back to the States; once home in Portland, she began showing them to friends and acquaintances (including her sister-in-law’s quilting group) to gauge reactions. “They loved them,” says Sharon.

Convinced they had a product people would want, the Woodcocks enlisted the help of their neighbor Bruce Feller, an experienced sales rep. “Bruce worked in the gift market, so that’s where we started,” explains Joel. Feller began selling the baskets to local shops, one of which was Portland’s Yarn Garden. When the store began ordering baskets by the dozen, Feller became curious. Linda Carter, the store’s owner, told him that her customers were snapping them up as knitting totes and suggested he take the baskets to TNNA. “So off we went with our one

product in two sizes and four colors,” says Joel. On the show floor, Lantern Moon found a viable (not to mention warm and fuzzy) market for their product. “After our second TNNA

show, we talked about what a great group knitters and crocheters were and wondered aloud why we should go anywhere else.”

Now fully committed to the yarn biz, Lantern Moon began developing other knitter-friendly products. “At our first TNNA market, Joel overhead someone saying that wooden knitting needles were impossible to get,” says Sharon. “That sparked the first big product expansion.” While Joel spent a year researching woods, consulting with knitters and developing a workshop that could consistently produce the quality product the company wanted, Sharon was busy designing, sourcing and refining the product mix. More baskets, silk needle cases, buttons and tote bags soon filled out the line.

Joel describes Lantern Moon as a small company with global reach. “We decided in the beginning that strengthening communities by being part of them and giving back to them would be at the very core of our business,” he explains. “It was always about lifting as many people out of poverty as we could. That’s the thread that goes through the whole process. We believe it is our responsibility to make lives better socially, economically and environmentally within the global community.”

That’s not just a feel-good tag line: The goal is to help the groups become self-sustaining. Lantern Moon doesn’t simply buy existing products; the team works with the artists to develop new items for a specific market. The craft cooperatives that make the bags, baskets and other items, and the family-run factory that crafts the needles, provide a source of income, education and self-reliance to Vietnamese women and their families. In Bali, Lantern Moon lends support to a group whose sole purpose is to provide education, training and sustainable business opportunities; in Cambodia and Laos they work directly with small silk producers, weavers and spinners in a fiber training program.

“Most of our producers are women in hard-to-reach rural areas,” says Joel, noting that there’s a direct “sisterhood” connection between the women who make the product and those who use them. “By matching existing skills and available resources with Sharon’s design skills and our knowledge of the market, [Lantern Moon] gives women a chance to create something marketable and grab the first rung on the way up from



a basic subsistence lifestyle.”

As the company grows, so has the diversity of items offered. “We have a great group in the home office now, and that’s allowing Sharon and me to spend more time on product development,” says Joel, who estimates that they spend six months or more a year traveling and working directly with artisan groups. Topping those new developments is the company’s Featherlight needle line, made from plantation-grown wood certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council, an independent non-governmental organization established to promote responsible management of the world’s forests.

“We’re coming across new and exotic fibers and working to see if we can provide something beautiful, unique and functional that creates steady income for people,” says Joel. Fabric is one possibility; yarn, another. Whatever joins the line, retailers and knitters can rest assured that it will be beautiful. “Our business is built on attention to detail, quality, customer service and a commitment to the people and groups that produce our products,” says Joel. “So in that sense, we’re simply planning for more of the same.”



Snapshot

Lantern Moon

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Years in business: 10
Square footage: 10,000
Employees: 10

Products: Baskets; needle cases; straight, circular and interchangeable knitting needles; containers, bags and other accessories; display items.