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Power-Packed Purses

Hudson Woman's Handbags Hold Hope

by Peggy Russell

Maryann Wohlwend may claim she did not set out to save the world, but that mission for her is in the bag.

"It's certainly not happening the way I had expected," Wohlwend said when explaining the success of MaryannBags. "In 2007, I met Hudson based missionary Diane Amon, who told me about a group of Filipino women who had been rescued from living under a bridge in their homeland by making jewelry to be sold primarily in the United States. I had been asking myself how I could use my handbags to help other women, and I felt this might be the beginning of my answer."

Previously, Wohlwend had contacted the Missions Director at Hudson Community Chapel after the pastors shared a global vision for all members to "multiply themselves" using personal gifts and talents to reach out to each other. About the same time, Lyndsey Farro, an accomplished jewelry artisan at Kent State Fashion Merchandising also made contact

with the church. Both women sought a purposeful career in missions and hoped to make a positive difference in the lives of others. When told of Amon's project in the Philippines, the three women joined forces in what looked like a providential partnership.

By October 2007, a collection of MaryannBags was manufactured in Cagayun de Oro, the City of Golden Friendships, in the Philippines.

Wohlwend began her artistic work with fabrics while attending Kent State University in 1988, where she was a fashion design major. "I studied textiles, art history and fiber arts," she said, "and at first, I began designing hats, wedding headpieces and things like that, and about ten years ago I decided to move into the area of handbags, which I now do full time."

When Wohlwend first began her handbag venture, she had no idea they would become such popular products. The handbags are now highly regarded throughout Northeast Ohio for their eclectic designs and quality construction. The artistic and whimsical bags were featured in the Plain Dealer's fashion section and are frequently showcased in trunk shows at Nordstrom Cleveland. They were also featured at Deering Gallery (Beachwood



Maryann Wohlwend heads into Uniquely Ohio at First & Main in Hudson with several of her creatively crafted handbags. Photo by C. Mroczkowski

Place), Lush Boutique in Legacy and at Cleveland Museum of Arts gift stores, and Ohio State University motif bags are currently available at Uniquely Ohio in Hudson.



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Inspired by the success of the Philippines project, Wohlwend wondered if she could accomplish more by joining forces with other women to expand production of her product. "I decided I could do it as a business with a purpose, rather than just a business to satisfy myself," she said. "I started out by working with The House of Transformation, a women's shelter in the Philippines in 2007. I am now partnered with the India Gospel League, and the women who make my purses are paid a wage that exceeds fair trade standards. I am hoping it will improve the economy in their villages. In fact, it already has."

A signature sparrow-nest construction of unusual fabrics makes Wohlwend's bags unique. Vibrant silks and fine embroidery combine to form purses that are often considered intrinsic works of art by those who purchase them. "I still make the one-of-a-kind bags myself," Wohlwend said, "but for the bags made in India, I have designed four different styles that they make for me."

Wohlwend said she was encouraged by the prospect of helping women become productive and by the positive reaction she received, both locally and internationally, to her bags.

"My husband, Andy, has also been a great inspiration to me, offering encouragement and help when needed," Wohlwend said. "He is a writer, working on children's books, a novel and also writes songs, so we both lean toward the artistic side. We have two children, a son, Ethan, 7, and a daughter, Sophia, 5, who are an inspiration as well."

Wohlwend is aware that some signature handbags are too expensive for the everyday shopper. "I try to design and make bags that will last and are actually small works of art," said Wohlwend. "My Sparrow's Nest bags are made with silk, Chantilly lace and freshwater pearls and sell for less than \$100, and my Gypsy Bag is made from fine painted silk and ivory lace appliqué, has a faux suede strap and sells for \$159."

It is more than a handbag business for Wohlwend; it is about the 'sisters' throughout the globe and her intricate relationship in their lives. "We make wearable art that feeds hungry women in India," she said. ∞



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~ JIM SHRINER, Metro Parks volunteer and Fall Hiking Spree participant



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