

Bead making offers Kenyan women livelihood

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Pulling into the driveway of the Kazuri beads factory in Kenya, members of a women's leadership team from Baylor University began to count their shillings and think about gifts for friends and relatives at home.

Initially, the students were dismayed when told they could not bargain the prices. After seeing where the money was going, they wouldn't want to bargain.

The Kazuri beads business was founded in 1975 by Lady Susan Wood. Wood started with two African women, but soon, more women joined the workshop. Experimenting in making handmade beads, the workers are mostly single mothers from the villages around Nairobi.

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Kazuri, which means “small and beautiful” in Swahili, has since grown into a competitive business that sells its beads worldwide.

In the brightly lit bead-making factory, about 100 women sat at various tables working. The room was large and on the left side were huge ovens and fiery pots. Modestly dressed in skirts and head wraps, the women stared at the work before them. With nimble hands, they created works of art.

The students stood amazed at the working women's craftsmanship. The first table was filled with women mumbling quietly as they carefully molded clay into various shapes. Beads took the form of long, flat circles, small squares and other various shapes, each one intricately crafted. The speed at which these women worked allowed us to see them make one, two then three individual beads in a matter of minutes.

The women gladly allowed the group to take photos of them at work, smiling for the cameras between beads.

"It's amazing that these women are able to craft these beautiful beads from clay and mud with their hands," said senior Amy Din.

The guide told the students that after the women craft them, the beads are heated to 1,060 Celsius and hardened. At this point, every indentation is permanent. Because the women are so careful in their design, flaws are rare, and individual details give personality to their work.

After the clay beads are baked in the industrial-size ovens, they are sent to another table to be painted.

Students watched as the workers turned beige clay into beautiful, colored art. Turquoise and pink, purple with green spots, red with black circles; every color and design was being carefully painted onto the clay. Each bead was individually painted, intricately designed to be unique.

"I've never bought anything that was all homemade. It was neat to see what I was buying being made," said senior Liz Aldrige.

Making the beads into jewelry is the next step. A table of older women took fishing wire and added large and small beads of various sizes and colors. The workers allowed some team members to try their hands at stringing beads onto a necklace. What would take about three hours for a student to do, the workers could do in 10 minutes.

Seeing the process of the beads being made and interacting with the workers, the team was excited to be a part of supporting the company by visiting the gift shop. For an hour or so, the Baylor students squealed over pottery shaped like their college mascot, modeled necklaces in the mirror and gathered gifts for their mothers, grandmothers and friends.

In addition to jewelry, the store contained pottery, hand-beaded sandals, purses and various other bric-a-brac.

Although the prices were more than many wanted to pay, the students knew where the money is going. A bracelet took on new meaning when helping the women who created it.

“There’s a story behind it, so it makes it more special,” said recent graduate Jordan Willmann. “It’s not a normal necklace you can get anywhere; it has a purpose.”

Knowing that they were helping Kenyan women have a better life made money seem inconsequential.

“It’s a good souvenir because you see the process and the money is going to the women.” said recent graduate Kacee Surratt, a member of the women’s team. “You’re willing to pay more.”

For more information on Kazuri, visit www.kazuribeads.co.uk/

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