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Yardley company's global thread

Silk home accessories pay off for the Yardley company that designs and sells them and the women a world away who make them.

By Kathleen Nicholson Webber
For The Inquirer

Taking stock of one's contributions to the world might merely turn into the usual resolutions to do better in the new year.

Or, it might be the making of a new career.

Sue Firestone's epiphany fell into the latter category. She left corporate America in 2001 to start Siw Thai Silk Inc., a Yardley company that designs and sells rich silk home accessories.

Priced from \$75 to \$450, the goods are sold in 300 tonny stores in 39 states and two countries. But the wares are handmade in seven small villages in Thailand by women who are sustaining their families through the work.

The silks are hand-colored with natural plant and vegetable dyes (or sometimes low-impact synthetics) and are handwoven and often hand-sewn. Retailers featuring them include Kellijane in Center City, Bograds in Riverdale in northern New Jersey, and ABC Carpet & Home in New York City.

"Our customers like us because we have different styles and designs than other companies who do this," says Firestone. "Our shops are mid- to high-end boutique owners. They want to sell things that their customer will not see at Crate & Barrel because their customer doesn't want to see the same pillow at their neighbor's house."

Among the company's offerings are giant ruched poufs; textured ikats and batiks that can take months to weave for bolsters and throws; hand-painted and hand-embroidered silks for squares; graphic basket weaves; and natural-colored pillows made from the water hyacinth plant.

"I love Sue and what she does. She is not only socially aware and conscious, she is socially active," says Kelly Monk-Reed, owner of Kellijane at 1721 Spruce St., which has carried Siw Thai Silks' pillows and throws for three years.

"The silks are gorgeous. There is a richness to the colors that jumps out at you," Monk-Reed says. "Her line has pieces that are ethnic-looking, modern and traditional. My city customers like the more modern pieces, and my suburban customers tend to like the more traditional pieces, pillows with tassels."

Three new collections will debut for store buyers later this month at the International Gift Fair in New York, a trade show. Firestone spends her days working on new designs with Siw Thai Silk's creative director, Karen Bluestein, a former housewares and home-furnishings buyer for Urban Outfitters.

Always in focus is their triple bottom line of planet, people and profit: eco-friendly manufacturing and operations, respect and fair pay for all people involved in Siw Thai Silk, and profits fairly distributed from its net financial gains.

But running through the company's story is a romantic thread as well as the silken ones.

Firestone's daughter Becca spent her junior year of college studying in Thailand. When she returned later to work for the Ford Foundation, she met a young Thai man, Ohng Sewthaisong, whose mother was a silk weaver.

As a gift, his mother gave Becca silk made in her small village, Isaan, located seven hours from Bangkok in the northeastern part of the country. It's an area tourists tend not to visit because the land is mostly flat and filled with rice fields. Most of the villagers are rice farmers who have only a fourth-grade education.



SUE FIRESTONE

A woman in Na Pho village in Thailand takes the first step in spinning the silk filaments into yarn. The goods that result from the handiwork are sold in 300 stores.

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During her daughter's courtship (Becca and Sewthaisong are married now), Firestone, a Wharton MBA, was climbing corporate ladders. When the division she was running at Cigna was being sold off, she knew it was time to start her own business.

Daughter Becca was the one who suggested in 2000, "Why don't you import this silk, sell it, and help support the villagers?"

Firestone first started making pillows in Sewthaisong's village, where silkworms were grown and the silk was dyed, spun and woven.

"Because the villagers are also skilled at sewing, we had them sew the pillows, too, instead of here in the U.S., so more money could go back to the villages," she says.

Today, there are seven silk co-ops in Thailand, and they make everything from the labor-intensive silk ikats and silk batiks to the rich metallic silks. Firestone also works with five other co-ops to produce a line of scarves, purses, and jewelry called My Thai Treasures.

Product design is done by Firestone, Bluestein and Sewthaisong, who is studying at the New England School of Interior Design (he also serves as translator). Bluestein's experience at Urban Outfitters was in product and textile development. "I also had a retail background, so I understood how stores think," she adds.

At trade shows, Siw Thai Silk's booth displays pictures of the women who make the pillows and throws it sells.

"People were intrigued when I first put them out. Then we put it on the Web site [www.siwthaisilk.com] that we were eco-friendly and fair trade, and buyers came to visit us at the booth," Firestone says.

"For some people, there is still this notion that fair trade has something to do with coffee," she adds with a laugh. "But the bottom line is you still have to have a quality product and beautiful design, or no one will buy it."

Firestone loves working with the fabrics and designing new products, but being involved with the villagers trumps all that, she says. "Seeing how our business helps them and supports their traditions is definitely one of the more rewarding parts of the business."

The more successful co-ops have been able to generate enough income to enable members to support their families, Firestone says - and even bring the younger generation back from Bangkok, where many have flocked in the last 15 years.

"Big city, bright lights and all that, but the reality is that they are able to live a better life in the villages, though maybe not as exciting."

One villager who works with the company now has tile floors (they once were dirt), indoor plumbing, and a water heater.

"This business makes a huge difference in their lives. The handcraft income not only helps support family members, it also provides a creative outlet and supports the continuation of village traditions and community," Firestone says.

"All good things."

Get the Goods

Siw Thai Silk's pillows and throws are available locally at Kellijane,

1721 Spruce St., 215-790-0233, and at www.upsideliving.com and www.edenhome.com.

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