

A local story: A local fair trade jewellery business



Shalini runs a fair trade/eco-friendly jewellery business, Samburu Designs that she set up with her sister.

Shalini was born and brought up in Kenya. She left the country to study and hasn't been back home for five years. She lives in Cranleigh. Shivani, Shalini's sister has always lived in Kenya and works there as a wildlife conservationist.

How did the business start?

In Kenya, a friend took Shivani to a tiny, dead village called Archer's Post. While there, she was told to buy some coca cola from a small grocery store run by a young girl called Amina. Shivani happened to notice Amina's jewellery, which it turned out the girl had made herself. Shivani asked Amina if she'd be interested in making more jewellery to sell and that's how it all started.

Shivani then asked me if I'd be able to sell the jewellery over here in England. I didn't really know how I'd be able to and in any case, at the time I was still working at Cranleigh Arts Centre. I spoke to some of my contacts and then when I left the Arts Centre last year, I approached the local markets manager and set up a stall in Cranleigh Market. From there, I got work at the Rudgwick Music Festival and at Hurtwood Polo Club and some other places, so it was well worth doing.

How does the cash flow work within the business, considering that the jewellery itself comes all the way from Kenya?

Amina, does most of our beadwork for us, plus a guy called Alex, who originates from a tribe in Samburu and also works as Shivani's assistant. Amina also now does some work for my sister's organisation, but at night she makes jewellery by the light of a paraffin lamp!

We then buy stuff from the producers, and when I sell it, Shivani and I give a percentage of the profit back to them. We originally paid them up front. In the first six months, I didn't take any profit at all and then split it with Shivani and the producers.

The biggest expense for me was rent for the market stand and of course my time, which was fine last summer, but now I do private parties, which is a much better option as I don't have any overheads, apart from petrol.

We want to carry on being able to help Amina and Alex's contacts but I'm aware that fashion is very fickle, so what we're selling may not be fashionable in the long term. We've thought about whether Amina can diversify and make other things like napkin rings and maybe next Christmas some baubles for the Christmas tree.

My sister feels very strongly about helping people, especially at the moment because there's a drought and lots of muggings are taking place. She tells me what's happening out there and I really feel for them – it's not an easy life.

How do you transport the goods?

We don't have special shipments, we get people we know to bring stuff over and because of what Shivani does for a living – she works for "Save the Elephants" and does some tour guide work too; she knows lots of people who are going back and forth between England and Kenya on a regular basis either for work, or on holiday.

What problems have you faced with the growth of the business?

The biggest problem is that the beads used for making the jewellery are very expensive and getting an adequate supply difficult, so we've had to supply the beads ourselves.

Shivani has also now got some metal jewellery made by the Borana tribe. It's very beautiful: they beat the metal and weave it into bracelets etc.

What reaction have you had from customers?

I had an article in the Surrey Advertiser and as a result people just came to the market stall to hear about Amina's story. I've sold a lot of Amina's 'special' necklaces - customers like the connection between what they are buying and this young girl who's made them.

How has Samburu Designs changed lives?

Alex is Shivani's assistant. Through his contacts we've managed to get a whole load of stuff made. Bracelets can even be made with customers' names on them!

The extra income has been very important and as making this jewellery is a traditional craft, it's not something that they had to learn to do, they were already doing it.