



A MESSAGE FROM GEOFF AND LYNICE

We have just returned from a trip to Thailand and Mongolia, where we had the privilege of catching up with various producer groups, as well as visiting Clear Skies House and House of Dreams. This issue of "Friends of Empower" will cover some of the highlights of our travels, and hopefully provide some further insight into the various groups and will encourage you, just as we were encouraged.

Empower has been involved with some of these groups for over five years now and during that time we have observed a significant improvement in the living conditions, health and life skills of the women and children. Of course there have been some complications and setbacks along the way, as the issues faced by the women are complex. There are no easy fixes and it is crucial that every group knows that we are on the journey with them for the long haul.

There can be a tendency for well-meaning (but misguided) charitable organizations to adopt a "tick and flick" approach when assisting people in poverty. There is simplicity in funding a building project, putting your sign on the front gate, taking a team photo..... and then moving on to something else. Tick...and flick. So often, the result is disaster at worst or no long term benefit at best. As we have travelled around South East Asia we have seen this sad reality time and time again.

The much harder, but far more worthwhile course, is to partner with those you are helping over an extended period of time, working through the inevitable issues together. It is all about relationship and ongoing honest communication is essential.

We loved visiting Artis Altai in Mongolia to see their new workshop. It certainly was great and a significant improvement on their previous premises. We wish every reader of this newsletter could walk into their workshop and experience the joy of the women as they work. But we discovered the women still don't have running water in their workshop, as the water pipes were not placed deep enough into the ground, and so the water froze in the pipes over the very cold winter. So.... now that summer has arrived, this issue is being addressed. There will be running water in this workshop. At Empower, we do not "tick and flick"!

Geoff and Lynice Wigney





STREAMS IN THE DESERT

The population of Mongolia is approximately three million and about one half of these people live in the capital city, Ulaanbaatar. Many rural girls move to Ulaanbaatar from the countryside with the hope of completing education or finding work. Some of these girls end up abused, addicted to drugs and involved in prostitution. It is a horrible, lonely and desperate existence.

Streams in the Desert exists specifically to assist girls in this situation, to provide secure housing, regular income, counselling, drug rehabilitation, childcare and to teach life skills in a safe and loving environment. It is precisely the type of issues which Empower is seeking to address and so we are very pleased to partner with Streams in the Desert. We were so impressed with the quality of care, guidance and support provided to the young women.

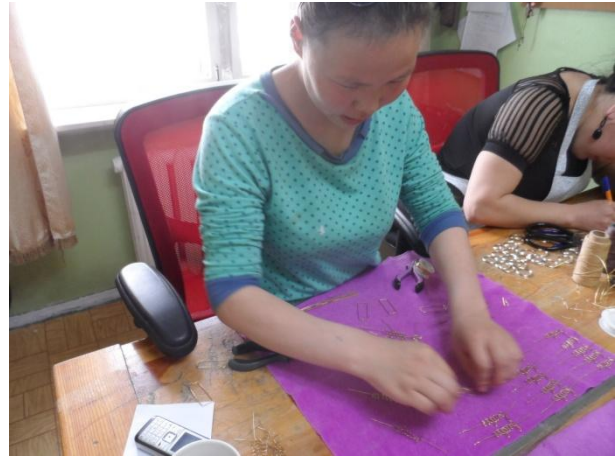


The young women at Streams in the Desert make jewellery, including a necklace featuring a pendant with the words “Free Her” (below). Another beautiful and meaningful feature of their jewellery is the traditional Mongolian eternity knot, also made by hand.

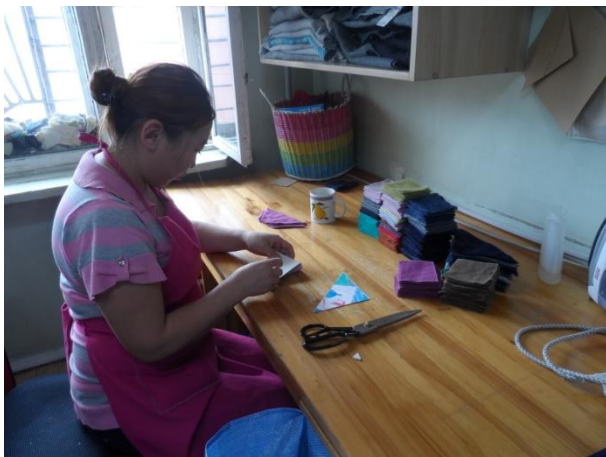




Here (below) you can see two of the women shaping different elements to be included in completed jewellery pieces.



The women also upcycle cashmere woollen jumpers to make scarves, mittens, ear warmers and blankets. Below you can see two women cutting and sorting fabric, and sewing new winter woollies.





ARTIS ALTAI

Our 1,000km drive across the Mongolian Steppe to Altai enabled us to appreciate the un-fenced vastness, beauty and changing landscape of this amazing countryside. We felt so privileged to see the occasional herd of horses, sheep, goats and camels, along with strategically located gers (housing for nomadic herders).





It was so exciting to finally be standing in the Artis Altai workshop and to experience the joy of the women as they happily worked around a large table together – chatting and laughing as they expertly worked on various felted products.





Artis Altai has its own retail shop attached to the workshop, so they can sell their products locally. This is the only women's co-operative in Altai and the only shop of this type and so it provides an example for others to follow to earn sustainable income in a safe and welcoming environment.



Spending a couple of days with the women enabled us to further enhance our relationship with them and hopefully give them a better appreciation of our commitment to them for the long term. It was apparent that Empower is one of the main purchasers of Artis Altai products and so it is important that we look for ways to sell more products to enable their business to flourish.



DOES WHAT YOU GIVE MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Before we left Australia, three people gave Empower different amounts of money with the instructions to “see a need and address it”. These donations proved so beneficial as we were able to:

1. Fund the purchase of the following items for Clear Skies House in Thailand:

- Sewing machine
- Air conditioner
- 9 Fans
- Water Cooler
- Water Filter
- Flywire for the window in the dormitories
- Cupboards for the dormitories



2. Provide US \$500 to Streams in the Desert to assist with their financial needs including provision of housing, child care and programs to teach young women valuable life skills.



3. Purchase a “clothes spinner” at Artis Altai to spin dry the wool - their spinner had recently “died”.

