



A MESSAGE FROM GEOFF AND LYNICE

We like the *idea* of exercising much more than we actually like exercising. We know the many benefits of exercise for the body and mind. Exercise makes perfectly good sense. The problem is that commitment to exercise has a cost – in terms of time, money and discomfort – and so the reality is that we don't exercise as much as we should. To encourage us to exercise, we have moved our exercise bike into our family room, so it is in front of us all the time, reminding us to move from "thinking" about exercise to actually "doing it".

In the same way we like the *idea* of changing the world more than we actually like changing the world. We know the positive impact that can be made in the lives of vulnerable women who face exploitation due to issues of poverty and lack of value being attributed to them. It makes perfectly good sense to undertake projects to stand against injustice. The problem is that commitment to change the world has a cost – in terms of time, money and discomfort – and so the reality is that we don't change the world as much as we should. One of the purposes of this quarterly newsletter is to bring the work of Empower into your family room, as a reminder to you to move from "thinking" about changing the world to actually "doing it".

We have just attended "The Justice Conference" in Melbourne, where the keynote speaker, Eugene Cho (Pastor, author and international speaker) made the point that our current generation is overrated in terms of the minimal impact we have actually made on justice issues compared with our incredible capacity to oppose injustice.

An unfortunate reality with our consumer driven capitalist society is that we are encouraged to focus on "self" rather than on the needs of others and the popular view is that our level of achievement is measured by our personal wealth.

We are grateful that there is a growing number of people who are choosing the less popular (but more fulfilling) course of giving appropriate consideration to the needs of others less fortunate than themselves.

Please consider the section of this newsletter headed "How you can help", to put some action to your thoughts. In the meantime, we have an exercise bike to ride.

Geoff and Lynice Wigney



EMPOWER HIGHLIGHTS

February • March • April • May

- Empower featured in an article in the Weekly Times on 29th October 2014. If you missed it, you can check it out by typing “weekly times Geoff and Lynice” into Google.
- During February, Geoff and Lynice visited Empower’s partner groups in Northern Thailand and also two safe-houses (Clear Skies House and House of Dreams). We also attended a Fair Trade fair in Bangkok, run by an organization committed to assisting rural producer groups in selling their quality handmade products.
- Geoff and Lynice attended “The Justice Conference” in Melbourne in April. It was very informative, challenging and inspiring, as a variety of speakers shared their experience and insight concerning a range of justice issues.
- Empower had its first taste of retail in the Melbourne CBD, being part of a Pop-Up-Shop called “12 X 12” situated at Donkey Wheel House, in Bourke Street. Various social enterprises were represented in the retail store. We are continuing our investigations to expand into Melbourne on a more permanent basis (stand by for details in our next newsletter).
- An amount of \$20,000.00 was provided to Artis Altai in Mongolia to contribute towards the cost of their new workshop (as detailed in our last newsletter). The photo to the right indicates the location where the workshop is to be built – with the building process planned to commence within the next two months. A massive “THANK YOU” to all those who have so generously contributed to this project. There will be a further update in our next newsletter.
- An amount of \$7,400 was provided to Clear Skies House in northern Thailand to fund ongoing child sponsorship and the Happy Families Project.
- An amount of \$1,500.00 was provided to Mother’s Heart in Cambodia to help fund their ongoing work with pregnant women. Mother’s Heart do an amazing job supporting vulnerable women – you can find out more at www.mothersheart-cambodia.org
- The opportunity to promote Empower and to raise awareness of the issues caused by poverty and a lack of value being attributed to women by completing “talks” at U3A Bairnsdale, Crosspoint Baptist Church, Cranbourne and Bairnsdale Probus Club.
- One of our great volunteers (Hanna Roderick) ran an Empower stall at Melbourne University’s Fair Trade Day. It was a great opportunity to promote Empower in Melbourne. Well done Hanna!



INTRODUCING FREESET

Empower has purchased quality jute and organic cotton bags from “Freeset” since our retail store opened in August 2011. Freeset was established by Kerry and Annie Hilton, who moved to India with their four children in 1999 to live and work amongst the poor. Freeset is located in Sonagacchi, the largest, most infamous sex district in Kolkata, India. Within a few square kilometres more than 10,000 women stand in line selling their bodies to thousands of men who visit daily. It is a truly gut-wrenching sight and it is impossible to fathom the physical, psychological and emotional impact of such horrible exploitation.

Freeset is in the business of freedom – providing skills training and employment for women rescued from the sex industry. Many of these women have been trafficked from Bangladesh, Nepal and rural India. Others have been driven into the sex trade due to poverty and a lack of positive options. As Kerry Hilton says, “They did not choose prostitution – prostitution chose them”. Freeset provides a “way out” for these women, through sustainable income and support. A new initiative of Freeset is to provide employment for women and girls at risk of exploitation by the sex industry.

In addition to being paid properly for their work the women receive health insurance, a pension plan and are empowered with life-skills needed to appreciate their new freedom. This freedom flows out into their extended families and is bringing about generational change.

Many of the bags made by Freeset feature up-cycled sari fabrics and their own silk screen printing. There are functional and practical new designs being created on an ongoing basis and their quality products have been very popular with our customers. Freeset products are available in our retail shop and our online store (including some discontinued lines at reduced prices!)

There are now more than 200 women employed in the Freeset “family”. The workshop is a friendly place with a positive atmosphere – a stark contrast to sweat shop conditions so prevalent in India. With the growth of the business, Freeset is planning to purchase a large building in the Sonagacchi district that will enable it to expand its work in combatting the injustices of the sex industry. You can contribute to this very worthwhile project by donations made through Empower.



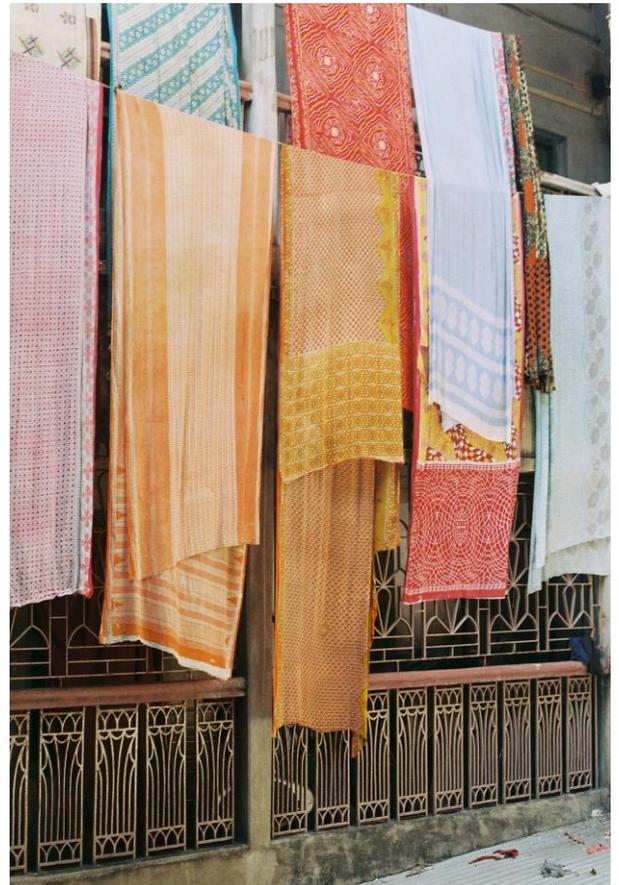
If you would like to learn more about Freeset, check out their website www.freesetglobal.com or their building project (called “The Gateway Project”) at <http://freesetglobal.com/gateway-campaign.html>

PHOTO GALLERY



Selecting just the right colour from the cotton cupboard at the Freeset workshop in Sonagacchi, Kolkata (above)

Old saris drying in the sun so they can be up-cycled into Freeset bags (right)





HOW YOU CAN HELP

If you are interested, there are some ways you can assist us in our vision to “empower the privileged to empower the poor”. You could:

- Donate funds for a specific project (eg towards the purchase of the building by Freeset) or by way of a general donation – either in our retail store or online. (100% of funds donated are used towards projects)
- Assist in the cost of Empower establishing a retail presence in Melbourne
- Purchase products from our retail store at 188 Main Street, Bairnsdale - Purchase products from our online store at www.empower.org.au (free postage)
- Promote Empower to your family, friends and associates
- Forward this newsletter to those who may be interested in Empower
- “Like” Empower on Facebook and encourage your online friends to follow us

Some pictures of the wonderful ladies of the Lisu Hilltribe village, taken during a visit earlier this year (right and below)

