



A MESSAGE FROM GEOFF AND LYNICE

Welcome to the fourth edition of “Friends of Empower”. We trust all our friends and supporters have enjoyed a refreshing break over the Christmas period and are now looking forward to what is in store during 2015. As the “normal” activities of the year get underway we take the opportunity to look back over the last few months and also to look forward to the year ahead.

December was a very busy month for Empower, with our retail shop being “flat out” in the lead up to Christmas. We were very encouraged by the level of support from our local community and beyond and enjoyed the Christmas vibe and excitement (although we were just about “over” Christmas carols by Christmas Eve). Our producer groups love making beautiful hand-made Christmas decorations and cards and so it is a very important time of the year to maximise sales.

Now that this busy time is over we are very mindful of the need to increase our turnover of stock.

Throughout 2014 we have purchased products from new producer groups located in Thailand, Mongolia, Pakistan and China. It has been a privilege to get to know these producer groups and to assist in providing a means of financial sustainability for them. However, it is crucial that we do not reduce the amount of products we purchase from any of our existing producer groups. In fact, it is our desire to increase the amount of products we purchase from each of our

producer groups, in order to improve their financial circumstances and allow for their businesses to grow and to secure the future for more women.

With this in mind we have resolved to open an Empower store in Melbourne this year, which is both exciting and daunting at the same time. Those familiar with our Bairnsdale store will be aware of the ox cart in the front window and the ox cart wheel (used to display scarves). Just this week we have received another ox cart and ox cart wheel from Cambodia, skilfully crafted by a man with HIV Aids. The demand for new ox carts is very low and so he was very pleased to be able to earn income using his considerable skill and passion.

Over the coming months we will determine the location for the store and arrange the fit-out in readiness for opening. We are seeking financial assistance for this considerable expense, which will enable the significant increase in turnover we feel is so necessary. We will also be looking for strategic people to be involved in the management and staffing of the store. Please carefully consider how you could be involved in these areas and you are most welcome to contact us at any time.

Geoff and Lynice
Wigney





EMPOWER HIGHLIGHTS

October • November • December • January

- 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.
- The Financial Statements for Empower for the year ended 30th June 2014 were prepared and the independent audit undertaken. If you would like a copy of the Financial Statements please let us know and we will email them to you, or you can access them by searching “Empower International” in the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission website www.acnc.gov.au
- We have updated our website www.empower.org.au to make it mobile phone friendly. So, if you haven't looked at our website recently, check it out – on your mobile phone! Please also check out our online store – we have been busy adding new products and really encourage you to order products online if you do not live in the Bairnsdale area.
- Just before Christmas we had a Christmas celebration for all our Empower volunteers (see photo on page 6). We are so grateful to these volunteers (and others) who have been so generous with their time, energy and finances to enable us to carry out the various aspects of Empower.
- We provided a further sum of \$5,000.00 to International Justice Mission to help fund the rescue of girls from sexual slavery in Cebu, Philippines.
- Child sponsorship in the sum of \$5,859.00 was provided to Clear Skies House in northern Thailand to help support the children between January and March this year. We (Geoff and Lynice) will be visiting Clear Skies House and various producer groups in northern Thailand in the latter part of February (you will hear all about this in our next “Friends of Empower” newsletter).
- So far, \$8,807.00 has been specifically donated towards the purchase of land and a purpose built workshop for the producer group “Artis Altai” located in rural Mongolia. Empower has committed to contribute \$20,000.00 to this project and so we are seeking further donations. Land in an ideal location has been obtained and a builder has been engaged, with building works commencing in April or May (depending on the weather conditions). We (Geoff and Lynice) plan to visit the newly completed workshop later this year.

INTRODUCING RAINBOW TREE

The first producer group we ever met when establishing Empower was the precious women of “Rainbow Tree”, a producer group situated in northern Thailand. These women have HIV Aids, contracted from their husbands who had attended brothels (sadly, a culturally acceptable activity), with their husbands subsequently dying.

Rainbow Tree make cards, gift bags and boxes out of paper which is produced from the bark of a mulberry tree (called “saa paper”). They also beautifully decorate wooden clothes pegs with fine paintwork, which we occasionally attach to paper bags when customers purchase products from our store.

At the end of our first visit with these women in early 2010 Lynice hugged each of them... and they cried... as no one would touch them as they have HIV Aids. They were ostracized in their own community through no fault of their own. It was a very poignant moment and birthed in us the resolve to partner with them on a long term basis, to help secure their financial future and to encourage them in any way we were able.

One problem they faced was that their few commercial customers in Thailand would have strict time-frames for their products to be made, and they would pay only a very small amount for each item. Accordingly, the women were working very hard for little income and then would have no further work available for a time. We have been able to purchase products on a more regular basis



A small sample of the handmade saa paper cards made by the ladies of Rainbow Tree

and volume, and to pay a fair amount. The women took some time to understand that we did not require a lower unit cost for greater quantity of products!

In a subsequent visit, it was painfully apparent that the bamboo and thatch workshop was at the end of its working life and needed replacing. It was not far from falling down and the women had placed plastic over the roof to try to prevent rain getting in and damaging their paper. The result was effectively a hot-house (unbearable working conditions) and so our first Empower project came into being – the construction of a suitable workshop (see the photo below). The building is



used by Rainbow Tree during the week and is used as a Church by the local community each Sunday. The building will be suitable for the long term and provides a place where the women can meet each day in comfort.

You can help by keeping Rainbow Tree in mind when purchasing cards or bags. They can be purchased in store or on-line and are far more appealing than mass-produced cards.

Over the last four years we have seen the health of the women improve due to medication for HIV Aids, which they can now afford. We have seen their confidence and skills improve and have enjoyed watching them thrive. Empower currently pays the manager's wage for Rainbow Tree. Our plan is to increase the sale of products made by Rainbow Tree so they can be fully self-sustainable and be able to pay the manager's wage out of the sale of their products.



The old bamboo and thatch workshop (above) and the brand new workshop provided for the women of Rainbow Tree and their community (left)



PHOTO GALLERY



Some of the women from Rainbow Tree making photo frames from saa paper (above)

A selection of the Christmas card and gift bag designs from Rainbow Tree (right)



HOW YOU CAN HELP

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

- Make a donation towards the land and new workshop for Artis Altai in Mongolia.
- Make a donation towards the fit-out of our Empower store in Melbourne - donations can be made in our retail store, on-line, or by direct deposit to:

Commonwealth Bank
Empower International
BSB: 063832
Account No: 10133769

- Support Rainbow Tree by purchasing their hand-made cards and bags from Empower.
- Purchase products from our retail store at 188 Main Street, Bairnsdale.
- Purchase products from our on-line 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.



Our incredible Empower team of volunteers (above)