

Grassroots FASHION

For Bellevue Club member Kim Foster, selling Zulugrass jewelry is more than a job. It's a way to improve the lives of women and families living more than 9,000 miles away.

BY STACY BOOTH

Kim Foster was a stay-at-home mom who had plans to go back to teaching when her children were grown. She had no idea a call from an old college friend would change her life and help change the lives of women living in a country halfway around the world.

Three-and-a-half years earlier, Philip and Katy Leakey were watching the Maasai people of Kenya suffer during a terrible drought. The men of the tribe were herding their cattle—the tribe's lifeline—hundreds of miles from their families to find food and water. The women and children of the tribe stayed behind without food, without water and without a means to make money to feed themselves. They were starving, and turned to the Leakeys for help.

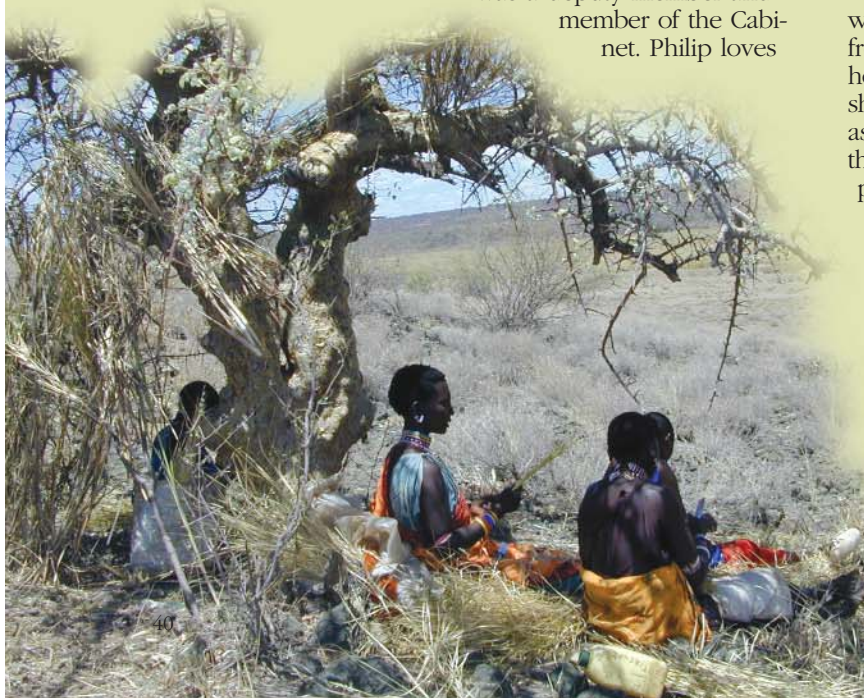
Philip Leakey is the third son of the famous Leakey paleoanthropologists Dr. Louis and Dr. Mary Leakey. He grew up in Kenya, served in the Kenyan Parliament and was a deputy member and member of the Cabinet. Philip loves

the country and loves the people. His wife, Katy, is an artist and designer who spent time studying ancient cultures in the Amazon of Peru and Ecuador before moving to Africa in 2001. The couple lives amongst the Maasai, who are their friends. Naturally, they wanted to help. For a while, they did help feed the Maasai women and children during the drought, but soon realized they couldn't support a whole tribe. Instead, the Leakeys helped find a way for the Maasai women to use their talents to make money, using a readily available resource in Kenya—grass.

There is a bamboo-like grass in Kenya that is drought-resistant and hollow. This grass would prove to be a life-saving resource for the Maasai women. The Leakeys started The Leakey Collection, a line of versatile jewelry made of the plentiful Kenyan grass. Katy creates the designs and the Maasai women produce the strands, which can be worn myriad ways.

In 2004, Kim got a call from a college friend who was working with the Leakeys to distribute this new product from The Leakey Collection. She asked if Kim could help her sell the jewelry, which is called Zulugrass, at trade shows. "That's just really how it started," says Kim. (She asked) "will you help me out?" Kim says she embraced the project and the concept of the Zulugrass and, for the past 18 months, has been a sales rep for The Leakey Collection. She says there are six women across the United States who sell the products to various boutiques and stores. "We travel and represent the product in our territories," Kim says. She covers Washington, Oregon, Alaska, Montana, Idaho, Kansas and Nebraska.

"It's been an interesting endeavor because I really wasn't planning on working," she says. "I had a teaching degree and I was going to go back to teaching, but the more I got involved with it ... it was just a really powerful project. I couldn't turn away from it."





The Maasai women are natural bead makers, as much of their traditional clothing and jewelry is beaded. The grass is cut into small beads by the women, then dyed a variety of different colors. The women then string the grass beads onto elastic interspersed with glass beads for sparkle. Each strand is checked for consistency and quality, and the women are paid per strand at the end of each day. They are not required to work eight hours—it is important for the Leakeys that these women are allowed to retain their culture, as it is very important to the Maasai. The beading workstations are portable, and travel from village to village where the women then check out a beading kit to do their daily work.

The women sit and bead under the Acacia trees that are native to Kenya. Some work all day, others part of a day. There are now more than 1,200 Maasai employed, creating Zulugrass and other products, including wooden bead jewelry made from fallen Acacia trees. “The Leakeys are trying to create a model even for other countries that help tribes or help the people native to the country maintain their culture and maintain their villages, and not have to assimilate into big cities,” says Kim.

Zulugrass jewelry is helping the Maasai women, and it is gaining popularity in the United States, appearing in stores across the country, including Bellevue Club’s Changes boutique and Hands of the World in Pike Place Market, locally. “What’s neat about this jewelry is that it’s so versatile,” says Kim. “It’s lightweight, waterproof. You can just throw it on your wrist.” The strands are sold individually in numerous colors, so customers can create any type of look they want. Zulugrass can be used for necklaces, bracelets, anklets, hair ties, belts—anything you can think of. As for a demographic, Kim says there really isn’t one. “My kids take them as birthday gifts for their friends. I’ve given them to my mom, friends and even babysitters—they love them. In June we were in Woman’s Day magazine and then the next month, Seventeen magazine. We’ve had this huge span of buyers and lovers of it, and the people that really love it are the ones that hear the story.”

Twice a year Kim travels to trade shows to sell Zulugrass and other Leakey Collection products. She says as soon as people hear about the Maasai, the products sell themselves. Kim related a recent story of a woman that started to cry at a trade show when Kim told her about

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The Maasai traditionally wear beaded clothing; Dried Kenyan grass is gathered then cut into beads for Zulugrass jewelry; Kim Foster travels to trade shows to sell Zulugrass and other Leakey Collection products; The Maasai women are now able to feed their families and send their children to school.



OPPOSITE PAGE *Maasai women often bead under Kenya’s Acacia trees.*

the Maasai and the drought. “Every time I tell the story (of the Maasai), I get goosebumps,” Kim says. “It’s so real.”

Kim says she would love to travel to Kenya with her family some day, but for now, the children are too young. “When we go, it’s going to be an amazing experience because we’ll have this really personal tour from the Leakeys.”

For Kim, selling Zulugrass and other Leakey Collection products isn’t just a job. “Honestly, I didn’t know where Kenya fell when I looked at Africa. It’s totally opened my mind to the world. It’s nice to have a project that you can feel passionate about.”

And for the Maasai, the women are becoming the breadwinners and, even though the region is again in a terrible drought, they are surviving, their families are eating and their children are attending school.

“It’s working because it’s the first time that they’ve been able to make a living outside of herding cattle,” says Kim. “It’s working because they can survive drought conditions without assimilating into big cities. It’s working mostly because they’re motivated by being able to maintain their cultural traditions and lifestyle through this project.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE LEAKEY COLLECTION, VISIT
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