

THE BEST PRESENT EVER

An order for felt Christmas stockings opens the door to economic independence

by Yildiz Yagci

Although Peace Corps has not had a program in Turkey since 1970, the Friends of Turkey (Arkadaslar) group remains vibrant. Since its inception in 1991, the group has raised \$66,000 for selected projects in Turkey and the U.S. Among the recipients is Anatolian Artisans, an organization dedicated to providing sustainable income to low-income artisans through product development, marketing and training, and raising awareness about the arts and culture of Turkey. Here, artisan Yasemin Bilici tells founder and president Yildiz Yagci how Anatolian Artisans has made a difference in her life.

I am the first woman shopkeeper in Sanliurfa. I used to be a CATOM (Multipurpose Community Center) participant. I never imagined starting my own business. Under the supervision of an instructor at the CATOM, we were engaged in making bags out of felt. One day a group of people arrived from America. They

were the directors of the Anatolian Artisans. They asked, “What can we do to help promote the work of the young women of the CATOM?” I told them, “Send us whatever [samples] you like, we will make it.” They gave funds to the CATOM for the purchase of felt and they also sent a designer, Fatma Hanim, to teach us how to make the new product.

Fatma Hanim had samples of Christmas stockings. She asked us, “Can you make these?” If someone mentions “work,” it will make me stop in my tracks, even if I have my wedding dress on! We were simultaneously receiving her training and working on the order for goods that we had received from America. We were very happy. Education and a merchandise order—at the same time! We completed and shipped the order in August of 2001. As a whole, 150 persons at the CATOM benefited from the work for this special order. This was an order totaling US\$12,500. Almost everyday,

I was giving interviews to radio and television programs.

My contract ended at the CATOM in January 2003. When I left my job at the CATOM, I became like a bird with a broken wing. Two months passed by without any employment. All I had was the last salary payment I had received. Was I going to use this money to support myself or to start a business? I was thinking about starting a business by obtaining credit. But we (my family and I) were not able to take on this risk.

I would think to myself “Yasemin, did you take these training courses for nothing?” I had taken a micro-enterprise training course sponsored by Anatolian Artisans. I thought of the owner of the shop I am currently in. Because he worked in a government office, he himself could only open his shop and tend to business during weekends. His son kept the shop open after school hours, but this store was closed to business most of the

time. One day I asked the owner, “What would you say to our working together?” He responded, “Sure, be here at 9 o’clock tomorrow morning.” He put the key to the shop in my hand. Now we work together. He said to me, “The store is not mine, it is yours; if you wish, gather the women, you can all work here or you can give them work to take home.” But we had no raw materials with which to produce anything.

My sister was working at a market for a monthly salary of 100 lira. At



Yasemin in her store.

home, in addition to my sister and my mother, we had my grandmother and grandfather, as well as my bedridden father who has been paralyzed for the past 15 years. I thought to myself, "Put everything else aside and rely on your own personal trustworthiness." I went to visit the bead vendor. He said, "Sister, the store is yours, take what you need, and if you can't pay it back, let it be yours to have and enjoy." The felt vendor said, "I freely give you all the felt you want." I was in shock. I went to the women who would do the handcraft work and said, "Here are raw materials for you to work with, we are starting a business. If I cannot pay your salaries..." The women said they would give their time freely.

Currently, I am employing 90 of the 400 CATOM participants. Before I assign work to a woman, I talk with her. I only employ them if they are sending their children to school. They must give me their word that their children, and particularly their female children, are attending school.

I learned how to turn work into a real business activity from Fatma Hanim. I learned that when I was making something, I should strive for a flawless product. I learned about quality. I learned the correct way to dye felt. Now we do all our own dye work.

The micro-enterprise training course I took taught me how to run my own business. I believe that the education I received from the course sponsored by the Anatolian Artisans has played a very large role in my success.

Presently, Yasemin is running a crafts boutique at the lobby of an elegant new hotel in Sanliurfa. As her story demonstrates, Anatolian Artisans' mission is to assist low-income artisans of Turkey by providing them training in product development, micro-business management and links to markets.

We work with international designers who develop trendy new crafts based on the regional culture and artistic traditions. In addition to production training, our artisan groups in the least developed parts of Turkey receive micro-business management training. The new products are sold at the Smithsonian and



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Anatolian Artisans designers Sue Heathcote and Deniz Betil at a product development workshop.

Textile Museum gift stores, boutiques and at our own periodic sales events. MUDO department stores in Turkey carry our artisans' products as part of their social programs.

Anatolian Artisans also organizes annual cultural tours to Turkey to raise awareness about the rich cultural

heritage of the country and its artistic traditions. Each year we sponsor an artisan from Turkey to represent his/her traditional craft at the wonderful Santa Fe International Folk Art Market.

To learn more about upcoming events and projects at Anatolian Artisans, please visit www.anatolianartisans.org.

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