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Knitting their way out of poverty

By Jim Taylor

Knitting needles lifted 45 families in Bolivia out of poverty.

All down the Andes chain of mountains, women knit soft alpaca wool into sweaters and shawls. Women knit while walking, while talking, while riding the bus. They knit while taking produce to market, while herding livestock, while tending children.

Until the late 1980s, the tin mines at Oruro in Bolivia were among the world's richest. Then the market crashed; ore supplies declined; the mines closed. Two-thirds of the miners found themselves unemployed.

In South America's machismo culture, the men simply left in search of new jobs, abandoning their wives and children. It was – to use religious terms – a community crucifixion.

The government moved many of these families out of Bolivia's high and inhospitable altiplano to the lower-elevation city of Cochabamba. With neither incomes nor skills, these women eked out a living on the streets. Their children couldn't go to school.

The Canadian connection

Save the Children Canada, knowing the quality of knitting done by indigenous women, organized some of these displaced women into a knitting cooperative. Eventually, their beautiful hand-knit garments were brought to Canada by volunteers.

Knitting has brought a kind of resurrection, both for the women and for the next generation, their children.

"When I used to knit for the local people," recalls Alcida Callejas Quevedo, a single mother with three children, "I could use my payment to buy two pounds of sugar. With the payment from Canada, I could buy 104 pounds of sugar!"

Quevedo and others formed the Minkha Cooperative. In the Quechua language, "Minkha" means "women working together."

Another woman, Yola Nina Leon, was pregnant with her first daughter when she began knitting with the Minkha Cooperative 18 years ago. That first daughter is now training as a nurse. A second daughter plans to become a human rights lawyer.

Another knitter's son recently graduated as a doctor, and has come back to Cochabamba to serve the community that gave him his start.

One woman's project

Canadian Beverly Edwards-Sawatzky knows most of these women personally. She saw some Minkha sweaters in 2001, and fell in love with the quality of the knitting and the concept of the project. In 2002, she flew to Bolivia, the poorest nation in South America, to make sure that the profits really were going to the knitters, not to invisible marketing agencies.

Also, if she was going to represent these women, she wanted to know them personally.

This April, she returned from her fourth trip to Cochabamba.

Over the last 12 years, her efforts, along with a host of volunteers in both Edmonton and the Okanagan, have resulted in more than \$600,000 being sent back, through Save the Children Canada, to the Minkha Cooperative's 45 families.

If that seems like a lot of money, consider -- the most skilled knitters may earn \$300 a month, after the costs of their wool and other supplies.

It's not much. But as Edwards-Sawatzky points out, "In one generation, they have gone from total poverty to owning and operating their own business."

During her recent visit to Bolivia, the Minkha woman took her under their wing, just as she has taken them under hers.

"They took us back up to Oruro," she says, "to see the world heritage Carnaval there. In all that chaos of crowds, there was always a knitter there right at my elbow taking care of me."

Selling the product

"Their skill is amazing," she goes on. "I've sent them photographs of sweater ideas, I've taken them through markets, and I've asked, 'Could you knit that?' They study it for a few minutes, and then they can do it!"

World-renowned clothing designer Kaffe Fassett was so impressed by the quality of Minkha work that he personally donated some of his patterns to the women.

In Canada, the sweaters -- also coats, vests, ponchos, for men and children as well as women -- typically sell for \$125 to \$250 each. "It sounds expensive," admits Edwards-Sawatzky. "But in Canada it would cost that much just to buy the alpaca wool unknit."

Other items like scarves, shawls, and children's sweaters sell for \$35 to \$70.

The Minkha women also knit most of their patterns in Peruvian pima cotton, which Edwards-Sawatzky calls "the Cadillac of cottons", a beautiful fibre with a silky sheen.

Knitting seems like such a simple thing. But thanks to caring Canadians like Bev Edwards-Sawatzky, it has become a micro-industry that's changing lives in Bolivia.

Commercial break

If you live in the Okanagan Valley, Minkha knitted products will be available April 26, at Winfield United Church in Lake Country, from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Many sweaters, vests, and wraps will be available for immediate sale. Others can be ordered. It takes about three months for the finished order to be delivered.

If you don't live in the Okanagan Valley, it may be possible to order sweaters (etc.) by mail. Write to me, and I will check it out with Bev.

The profits go directly to the women in Bolivia. All Canadian services are donated.

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YOUR TURN

George Brigham, in England, noted that "Orange" has had some successes, as well as some failures, as a corporate name: "The major French telecoms company France Telecom rebranded themselves as ORANGE. When they launched their cell phone network in the UK, 25 years or so ago, they used the slogan: 'The future is bright, the future is Orange'. The company is still a major player in the UK market. On the other hand, longer ago, the failed

Texas-based airline Braniff embraced orange, painting many of its aircraft orange. Sometimes the largest ones were referred to as Big Orange and smaller ones as Orange Squash. It ceased operations in 1982. The name (but not the colour) has been resurrected, unsuccessfully, a couple of times since.”

Diane Bourgeault had similar thoughts: “If I did not already have an account with ING, I would not be interested in something called Tangerine. Do they think that if Apple and Blackberry worked that any fruit for a name is good? Or is this Orange ‘light’? Weird.”

Pat Jones did her own musing about names: “I first became aware of the information embedded in a name when I was phoning during an election 35 years ago. It was unsettling not to know person’s gender automatically because of their first name. It says something about the roles of women and men in a culture when your personal name defines your sex. Of course, we know many times throughout 'western' history where women took 'men's' names in order to make a living.

“Since that time, I have travelled and studied many other cultures where personal names reflect an attribute or a piece of personal history and realized that many more people in the world have wonderful and thoughtful names bestowed on them, not just at birth, but at several times throughout their life. This topic came up again a few weeks ago when I was teaching in a First Nation's village. I commented, with a feeling of regret and loss, about a woman from another part of Canada who had been in a residential school and who had forgotten the ‘Indian’ name given by her parents before she was taken away. The elder responded that it wasn't a big deal to our local villages. People, in their tradition, look forward to a new name as it is a 'right of passage' and the woman's 'white' name would change again upon her return home. They still continue the practice.

“Perhaps the use of nicknames is my culture's remnant nod to the fluidity of personal names. Perhaps my need to check the sex column of the students in a class is the dying gasp of applying preconceived assumptions about a person.”

Laurina Tallman wanted to continue the discussion of vaccinations: “Your readers' comments on vaccines, excepting Isabel's, are somewhat naïve. Doctors do not know what they claim to know about many things and the gullible public swallows their bromides usually without sufficient suspicion and questioning. [For example] the uselessness of one flu vaccine that has been stockpiled by 100 countries at enormous profit to the manufacturer... Flu vaccines do not accomplish what their manufacturers claim and they can have nasty, even fatal, side effects.

“The same can be said... of the link between psychoactive medications that produce increased psychosis and other kinds of damage to the body. Anyone who takes a serious interest in these issues and does some research encounters cover-ups by pharmaceutical companies... The playing field becomes even muddier when political interests become involved. And even if we were getting pure science, science is evolving. My father was a high-minded scientist who helped to produce atomic energy, toxic chemicals, explosives, and was naively complicit in polluting the environment in ways we consider abhorrent today.

“The polio epidemic in North America had played itself out before the Salk vaccine was developed; we don't really know how effective it is or how damaging but manufacturers are happy to experiment on third world populations. The blanket vaccinations pushed by the pharmaceutical companies have left us with very little information about the human immune system in its natural condition.

“Christians, some of them, are capable of developing a sense of what to do or not to do and they should be allowed to continue to try to do so, even if they are floundering in their efforts towards that level of discernment.”

As a former public health nurse, Ruth Zenger commented, “Having most of the population of children vaccinated protects those who cannot be vaccinated (illness, allergies, etc.) so there is community responsibility involved. I would also imagine that most of these parents who refuse for their children have never seen a serious case of polio, measles, whooping cough, or diphtheria, etc. or seen/realized the serious long term disabling consequences of some childhood diseases. That is because most children have been vaccinated!”

TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
