



Creativity and Compassion Woven Together: Weaver teaches young women in Africa

by Anika Hanisch

Three years ago, Bev Polk received her first request to go to Uganda to teach weaving to teen girls at a vocational school through the Rafiki Foundation, a faith-based organization. At that time, she had been weaving for 34 years and was excited to pass along her skills to young people. The Wilsall, Montana resident had no idea what to expect, but that first day was a bit of a shock.

She walked into the weaving room alone, took one look around and wept.

The school had ten looms. All were in a state of disrepair. On any loom, the beams, which feed the thread and spool

the cloth, must be perfectly parallel. In the Ugandan classroom, all the beams were crooked.

“I sat down and cried and prayed, “These are not going to work. What will I do?””

Initially, she had a few simple frame looms made and taught the students with those. Then, a welcome surprise came along. Another volunteer arrived from Michigan. Bob had been slated to help with playground equipment. But when Polk found out that he had a background in engineering and troubleshooting manufacturing equipment, she asked if he could help with the looms. Jetlagged and travel weary, he spent his first night poring over weaving books to begin to understand the machinery.

Together, the two developed a solution for fixing the looms using locally available materials. They had to get a little creative. Sewer pipe was used for new beams. Additional thin piping took the place of wooden dowels. In a month, the first loom was in good working order as a prototype for fixing the rest of them.

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“Teaching them is the most satisfying thing I’ve ever done,” Polk shared. “It’s a way for them to be creative in a world that is very basic, very subsistence level.” It is a practical income-generating skill as well. Polk described trends in the region where the lures of prostitution or becoming a third wife are very real. According to UNAIDS statistics, it is estimated that 5% of the adult population is HIV-positive. Sustainable vocational and life skills training for young women is intensely needed.

The atmosphere at the vocational school was bittersweet. “(The teens) meet death every day; malaria, AIDS, rape. They are so thankful for every day that they have,” Polk commented.

She recalled her time in Africa as she sat at her loom in her weaving barn in Wilsall. The shuttle passed between the threads as she pressed the treadles below. A leverage system of jacks and lams alternately raised and lowered the harnesses for specific threads, and the weaving barn resounded with the rhythmic beat. Inch by inch, the completed fabric rolled onto the cloth beam.

Polk also shared some about her own personal journey, from the college course she took in weaving to the Swedish woman who mentored her. “A lot of the arts are left brain only; (weaving) is definitely both right and left,” Polk said commenting on the hint of engineering involved in this craft. “I always thought I’d be an architect.”

But weaving has certainly worked out well for her. “Creating things, making things is exactly what I’m supposed to do. I like to create useful things of beauty for the everyday.” She pointed to some of her woven dish towels and said, “A package of flour sack towels will do, but it’s not as much fun!”

Polk has several three-ring binders full of weaving patterns. “A lot of these come from really old patterns,” she said. “You find one you like, and then you work it out for yourself.” The graph paper sketches and numeric patterns provide a methodic foundation for the creative results.

In Africa, Polk found a similar mix of right brain and left, beauty and pragmatism. Her students acquired skills and techniques in a craft that can be income-generating. But the creative process also enhanced their quality of life. “It’s a way for them to be creative in a world that is very basic, very subsistence level,” she said.

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