



The Bead Goes On

The hip girls of Costa Mesa's 31 Bits do fashion *and* philanthropy—with a lot of help from their lady friends in Uganda

| By Chantal Gordon |

On a spring day at Newport Beach's Alta Coffee, chai was on the table and so was Kallie Dovel's business proposal: collaborate with women displaced by Uganda's internal war and bring their cheerful, handmade, recycled-paper jewelry to the global market. Pay the women fair-trade prices and empower them economically.

The thing was, Dovel's friend and would-be partner, Alli Swanson, needed to be sure they weren't going to be another Save Africa crusader-come-lately. "I thought, 'OK, another Africa thing?'" says Swanson. "I feel like it's so trendy to go to Africa to save the orphans—which is cool; I appreciate that it's trendy—but you see people on TV with Bono, and it's really commercialized. I didn't want this to be written off as just another trend."

Well, these socially minded baubles—christened 31 Bits and co-founded by Dovel, Swanson and their friends Anna Nelson, Brooke Hodges and Jessie Simonson in 2008—have proved their staying power. Last month, SoCal sandal empire Reef launched Ugandals, a line of ladylike T-straps embellished with beads made by 31 Bits African craftswomen. Each pair is accompanied by hangtags bearing the bright, hopeful portrait of Margaret Ober, one of the six original bead designers who've worked with the organization since the very start.

If their concept sounds familiar, that's because

the "social business" revolution has been growing at a galloping pace ever since microloan pioneer Muhammad Yunus won a Nobel in 2006. To wit: Krochet Kids International was started by three shaggy-haired guys from Spokane and has become a philanthropic (and celebrity) darling via its crocheted hats made and individually signed by women in Northern Uganda, and the International Princess Project sells pajamas made by women in India rescued from forced prostitution. And of course there's Toms Shoes, whose iconic slip-ons and "one for one" model has shod more than 150,000 children in need.

The five bubbly co-founders, all 22 years old, met at Costa Mesa's Vanguard University. Dovel, the "dreamer" of the team, first went to Uganda the summer before her senior year and initially helped out with Krochet Kids. Then she met Molly Oyolli, who made necklaces and bracelets using beads rolled from recycled calendars, posters and magazines hardened and preserved with a lager-based varnish. Oyolli, who lives in the Northern Uganda city of Gulu, had nowhere to sell her work. "I bought a huge box," says Dovel. "I didn't think anything would come out of it, but I came home and they sold like hotcakes. That's when it clicked. I talked to my girlfriends and said, 'I'm going to do this—do you want to do this [with me] or not?'"

CONTINUED...



“Using homemade goods from indigenous people is really new to the action sports industry—it comes at a time when people want to connect to the world and make a difference,” says Marks.



...CONTINUED Within a year, the number of beadmakers (reverentially and collectively referred to as “the Ladies”) employed by 31 Bits grew from six to 35. Along with Ober and Oyolli, there’s Grandma Ketty, 78, who was the goalie for her women’s soccer team two years ago and who uses her jewelry-making salary to send 11 orphans to school.

Dovel’s upbringing on an Oregon farm prepared her for the more down-to-earth life in Gulu. She, Swanson (“the creative”), Nelson (“the accountant”), Hodges (“the candid one”) and Simonson (“the planner”) each spend about nine months out of the year on a rotating schedule in Uganda, where beads are rolled inside the organization’s compound beneath shade trees. Taylor Swift or Jack Johnson is usually playing on the stereo. This year, the ladies, who come from the Acholi ethnic group, will get educations in English and financial planning. On the aesthetic side of things, this spring 31 Bits will experiment with edgy black beads (many of which were made from original posters for Nile Special beer) and on-trend multistrand necklaces.

The workdays in Gulu are more or less nine-to-five—at least as nine-to-five as you can get in a war-torn country. “Death is a normal thing over there,” says Dovel. “We missed a deadline with Reef; we were supposed to have a shipment done, but 10 women didn’t show up that week because someone in the family died from sickness. But there’s a beautiful relationship between Reef and 31 Bits; we care more about our women and their livelihoods and Reef understands that, and wants this to be a sustainable project.”

In its earliest months, 31 Bits targeted craft fairs like Patchwork in Santa Ana, and now shops like Seed People’s Market at The Camp and Newport’s Patricia Di Gioia sell the jewelry. The Reef deal was actually an accident of dinnertime accessorizing: When Swanson’s



father (a board member of surf nonprofit Walking on Water) had surf videographer Russell Brownley and his wife Brianna Marks, Reef’s senior designer for women and girls, over for dinner, Alli’s mother was also there, wearing a 31 Bits necklace.

“As soon as I held her necklace I saw a vision of the sandal in my head,” says Marks, an FIT alumna. “The Ugandal is the first of our efforts in bringing to life the stories of the people who make these products. The idea of using handmade goods from indigenous people is really new to the action sports industry—it comes at a time when people want to connect to the world and make a difference.”

While the Reef collabo is poised to take their company to the next level commercially, it was one of the bead designers, one of “the Ladies,” who drove home the hugeness of their project. Says Swanson: “We asked the ladies what they would like to see this program look like, and I’ll never forget what Molly Oyolli said: ‘To see women from Uganda and women from America stand together. That women all around the world can stand together, for love, for peace, and for hope.’ I knew in that moment that I was about to be a part of something so much bigger than me.”

For more information, please visit 31bits.com; reef.com/ugandal.

STRANDS OF LOVE Clockwise from top: The cheery, loose beads handcrafted from recycled magazines and posters; Margaret, one of “the Ladies”; Alli Swanson in Gulu with a 31 Bits artisan; Molly Oyolli made the jewelry that Kallie Dovel bought on her first trip to Africa.