

Connecting Trade with Conscience

Begun by a woman 60 years ago, the fair trade movement has captured not only the heart and soul of an Agnes Scott woman, but also her professional efforts and commitment. BY KATHY MCKEE '87



People literally make gravel by the side of the road."

For Jacqueline DeCarlo '87, this image from her expedition to Madagascar testifies to the human need for meaningful work.

"They dig up big chunks of granite, which they carry up a hill to the road. There they pound granite into gravel and hope to sell piles of the gravel to passersby," says DeCarlo. "But this is not a busy road and lots of people are selling the same things: gravel or fruit. The attempts at income generation are amazing."

The products people grow or make and the reasons those products thrive or fail in the marketplace are paramount concerns for DeCarlo. Within the burgeoning global fair trade movement, DeCarlo has made a mark as an educator and organizer.

After five years directing the Fair Trade Resource Network, DeCarlo is adviser for the fair trade programs of Catholic Relief Services. "Our goal is to help Catholics in the U.S. live their faith in solidarity, and fair trade is a significant component of our economic justice work."

The trip along back roads and through the villages of Madagascar—called Red Island for the color of its soil—gave DeCarlo an opportunity to evaluate the potential for trade development in handcrafts and spices.

DeCarlo's faith is integral to her professional journey. Raised Catholic, DeCarlo found a different spiritual home in the Society of Friends after

moving to Washington, D.C. One of Quakerism's principle tenets led her to fair trade in the late 1990s.

"I was exploring voluntary simplicity and other movements that examine the place of consumption in one's life," says DeCarlo. "Part of that exploration included a nine-month sabbatical in Central America where I lived and worked alongside people who wanted to achieve a standard of living locally comparable to the one I enjoyed in the United States. They helped me understand people need trade in their lives. How we go about our trading relationships is what can make a huge difference."

MANY AMERICANS GET THEIR FIRST TASTE of fair trade through a cup of coffee or a chocolate bar. DeCarlo's first encounter came while standing in the groves of a coffee cooperative.

"I've witnessed fair trade's impact on people's lives. It's a partnership that helps producers, but it also benefits consumers. Fair trade breaks down impersonal exchange into a story of how a product can bring people together."

According to the Fair Trade Federation, criteria for fair trade include paying a fair wage in the producer's local context, offering advancement opportunities and promoting environmentally

TO LEARN MORE

Fair Trade Resource Network: www.fairtraderesource.org

Fair Trade Federation: www.fairtrade.federation.org

United Students for Fair Trade: www.usft.org

Catholic Relief Services: www.crsfairtrade.org

Ten Thousand Villages: www.tenthousandvillages.com



sustainable practices.

DeCarlo enthusiastically points out that fair trade traces its origins to the insight and ingenuity of one woman, Edna Ruth Byler. "It started as a vision of woman to woman solidarity," DeCarlo says. A Mennonite volunteer working out of her basement, Byler brought the products of Puerto Rican seamstresses to women in sewing circles in Pennsylvania in the late 1940s. Byler's craft sales grew into Ten Thousand Villages, the largest fair trade organization in the U.S.

As fair trade expands, it remains true to its roots. According to the Fair Trade Federation, fair trade businesses return up to a third of profits on annual worldwide sales of \$400 million to producers in developing countries. A significant number of those producers — and the owners of fair trade businesses — are women.

"Women have to be front and center in order to change lives and improve conditions," says DeCarlo.

HONOR COURT PRESIDENT and Dana Scholar, DeCarlo graduated from Agnes Scott with a major in sociology and a certificate in elementary education. She later moved from teaching social studies into the not-for-profit field focusing her energy on international, social and economic justice concerns.

When Agnes Scott launched its Global Awareness Program in 1986, DeCarlo joined the inaugural group traveling and studying for six weeks in India and Nepal.

"It was an unsettling experience," she recalls. "I had romanticized the countries, but when surrounded by masses of hungry, dirty people constantly begging, I felt repulsed."

DeCarlo was getting her first, tough lessons in global economics.

"Frankly, I shrunk back from the dynamic of 20 or so white people plopped down in another country to study it and observe its tremendous suffering. I took the actions of desperate people almost as a personal affront," says DeCarlo.

Subsequent work with refugee populations in war-ravaged Croatia and Rwanda brought her full circle. Facilitating solutions in coordination with local groups, rather than merely observing, she experienced a dynamic shift.

"Refugees are some of the most vulnerable on the planet. Interacting with them compels acting on conscience, which pushes you past the level of stereotypes and allows you to connect authentically to other human beings," notes DeCarlo.

As executive director of Fair Trade Resource

Network, DeCarlo directed that organization's consumer education on fair trade. Another accomplishment for DeCarlo came in September 2005 with the first international Fair Trade Futures Conference in Chicago, for which she served as lead organizer.

MENTORING YOUNG ACTIVISTS ranks high on DeCarlo's responsibility list. Student activism, according to DeCarlo, has been essential to the growth of the fair trade movement. "On the heels of the sweat-free movement, the next wave of activism for college students concerned about economic justice is fair trade. Student demands for large food service providers to make shifts in their business models have led to other companies taking notice. Students are creative and positive. They aren't *against* something; they are *for* something."

DeCarlo shares her experiences and stories in her forthcoming book, *Fair Trade: A Beginner's Guide*. Its publication is slated to coincide with World Fair Trade Day in May 2007. One success story she highlights is that of Kuapa Kokoo.

Kuapa Kokoo, a cooperative of cocoa farmers in Ghana, is a founding partner of the Day Chocolate Company, known for its Divine Chocolate brand. This summer DeCarlo attended Kuapa Kokoo's Annual General Meeting and observed the association's election of leaders. Women members were prominent.

"The Kuapa women are hardworking farmers. They have a cash crop, but otherwise basically grow what they and their families eat," DeCarlo explains. "Throughout two days in election meetings, they appeared stoic." When the difficult deliberations concluded, the mood changed.

"Once the winners were declared, the women led all the participants in a celebration of singing and dancing — punctuated by calls of 'pa pa paa,' which means 'best of the best' in Twi."

Speaking to a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Delaware, DeCarlo emphasized how consumers in the global North can transcend the boundaries separating them from producers in the global South. "We engage in an economic election every day. Our daily choices about how to spend our money constitute an exercise of power.

"When we make conscious decisions about how to spend our money on items that don't depend on the exploitation of human labor, the destruction of the environment, the homogenizing of culture, we are voting for the kind of world we want to live in, and we are engaged in creating that world."

Kathy McKee '87 is an essayist and playwright living in Atlanta. Her latest play, Pollywog, spotlights a young woman's solo swim in the Atlantic Ocean.



Fair trade is an alternative way of doing business — one that builds equitable, long-term partnerships between consumers in North America and producers in developing regions.