



PHOTO BY DENISE REHSE-WATSON



PHOTO BY DENISE REHSE-WATSON



ADELE HAMMOND

PHOTO COURTESY OF ABRAZO STYLE

Fashion with a Mission

Abrazo Style brings hand-crafted chic to consumers and fair wages to the artisans who help create it

BY ROBIN ALLEN

It's 2,974 miles from Hood River to Oaxaca, the capital of Mexico's southwestern state bearing the same name. That's one big hop, skip and jump for Adele Hammond, founder of Abrazo Style, a company that straddles both worlds with its handcrafted clothing and accessories.

"I have never taken the easy path," Hammond says. "My passion is what drives me." Five years ago Hammond's passions for art, travel and adventure led her and her husband, John Harlin, an accomplished mountaineer, editor and writer, to pursue a year living abroad. The long-time Hood River couple and their daughter, Siena, wanted to spend a year living someplace where they could be submersed in another culture, language and people. Determining where

they would live was the difficult part. They had a "dream list" of things they were looking for in a destination, but the more they researched, the further they seemed to get from finding a destination that fit.

It was Hammond's sister, Cheryl, who suggested Mexico. As the couple looked closer at this option, they began to realize that a place they had overlooked in the past was becoming a real contender for their future. They finally settled on a small village outside of Oaxaca. "We had no idea our lives would be so fundamentally changed," Hammond says.

The family's initial year abroad turned into another year, then another. Each year brought new challenges but also new excuses to stay.

By the family's fourth year in Oaxaca, Hammond, a long-time artist, found herself at a crossroads in her career. One day, she gave a ride to a woman standing by the side of the road. As Hammond got to know her, she realized that the woman, Marta, was a perfect reflection of the naturally gifted artisans living in poverty-stricken Oaxaca. Although it's considered the most culturally diverse and artistically rich state in Mexico, Oaxaca is the second poorest in the country, with an extreme poverty rate of 76 percent. Hammond knew there must be a way to embrace these artisans' talents while helping them to improve their quality of life—and maybe somewhere in there was the career change and challenge she sought. Thus Abrazo Style was born.

After meeting Marta, Hammond came up with a mission—to pursue what she calls her "principles of compassionate commerce." They include empowering the indigenous artisans of southern Mexico by providing a worldwide marketplace for their talents; establishing a solid foundation through creative enterprise so the artisans can strengthen and expand their creativity, learn business skills and build confidence; and helping the artisans sustain gainful employment and earn fair wages.

With her mission established, Hammond needed a base from which to launch Abrazo Style, and her home outside the city of Oaxaca seemed like a natural fit—especially because Oaxaca and its neighboring state of Chiapas are two of the three regions (Guatemala being the third) that Hammond calls "the perfect storm of textiles."

"There is breathtaking beauty, complexity and diversity in the embroidery and weaving in these regions," she says. "And I have to admit I'm easily seduced by beauty, and when it comes to handcrafted beauty—well, I'm helpless."

Hammond quickly turned this love affair with beauty into relationships she discovered through the reputation of artisans, in the textile-rich markets and on the backroads of rural Mexico. She built these relationships on "a spirit of trust, creativity and empowerment" that would quickly transform into strong collaborations which would "merge their ancient traditions with contemporary styling," as she puts it.

This type of merger is no easy feat. Communication is a constant challenge for Hammond. "These people are very dependable," she says, "but many have no telephones and most do not know how to read or write." It's important, for example, to pick up on terms like "es que" which in English means roughly "it is that," or "I was only," or "it was just." In Spanish culture, "es que" is the mother of all excuses, according to Hammond. If an artisan begins a sentence with "es que," Hammond says, she knows bad news is coming. "You'd better make a different plan because whatever it is you're expecting, ain't going to happen," she says. "Perseverance, vigilance and a great sense of humor is key."

BUSINESS PROFILE

One place she doesn't have to worry about communication is when it comes to the work of the artisans. Hammond works with more than a hundred individual artisans now, and she says they all create from their hearts with the same passion she has. Because of that, the craftsmanship is personal, unique and reflective of their own stories.

The "Marta Dreamy V-neck Blouse" is a reflection of Marta's story. Because Abrazo Style has been able to compensate her for her talent, Marta has saved enough money and gained enough confidence to leave her abusive husband and begin anew with her children on her own. This is one of many examples of how the fair-trade standards Abrazo Style lives by have achieved their goal in improving the quality of life and "building a pathway out of poverty" for people in Oaxaca and Chiapas.

Although Abrazo Style is based on integrity

and social responsibility, and its products meet the standards and principles to be credited as fair-trade, the company is not officially fair-trade certified. "I don't believe that fair-trade certification for small businesses is a model that works for us," says Hammond, adding that the certification is geared more toward big businesses that deal with huge quantities, factories, and a large number of artisans.

One advantage of not adhering to rigorous fair-trade certification standards is that the artisans have the freedom to work in their own environments, in their homes, on their own schedules. They have been able to create their own organizations, cooperatives, and family groups in which there is a designated group leader. This dynamic allows a more personal and open dialog with Hammond. Because of this fair treatment, and the fair pay, the artisans remain loyal and trustworthy, according to Hammond.

Relationships with the artisans are not the only ones Hammond and her business manager, Celina Cruz, must maintain. Shipping products from Latin America can be challenging and when Abrazo Style started exporting small shipments monthly, the company frequently became a target for drug smuggling searches, which led to delays. Developing trusted relationships with shipping brokers and customs has been vital. In addition, leaving control samples in Mexico and waiting to clean and tag products until they reach the U.S. has helped lead to more efficient product delivery.

As Abrazo Style grows, the shipping process will soon change to coordinate with the fashion industry's strict schedule. Hammond will have to meet tighter delivery dates and fill bigger orders. One big adjustment she's had to make for the company's growth has been using sewers in the United States to create machine-sewn

garments that can be made in at least four different U.S. sizes and offered in a wider variety of colors. Hammond is also sourcing fabrics in Oregon that she was unable to find in Mexico, such as cotton knit. The fabric was needed for Abrazo Style's upcoming winter line which will feature a sweater cape, scarves and other goodies she's keeping under wraps for now. Despite the growth, Hammond is confident that her artisans' craftsmanship will not be compromised.

After living full-time in Mexico for five years, Hammond and her family are now based in Hood River again, which has made it easier to deal with these U.S.-based issues. In addition, she's brought Hood River resident Wendy Bullock on board to help her manage the U.S. side of the business. Being based in the Gorge again also makes it easier for Hammond to get to the many trade shows and festivals she attends on both coasts, as well as check in with local retailers that carry Abrazo Style—including Hood River's Enchanted Alpaca, Waucoma Bookstore and Knot Another Hat.

For all the growth and excitement surrounding Abrazo Style, Hammond remains humble and always eager to get back to Oaxaca and the people who inspired her company. "For better or for worse," she says, "we love living interesting lives." ❀



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ABRAZO STYLE

For more on Abrazo Style, go to abrazostyle.com.