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After 10 years in brand management, Liz Thomson was looking for a shift in her career. She wanted a job with a purpose, something that would make a positive impact and give back to society. When she shared these thoughts with her partner, Jerry Wang, "Nicaragua quickly came to mind," he said.



It was a natural sequitur for Wang, who'd grown up familiar with the country and its culture, having often visited extended relatives there. His first trip to Nicaragua with Thomson, however, proved to be a life-altering experience for them both.

"I don't think I fully appreciated Nicaragua when I was younger," Wang said. "However, after traveling extensively as an adult and learning to appreciate other cultures, our first trip together was a much different experience."



"Nicaragua is a beautiful country with wonderful, kind and optimistic people," Thomson added. "I loved it right away, but on that first trip, I had no idea what a big piece of my heart the country and people would capture."

Finding the Right Style

Both Wang and Thomson come from business backgrounds; Wang is a business strategy consultant and Thomson's past in brand management meant she was well-versed with product development and trend research. When looking to start up their business, Thomson knew it would have to involve a product she could easily wrap her head around, considering how complicated product design, engineering and testing could be.

"I was interested in what skills the artisans in Nicaragua already possessed, and the jewelry there was awesome. It seemed like a perfect fit," she said.

Although Wang admits that it wasn't easy at first, they were soon able to find the right partner to help them get the business off the ground: a native Nicaraguan with a passion for social entrepreneurship, who now works as Nica Life's operations manager. The resulting jewelry line blends laidback, beachy Nicaraguan vibes with the boho-chic trend that's heavily influencing fashion in the U.S. "We knew that to really grow and provide jobs for locals, we would need to develop pieces that are on trend here in the U.S.," Thomson explained.



Although Thomson relies on her experience with product development and trends research to inform the jewelry designs, she incorporates Nicaraguan materials and inspirations as much as possible, as seen in Nica Life's string bracelet offerings, for instance. "Artists in Central America have been making string bracelets for years; they're big with the backpacking community," Thomson said. "I just try to pick colors or add things that work with the U.S. market."

More Than a Business From the beginning, Thomson and Wang knew they wanted their startup to make a difference. "We all have a responsibility to make this world a better place," Thomson said. "No one lives that idea more than our artisans. They all volunteer to make things better for others all the time. The people I have met on this journey reinforce my determination to fight for others every day."



Their first goal was to ensure fair, livable wages for each of the artisans they hired. However, with the increased time they spent in Nicaragua, they soon became aware of other issues, such as the lack of access many Nicaraguan kids had to a quality education.

"Our artisans' children were only going to school for a half day because that's how it works in their communities," Thomson explained. "We saw that if you are wealthy in Nicaragua, you attend private school your whole life and get a quality education.

"So we have begun to break this cycle with our own education programs and by working with other groups in the area to promote their programs as well."

One such initiative is the English Learning Tablet Program, which offers English lessons to Nicaraguan youth. Because English fluency is a highly desirable job skill in the Nicaraguan tourism industry—and can often lead to higher incomes—Nica Life's involvement with the program is helping children in artisan communities receive better opportunities for the future. This year, Nica Life also began offering scholarships that enable students to receive a private education.



For the future, both Thomson and Wang hope to build up the social good aspects of Nica Life as much as possible. Their strategy is driven by their desire to realize new goals, which include hiring more artisans and continuing to open existing educational programs to more children in Nicaragua. To do so, they plan on attending more trade shows and expanding out of Southeast U.S., so they can increase revenue and profit and, in turn, pour monies back into the communities with which they are proud to collaborate.

"Last year, several of the artisans told us what they like about Nica Life," Thomson said. "They said they are grateful for steady employment, but also that it feels like a family and that they enjoy being involved in something that is creating opportunity for their kids. I'm so proud to be a part of such a great community in Nicaragua."

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Alex Herring graduated from Elon University with a degree in communications. Her strong background in multimedia storytelling helps her deliver engaging content across *Gifts & Decorative Accessories*' multiple channels, from hosting showroom tours on Facebook Live to writing feature-length articles for the 102-year-old publication.

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