

The Paper to Pearls Story

Barbara Moller founded Paper to Pearls after a trip that *Voices for Global Change* made to northern Uganda in the fall of 2005. Barbara was one of a team of trainers on a U.S. State Department project to create a coalition of local municipal officials and civil society leaders that would lobby and advocate nationally and internationally on behalf of the region.

Joyce Laker, a participant in the training, invited Barbara to visit two displaced persons camps where she had started a small beading project. Utilizing a grant she had obtained from CARE International, Joyce had brought a trainer from Kampala, Uganda's capital, to train women in the camps in making necklaces from recycled paper. Her plan was to sell the necklaces on the streets of Gulu, the local town, to provide a small source of revenue for the women in the camps.



Barbara saw it differently, as an opportunity to provide significant income for the women – if she could create a market for their work. Two months later Paper to Pearls was born. Barbara viewed the initiative as a natural extension of the mission of *Voices for Global Change* – to help give a "voice" to those who have traditionally been silent. In this case, by helping lift desperately marginalized women out of poverty, it would give them a voice in their future and the futures of their families and communities.



What started with 40 women in the two camps has grown to include 125 women in eight camps and three cooperatives in Gulu, including 20 child mothers. The program's impact has been as significant as its growth. The World Bank calculates the average annual income in Uganda at just \$340, or less than \$1.00 per day. Paper to Pearls beaders earn as much as \$120 per month – more than four times the national average. This income enables the beaders to buy more nutritious food for the families, have access to better health care, and send their children to school, while redistributing money throughout their communities. Based on research confirmed by United Nations statistics, an estimated 30 people benefit from the income each beader earns.



When more substantial income necessitated guidance on money management, Paper to Pearls began providing basic financial literacy training to help the beaders stabilize, save, and maximize the earnings from the purchase of their beads. Each cooperative maintains a communal savings program, and beaders contribute monthly or, for those near town, open individual bank accounts and commit to regular deposits.

In June 2009, Paper to Pearls launched Phase II of the initiative. During Phase II, which is projected to last 12 months, current beaders will transition out of the program into local sustainable businesses. To prepare for this transition, Paper to Pearls will increase jewelry production and sales, and beaders will receive refresher training in their savings programs. This combination of increased income and robust cash management will enable them to have sufficient savings with which to start local businesses, which may include goatkeeping and cheese production, beekeeping, soap and candle making, and baking—enterprises appropriate to a post-conflict, agricultural region. Graduating beaders out of Paper to Pearls and into local enterprises, enables them to be fully independent, while creating space for other women to join the Paper to Pearls initiative.

September 2009 will mark another milestone, as Paper to Pearls beaders join the ranks of 60 internationally recognized artisans, when selected necklaces will be included among those exhibited in the Triennale Design Museum of Milan's *Paper Jewelry* show. This show launches an international tour, which will return to Italy for its finale in 2010 at the Museo della Carta of Fabriano.