

HANDEYE

Paper to Pearls

BY [ANNIE WATERMAN](#) | JUNE 9, 2011



Courtesy of Paulette Walther

Voices for global change

“Paper as pearls, paper as beauty, paper transformed and transforming. Northern Uganda—poor and marginalized, torn apart by war and displacement—now has another story to tell.”- Barbara Moller.

Calendars, magazines, brochures, and old posters are being sold in massive stacks in the markets of Kampala, Uganda. The piles of paper are ceiling high, monitored by stern businesswoman working all hours of the day. The paper trade is on the rise, or at least in Uganda.

In 2005, Barbara Moller founded Paper to Pearls, which unexpectedly developed in Northern Uganda from a trip she took for her non-profit, Voices for Global Change. Barbara says, “Fate, it seems, had brought me to two internal refugee camps where two small groups of women had learned to roll discarded paper into beads and string the beads into necklaces. They weren’t yet skilled in their new craft, but the promise of something beautiful was there.”

A generous grant from CARE International enabled Barbara and her partner to bring a trainer from Kampala, Uganda to teach a group of women who were living in displacement camps how to make jewelry from recycled paper. What was only going to be a small “bead project,” soon turned into a prosperous fair trade micro-

enterprise.

Paper beaded jewelry is on the rise and a creative way for hundreds of women to earn a living wage. This jewelry continues to amaze as the recycled paper is cut, rolled, and finished with a waterproof, eco friendly coating. Paper to Pearl's collection is bright and bold and ranges from vibrant one-strand necklaces to delicate three strand bracelets. What sets them apart is their high-gloss finish, fashion-forward designs, and rich color saturation. The common response is, "I can't believe they're made out of paper!"

The organization's vision is to be known as the "premier designers of paper beads." The women are continuously coming up with new designs, playing with different shapes, textures, materials, and styles. This gives these women a license to be creative and act as an integral part of the enterprise. In 2009, four of their jewelry designs were proudly featured in the "Paper Jewelry" Exhibit at the Triennale Design Museum in Milan.

Due to their elegant work and heartfelt story, this enterprise has been growing steadily. Paper to Pearls began working with forty women in two camps and now it is supporting 125 women in eight camps and three cooperatives in Gulu. These beaders earn as much as \$120 per month--more than four times the national average. Income from jewelry sales allows the women to buy basic necessities such as food, medicine, and school supplies.

Paper to Pearl empowers the individual by providing training, mentoring and educational programs. These workshops include sessions on how to refine one's beading skills as well as how to manage and save money. This enterprise is working from the ground up, empowering these women in profound ways.

To purchase and get more information, please visit <http://www.papertopearls.org>