

Hope for a Jewelry Business for Deaf Artisans in Kenya

Blog post by Jana Harp Dean, President of OneMaker and consultant to organizations starting businesses to employ poor women in developing countries. OneMaker is a 501c3 organization that exists to be a tangible expression of God's love to poor women and girls vulnerable to trafficking and other exploitation by giving them opportunities through education and business ventures. Visit www.onemaker.com for more information.

Just last month, I had the privilege of providing strategic business consultation and training to DOOR International at their campus just outside Nairobi, Kenya. Mike Buus, the president of DOOR International, dreams of starting-up a jewelry-making business that would employ 100 Deaf artisans in Kenya.

Like in most developing countries, the greatest felt need in Kenya is for jobs. The last estimated unemployment rate for Kenya was 40% (est. for 2008, reported in the 11/9/2010 report of The World Factbook). In a ranking of 200 countries from lowest to highest unemployment, Kenya ranks number 185. (The World Factbook, a CIA publication, 2010). Among the Deaf, the unemployment rate is even higher, perhaps even as high as 85%.

The president of DOOR International conducted an informal survey among the Deaf at a church service. He asked how many people in the room had a job. No hands went up. He then rephrased the question, "How many of you have a part-time job or a temporary job like painting a room for your brother for which you get paid?" About 15% of the hands went up. Although they may be skilled and hard workers, because employers don't know sign language, the Deaf are hard to employ.

To address this problem, DOOR has already started business ventures to employ the Deaf, including a rabbit farm, a fishery, and an organic produce farm. DOOR wants to continue to create more jobs for the Deaf and expand its business portfolio to include a business that taps into an international market.

A jewelry making business does just that - taps into the international market - and has some other aspects that make it especially fitting to the context. Basic jewelry making skills are relatively easy to learn and it takes a relatively short time to acquire them. The tools and equipment needed for making simple jewelry are inexpensive and some raw materials are available locally. The global market for jewelry is large and the U.S. represents about half of the global jewelry market. Exporting creates the potential for generating more revenue and more profit than a business creating products to be sold only inside Kenya would.

To start a jewelry making business in Kenya, there are many issues to work through, including a 50% tariff on any imported items, even raw materials imported to use in items to be

manufactured for export. Although there are many raw materials available to incorporate into jewelry, higher quality finishing pieces, like clasps, would have to be imported, at least initially. Another major challenge is finding a business person to champion the start up. Over the week I was there, Deaf women demonstrated that they could master the skills required and, because they need jobs, were very much in favor of a business start up that would employ them. Those on the planning team love the idea as well, but, as in many Christian organizations, most of the staff had too many responsibilities already and could not take on more.

Over the week I spent with DOOR, several days were devoted to teaching jewelry making skills to Deaf women. Mike had mentioned that the Deaf tend to be very attentive to detail and are eager to do a good job. He was right. I have taught jewelry making skills to women from many countries and often through translators, but have never encountered a group that was able to master as many skills as quickly as this group. As visual learners, they noticed even the smallest details in the demonstration of the particular technique. They consistently asked for feedback and wanted to know if there was anything they could improve on. They caught the concepts quickly and translated the concepts into completed pieces of jewelry.

Next steps:

DOOR has commissioned OneMaker to design 15-20 pieces of jewelry using materials available in Kenya plus some higher quality supplemental materials not available in Kenya. Later this year, I plan to return to Kenya to teach the artisans how to make each one of those products. In the meantime, we'll keep praying that God will raise up a business manager.

The president and I will also work on the business plan together. Then, when the Lord has provided the business manager, I hope to provide training for him or her as well. I'm so honored and delighted to be able to be part of a business start-up that has the potential of blessing so many.

Would you pray with me for:

- God to raise up a business manager to lead this business that would employ 100 Deaf people one day.
- Creativity and wisdom as I design 15-20 jewelry pieces.
- Retail buyers for these pieces of jewelry.
- Blessing on a business that would provide for the physical needs of Deaf Kenyan artisans and their families as they work in dignity.

Thank you for taking the time to read this blog entry and for your prayers for these budding artisans and this business venture. If you're interested in receiving future updates on this or other OneMaker consulting projects, please email me at jana@onemaker.com.

Evening 1

Arriving in Africa feels a bit to me like moving from air to water. You know how when you dive under the surface of the water, your movement is in slow motion? It's like that here. To me, it

actually has a quieting effect. Having lived in slower-paced cultures, like those of Guatemala and Afghanistan, this environment feels familiar and comfortable. I landed and got in the visa line with my completed application and my \$25, as new and crisp as I could find, and then I waited.....and waited.....and waited. I was one of the lucky ones who had a worker actually sitting at the desk processing applications at the front of the line. Poor souls in the line to the right of me had no worker at all until one of them approached another worker to inquire about where this one was!

I wasn't in a hurry so just enjoyed looking around at all the people in all the others lines to either side of me.....waiting. There were Africans and Indians and British people and other westerners.

I learned that the Indians built a train line through here many years ago and many of them settled here in Nairobi. They started lots of businesses and are now known as the "white Kenyans".

Upon arriving at the campus, I learned how important security is here. The walls had razor wire uncoiled along the top of them to keep would-be intruders out, but that's not all. There are two night guards and ferocious dogs that patrol with them. Apparently, these dogs will tear up anyone who comes out of their building onto the grounds at night except the guards themselves. If jet lag wasn't enough to keep me in bed, the thought of those two dogs patrolling about was more than enough! I was also told that paw prints of lionesses were often seen on the dirt road in front of the main compound gate. And, interestingly, there are never any stray dogs loitering about.

Day 1 (Monday): Business Training & Spontaneous Jewelry Making Training

The first day of training went well. The first half of the training was focused on the business side of starting a jewelry making business. People kept trickling in throughout the day, some came to learn about starting a jewelry making business, but others were more interested in learning jewelry making skills. So, as one does in Africa, we adjusted the plan slightly mid-way through.



Most of the women in attendance were those who aspired to be artisans, but not necessarily the ones who would lead the business or who wanted to wade through all the business management

presentations. More and more women arrived throughout the day so we split the class into two groups, those who needed to be in on the business planning side of things and those who wanted to learn to make jewelry. Ana Lu Herrera, a OneMaker volunteer and business woman employed by Nestle in Guatemala, provided an overview of marketing to the business group. While she did that, I started teaching jewelry skills to the budding artisans.

Since I heard rumors that we might have twelve students on Wednesday and Thursday for the jewelry making training, I decided to fish out an assistant with an aptitude for learning these skills and train her before Wednesday so she could help me teach!

We made it through two of the four basic skills in about an hour and a half – not bad. These three ladies had not done these techniques before, but were catching on pretty fast. It was clear by the end of the day that “V” most easily mastered the skills and could be a teaching assistant later in the week. She’s a lovely Deaf woman who is expecting, but isn’t sure how far along she is. She’s been to two doctors, but they gave conflicting estimates. The ultrasound that would help her know for sure when to expect her little one is 500 shillings (\$6.10 USD) and she hasn’t wanted to part with that kind of money so she just waits for the baby to come. I inquired about whether assisting me would be too taxing for her, but the staff assured me it was no problem. She looks much further along than 4 months to me!

The women devoured the jewelry catalogs, supply catalogs, and magazines I brought with me, poring over the pictures and thinking through how various pieces are constructed. We did an exercise where we looked through popular jewelry catalogs and identified themes like combinations of metal and textile, asymmetry, chunkiness, etc. They seemed very engaged, but also quite interested in the construction of the pieces and types of materials used.

These ladies seem eager to be a part of a jewelry making business, but at present they are missing one important element – a business leader. Pray that God will raise up someone who can provide designs and training, connect the group with customers, and even handle order fulfillment with U.S. customers. To fill in gaps, I can help with designs and training and do some initial connections to wholesale customers, but they still need a business leader who can operate in a full time capacity.

Unique Kenyan Sign Names

Each of the ladies introduced herself today with her name sign. In Kenya, unlike in western deaf cultures, the deaf choose a name for each person based on some distinguishing physical characteristic about the person, perhaps even one they wish they didn’t have! It could be your freckles, or the curved wrinkle that forms around your eye when you smile, or, as in one man’s case here, his ramp-like forehead. For him, the sign is a hand going upward across the forehead like a plane taking off!

One person tried to come up with his own name sign and announced to the Deaf community what it would be, but that didn’t go over well at all. In fact, the Deaf community never did accept him. So it seems being given a name sign by the Deaf community is a kind of cultural rite

of passage. I'm eager to know what my sign name will be! I'm also hoping it won't be one of several things!

The Deaf – Unreached Peoples Around the World

I'm learning that the Deaf around the world meet all the criteria for an unreached people group like those in the 10/40 Window. Less than 2% of the Deaf have heard the gospel in a way that makes sense to them. Only recently has technology made it possible to have a Bible translation in sign language.

DOOR International has projects in Kenya and India, doing Bible translation with the Deaf, for the Deaf. There are still 400 sign languages around the world that do not have a Bible in sign language. DOOR aims to translate the Bible into 85 of those languages. Teams come from around the world to the DOOR campus in Kenya to work on signed Bible translations for the Deaf.

Today I came face to face with the fact that even the Deaf ladies in the room were in what I've heard termed "Bible poverty" by Wycliffe. As I talked through slides about ideas for jewelry pieces inspired by scripture, I asked, "Do you know the story of Esther?", "Do you know the story of Elijah?", "Do you know about the Proverbs 31 woman?", "Do you know the story of creation?" Thankfully they had just studied Proverbs 31 and they knew the creation story, but they had very sad looks on their face, and if I perceived correctly, maybe a bit of shame, for not knowing the story of Esther or Elijah. I hated the feeling that they were on the outside and, without being able to communicate in sign language, I couldn't help them get "in the know".

How the Deaf Pray in Groups

At supper tonight, I spoke (through an interpreter) with an Ethiopian Deaf man, a believer. I was curious about how Deaf people pray in groups. He said most will close their eyes when they pray, signing with their hands. Others watch the person praying sign so they can agree with him in prayer. The Deaf person signs with eyes closed so as not to be distracted by others looking at him. I learned that initially when Deaf Kenyans started coming to faith and having worship services, they adopted the ways of worship of the hearing, but when they inquired about whether they could do it differently, in a way that fit for them and got "permission", their services dramatically changed. They incorporated drums so they could feel the music, they dance, and their services are a time of giving testimonies of praise to God. It's very interactive rather than one person preaching a sermon.

Day 2 (Tuesday): To the Nairobi Market – In Search of Supplies, Special Training for One Artisan

As I worship God by listening to praise music full of truth about Him, I rejoice that I have this privilege, to hear music and be able to worship God in song. I rejoice that I have the privilege of reading my Bible, any part of it I want to, effortlessly, just by running by eyes over the page or the screen.

“Your words were found and I ate them, and they were to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart.”
— Jeremiah 15:16

“V”, my designated teaching assistant, learned skills three and four of four basic skills in one and a half hours. She did so well, I sent her home with a box of materials to make two more bracelets.



After the training session in the morning, a group of us headed out to Nairobi, a half hour's drive away. We found some stones and supplies that we could use in designing products and left town at 3:30 in hopes of beating the horrendous traffic. I couldn't imagine how awful traffic could be as it was already pretty bad before 3:30. We should have arrived

home an hour later or so with the traffic. Sadly, it was 5 hours later, 8:30pm before we rolled in, exhausted.

Apparently, there has been a gasoline shortage going on in Kenya and we realized we didn't have enough gas to get back home! All over town gas stations were out of gas. We prayed for provision in the van, turned the corner and saw a gas station. One of the ladies in the car got out and walked down the road to see if they still had gas. Indeed they did, but the line was so long, the road was backed up with people waiting. We decided to walk on ahead and see if we could find a container that we could fill with gas and bring back to the van. Ultimately, we bought 4 – 5 liter water jugs, emptied them, and, with much effort, persuaded the elderly lady who was the gas attendant to put some in our containers. Finally, she did and we were able to fill the van to $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Still, it was a long drive home in the bumper-to-bumper traffic.

I still had much to do to prepare projects and organize supplies for the next day's training, but was so exhausted, I fell into bed and got up early the next morning to prepare.

Day 3 (Wednesday): First (Official) Day of Jewelry Making Training with All the Artisans

Before I arrived, I had been told to plan on having six students in class. Ten showed up today and I learned that others had been turned away. Thankfully, I brought two extra sets of tools and a box of supplies had been donated and there were two more sets of tools in the box.

Of course, three of the budding artisans had a head start in Monday's training. We worked our way through the four basic skills and all of the budding artisans got good practice. Some of them even mastered the skills surprisingly quickly.

I'm quite amazed at how quickly they are catching on. There were even two ladies from another jewelry-making project in the city who were sent to learn some new skills. At the end of the day, the ladies said they were happy to keep working even though it was quitting time. They loved learning. I was the one who needed to stop for the day to sit down for a bit and then to prepare for the next day. One lady said she wanted to learn new skills every day for a month. Another of the ladies on staff here asked if I would be willing to come back and teach some more – of course, I said, "YES!"



This evening, I spent time laying out supplies and preparing projects for the next day as well as spreading all the finds from the previous day on the table and designing products in my head.

These budding artisans seem eager to work and are enjoying the learning process.

This evening as I was working after class, a number of Deaf people on campus just poked their heads in the work room, curious about the potential new venture. They commented in sign on how beautiful the stones were and said we were doing a good work.

Thankfully, sign language seems easier to acquire than a spoken foreign language. Some of the words I learned in sign language study in college are in use here in Kenyan sign language. I've learned a few basic phrases and can spell out words I don't know the sign for which prompts the Deaf person to give me the sign for it! They have been quite generous and helpful.

I introduce myself by spelling out my name. I do now have a sign that an Ethiopian brother gave me, but it doesn't use the Kenyan approach to assigning sign names. It's a letter J and pinky

touching the chin (Ethiopian women's sign names are always done around the chin area). The Kenyan way of assigning name signs focuses on some visual uniqueness of a person, usually not even using a letter at all.

I thank God for opening this whole new world to me and that He is willing to make me useful here.

Day 4: Budding Artisans Learn Quickly!

The time has flown by! This was the second full day of jewelry training with all the artisans and I'm amazed at how far they have come. They caught on so quickly that we had less wasted material than I had anticipated and we have more ready-to-sell items than I could have hoped for. They worked so quickly, I had to scramble just to keep one step ahead of them, to have the next project ready to demonstrate and teach before they finished up with the one they were working on.



Tomorrow we'll have a meeting to talk about our impressions and think through what next steps might be. I'm praying that God will provide a business manager to enable the launch of this business. I'm also happy to come back and teach more, help create a logo and some packaging, and put together some jewelry designs using local materials and a catalog. Perhaps the Lord would open the door for that.

I find myself longing to learn Kenyan sign language so I can ask these ladies about their stories. Several men and women on campus try to communicate with me by signing. I can only get so far with the little I know.

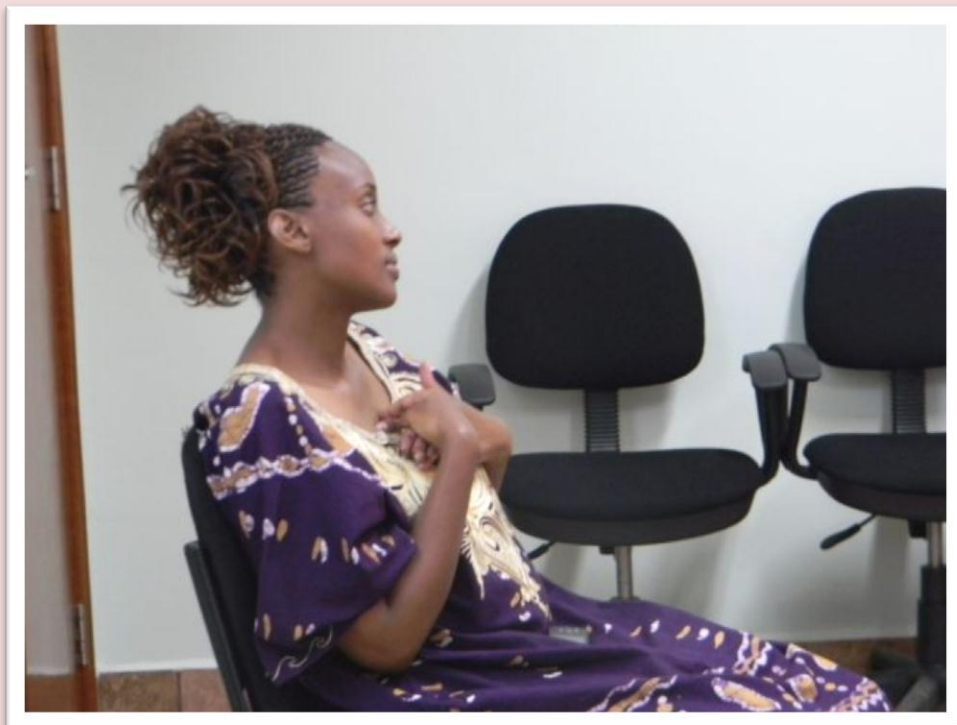
I was given my Kenyan name sign today. I had worn my hair up in a high ponytail for the first few days here, so my name sign is a fist on the back of the head where my pony tail sits! I love it because they gave it to me and that's what they noticed about me.

Today I even attempted some humor, although that is always a challenge to do cross-culturally and across languages. I decided to take a chance. One artisan as she worked with a piece of leather for a necklace asked if it was okay for leather to get wet. I said, "I don't know, but cows

do stand in the rain.” The ones who were looking when the interpreter translated it laughed. That felt like a little victory!

Day 5: Getting from “Dream” to “Reality”

Today was a day of meetings and making a plan for going forward. It seems current staff could cover some of the functions of the business. There is a young Kenyan woman who is handling accounting on a big construction project whose time will soon be freed up and she’s eager to start learning the inventory tracking software. Another woman (American) on the team handles all newsletters and graphic design for the organization so she’s going to work on a logo, marketing materials, and an insert card. A Kenyan woman who works for DOOR and knows sign language has been identified as a potential candidate for supervisor.



The greatest need is for a champion for the business start-up, someone who can get the business up and running with good systems and processes and then either continue in a business manager role or train the person who would do the ongoing management.

We will move forward by creating a business plan, developing product prototypes, presenting prototypes to wholesale customers, training artisans in how to produce those, and by praying that God will raise up the business champion for this business.

If you’re interested in receiving future updates on this OneMaker consulting project and others, please email me at jana@onemaker.com.