

## **Claudia Sternbach: Is this what you would be doing with your life?**

**Author(s):** I was having trouble deciding between the necklace made in Afghanistan, the prayer wheel crafted in Nepal. **Date:** June 9, 2002

My friend Diane was having the same difficulty. But we had come to shop, and shop we would. "Are you sure this is right?" I had asked Diane as I drove further up the winding road, bumping along in the dappled sunlight. She assured me it was right when the paved road turned to dirt. "See," she said, "the directions mention a dirt road." A few moments later we parked the car and made our way to Carmel Jud's front door.

The hum of conversation filled the room. Guests chatted over fresh strawberries, sipped glasses of champagne. We toasted Carmel's new venture, Rising International. Carmel is a creative woman who thought she was doing exactly what she was meant to do, carving out a career in advertising.

Then one day she had a jolt. She had been reading a book that asked the question: If you had all the money and all the time in the world, is this what you would be doing? She was stunned to find herself answering no. And so began her search. "I went out and put myself into the middle of everything," she told me. "I began looking into different causes, searching the Internet."

What she found, what she connected with, was the plight of women around the world. Women of great poverty. These were the people she decided to try to help. Carmel decided to launch a fair trade home party business. Diane had been invited to the very first one, and she asked me to go along.

"I only buy fair trade items," Carmel told us as we stood in her kitchen. "This way I know that the artists are being paid what they deserve." As our hostess went off to greet new people, I wandered room to room and admired the crafts from around the world. There were richly textured pillow covers, intricately embroidered and embellished with pearls. Prayer rugs stacked in a corner. A small Afghan doll, complete with burqa. When I slipped it off over the doll's head, I saw she had a tiny face, unsmiling. On the mantle sat three statues of Buddha, made by families in Nepal. If one were to be sold, the money would support a family for weeks.

The sun streamed through the window. Outside on the deck a family from Nepal had arrived. The father is responsible for buying the crafts and bringing them to this country. He then goes back to these villages and sees firsthand how people's lives are changed as they begin to pull themselves out of poverty.

As he spoke to the shoppers gathered in the sun on a beautiful Santa Cruz day, it was easy to feel the connection to others so far away. Carmel wants to encourage that feeling of connection. She wants to collect stories written by the guests who make a purchase at her parties. Stories about the necklaces worn or the art hung on walls. She wants to know about the effects these pieces are having on the owners. She then wants to send these letters to the artists, to the women who took such time and care in making these beautiful things. She is hoping they will write back and share their own stories.

"The business is called Rising International because it is about women rising above their circumstances," says Carmel.

"I also think it can be something which could help women right here, women who would like to join in and host parties of their own. My dream is to see it as a nationwide business."

As Diane and I were getting ready to leave, Carmel was off surrounded by women. She pointed out the delicate stitches in a wall hanging of coppers and rusts. Her hands danced over the fabric, just as a woman's hands did in India where it was made. I could almost see them reaching out toward one another.

This morning I got up and decided any day was special enough to wear my new necklace from Afghanistan. Walking through the living room, I paused for a moment and picked up the prayer wheel I now have resting on my mantle. I gave it a few spins, sending thoughts toward heaven. And outside, flags in the apple tree fluttered in the breeze.

Carmel Jud plans to host craft parties at homes across the county. She buys most of her crafts through importers who belong to the Fair Trade Federation, which requires that the importers pay the artisans a living wage.

For more information, e-mail [Carmel@RisingInternational.com](mailto:Carmel@RisingInternational.com)  
Contact **Claudia** Sternbach at [cmarie302@aol.com](mailto:cmarie302@aol.com)

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