

A Native Guatemalan Who Helps Others Succeed

La Antigua, Guatemala, is home to many artisans, especially hand-weaving specialists like Olga Reiche, who concentrates on natural dyes and pure products for her woven creations.

Olga grew up in Guatemala City and moved to La Antigua as a young woman in 1977. She spent the past 30 years developing beautiful hand woven tapestries with the indigenous weavers of Guatemala and Mexico.

“My grandmother was Kekchí, which is the name of the people of one of the 22 ethnic groups, and also of their language. She always wore our traditional clothing and practiced their native customs. No one in my family was a weaver, but I fell in love with the Guatemalan textiles since I was very young.”

While working for Oxfam UK in Guatemala after the earthquake of 1976, Olga visited different regions, organized grass-roots projects, and cooperatives where artisans were granted financing in exchange for handicrafts of different kinds.

As her knowledge of crafts and textile arts grew, she also learned about the logistics of setting up and managing cooperatives, eventually being assigned to the Petén, helping to educate families who acquired land cooperatives in the jungle.

Olga's history of helping others stretches beyond Guatemala, when the civil unrest there began affecting even the indigenous cooperative weavers, who fled to Mexico for safety. She followed them, so that she could help them with medical supplies and food. While in Mexico for four years, she again helped with grass-roots development in Chiapas, specializing in honey and textiles, some of which still thrive today.

Upon returning to Guatemala, Olga worked as a product developer with a group of civil war widows from the Ixil Triangle, (Chajul, Nebaj and Cotzal). Together, they created chairs, folding screens and other items with wood and textiles, to sell in the local market areas and for export.

Olga also opened Ojalá Proyecto Artesanal, a shop in La Antigua, where she sold the weavers' creations to the general public. (Ojalá is an Arabic word adopted by the Spanish, meaning oj-hope and ala-God).

Natural Dyes Become Important in Quality Woven Products

In 1987, Olga learned the creative secrets of using natural dyes, and this became her passion for the textile industry. Many Guatemalan textiles were rejected on the international markets due to the use of azo, a cancer-causing agent used in synthetic dyes, and they sought an alternative in natural dyes.

“To master this kind of dyeing, I’ve had to practice, experiment, research, and learn from many, many mistakes. First, we add color to the fibers with natural dyes and then the threads are woven on a handloom or on a backstrap loom.”

Olga was soon hired as a consultant to teach local weavers how to integrate natural dyes into their products.

“We do not use any chemical or contaminating products in our work, and this is what we do to help Mother Earth. All the dyes we use come from recycled material, cultivated or easily obtained plants. They are all of sustainable origin.”

The civil war widows that Olga helped in 1986 grew from 27 women originally, to over 700 widows from various villages by 1989. Olga mentored the weavers, developed new products and designs, taught them how to manage a business and how to market products at fair prices. She also helped them establish buyer connections throughout the United States and Europe, where they are still successful today.

“I draw a lot of inspiration from natural things, useful things, all crafted by hand, and with the human factor involved. When designing, I try to help the artisan. What is most important when working with artisan groups is that they have a good sense of quality, responsibility and fulfillment.”

In 2008, she co-founded Artes Textiles y Populares in Antigua, which served as an educational center that hosted different cultures and nationalities in learning, experimenting, and sharing about textile and popular arts.

Now, in her new venture, Olga stays busy, teaching workshops about making and using natural dyes and paints, hand weaving, and selling other handmade products. She’s even written a book, “Dyeing and Useful Plants of Guatemala”, which will be published and released this year.

“I hope you enjoy our designs and products as much as we enjoy creating them. They are filled with lots of positive energy.”

Within Olga there is a history of hand weaving and custom designs, a love for natural dyes, especially indigo dyes, and a passion for helping handweavers become successful.