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Community lends hand through fair trade

Concept is one of pursuing trade and relations that are fair to the producers

The phrase "fair trade" has become a buzzword of sorts these days, thrown around by businesses looking to harness a sense of goodwill among customers.

However, for a CSU center, fair trade is an organic and concrete philosophy that impacts real people globally and here in Fort Collins.

Sitting in a small office in the Clark Building on Colorado State University's campus, CSU sociology professor and co-director for the Center for Fair and Alternative Trade Studies, Doug Murray looks pensive before defining the term fair trade.

"Fair trade can be a concept of pursuing trade and relations that are fair to the producers," said Murray.

By purchasing fair-trade items, consumers are ensuring poor workers and farmers are getting paid a fair wage for what they do, Murray said.

When Cheryl Refuerzo got married, she could have had the clean-cut diamond like so many American brides. However, 31-year-old Refuerzo chose a more unconventional stone, a sapphire, because it is a fair-trade product.

"I don't know all the ins and outs," said Refuerzo, looking at the dark sapphire ring on her finger Tuesday afternoon while sipping her fair-trade mug of coffee at The Bean Cycle. "But it was important to have fair trade."

Refuerzo of Bellvue reflects a growing generation of consumers who are willing to pay a bit more for fair-trade products yet don't entirely understand what goes into making a product, such as a ring, fair trade.

In Refuerzo's case, she bought the sapphire online from a dealer in Chicago who assured her the stone was fair-trade certified.

"I trusted that the vendor was legitimate," she said. "The idea that in America we lead such privileged lives, so for people who live in less-fortunate circumstances, the least we can do is pay something comparable to the work."

Aimee Leverette, 30, of Fort Collins, joined Refuerzo for a cup of coffee at the Bean Cycle and shared a similar viewpoint.

Leverette said she will seek out stores that sell fair-trade products in town to ensure that the people producing the goods receive a fair wage. She said Fort Collins' residents are typically more socially aware than the average consumer when it comes to fair-trade issues.

"I think, generally speaking, we are more active in seeking out fair-trade products such as coffee shops," she said. As the co-director for CFATS working with organizations around the globe, Murray wants to provide more information to consumers such as Leverette and Refuerzo regarding the nuts

and bolts of fair trade.

Recently, Murray partnered with the Downtown Development Authority to help educate Fort Collins businesses and residents about fair trade

Matt Robenalt, DDA executive director, confirmed they are working with CFATS to help launch a new community marketplace project that would combine a fair-trade, locally grown market and small-business space.

"What we are looking at is spaces for very small business that would not otherwise be able to find space in the down-town," Robenalt said of the project set to open in spring 2012.

While still in its feasibility stage, the DDA has dedicated \$400,000 to exploring the fair-trade marketplace. The Center for Fair and Alternative Trade Studies originated in 1999 from what was then called the Fair Trade Research Group.

With funding from organizations such as the Ford Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Bohemian Foundation, the center analyzes local, national and global initiatives that enhance social justice and environmental sustainability through fair and alternative production, distribution and consumption practices.

Murray, who authored the book "Fair Trade: The Challenges of Transforming Globalization" with Laura Reynolds and John Wilkinson, has witnessed an emergence over the past decade in consumers' buying habits, which has, in turn, changed the way companies do business.

The emergence that Murray sees is what he calls a "conscious consumer economy," which is growing on a global scale. The new consumer that Murray has seen is much like Leverette and Refuerzo in that they take the time to question where products they purchase originate and how the company treats its workers. The end result has been a dynamic shift in the way businesses operate.

For instance, Cooper and Cooper Jewelers in Fort Collins uses dealers that adhere to the Kimberly Process to ensure their diamonds are not conflict stones and that the workers who find the diamonds are treated well.

"People through consumption behavior are changing the way business is done and development is done," said Murray, who noted the fair-trade term is often loosely used, which is why it is important to monitor organizations.

Fair trade is a system that monitors whether people comply with the third-party certification process.

That means a third-party organization, such as the Fair Trade Labeling Organization, with no vested interest, will step in and examine if a company is truly fair trade or not. That way, a consumer can examine the third party's unbiased certification of a company, said Murray, who researches such organizations.

He noted, particularly in the coffee industry, some "organic producers" have been decertified for not complying with established guidelines.

The CFATS included 64 certification systems around the world in a recent study and hopes to help local businesses and consumers better understand how they can best embrace those fair-trade values they want to capture in their businesses.

What fair trade means for Fort Collins depends on the consumer.

There are still bargain shoppers, especially in this economy, who adhere to the motto of cost is king. However, Murray sees more people embracing fair trade.

"Part of it is there is a growing global reaction to what was a half century of mass producing at the cheapest cost without recognizing there are long-term costs," he said.

Those long-term costs expand beyond human-rights interests to environmental issues, migration patterns, climate changes and impoverished regions — all of which have ramifications for local residents.

"Consumers have now gotten used to the idea of buying organic products to foster ecological improvements, locally produced items to support the local economy and items from firms that are known to treat their workers well," Raynolds, co-director for the CFATS, wrote in an e-mail. "Fair trade lets us extend these practices globally to support ecological improvements, worker well-being and strong communities not just here, but around the globe."

Ten Thousand Villages, 113 Linden St., is a nonprofit fair-trade retailer of artisan-crafted home decor, personal accessories and gift items from across the globe.

Jerry Kennell, managing director of Mennonite Mutual Aid West in Fort Collins, helped launch the regional Ten Thousand Villages and continues to work for the fair and ethical treatment of people.

"Fair trade is part of a whole; people are becoming more and more aware of it," he said. Fair trade ensures people around the world are treated fairly and paid fairly.

Compared with other communities, Kennell said Fort Collins has an exceptional level of awareness when it comes to fair trade.

Wendy Poppen, manager of Ten Thousand Villages, said that in the nine years she has worked at the Old Town store, more people have started to show an interest in fair trade.

She estimates 70 percent of their customers have traveled abroad and seen the need for fair trade, while the remaining 30 percent simply like the handmade products.

The demand for the store's products remains high, as well. In the current recession, Poppen expected a drop in sales, however, the store is on par with its 2008 revenue.

She said the interest in fair-trade products stems from an individual's desire to help.

"I feel people are more conscious and want to do global good, but can't leave the country," she said. "This is a way to do good in the world through fair-trade products."

Additional Facts

Local stores that use or sell fair-trade products:

- > Ten Thousand Villages
- > Cycle Bean Coffee
- > Colorado Harmony Market Co-Op
- > Fort Collins Co-Op
- > Bella Luna
- > Café DeLeon
- > The Cupboard
- > Whole Foods
- > Wild Oats
- > Vitamin Cottage
- > Ben & Jerry's
- > Target
- > Starbucks
- > Safeway
- > Costco
- > Sam's Club
- > WalMart

*Source: transfairusa.org

To determine if a store offers fair-trade products, look for the official "Fair Trade Certified"

sticker, or visit transfairusa.org.
