

Sewing the seeds of progress Somali women learn skills to make their own clothing

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Rhoda Abdi's garbasaar is beautiful, a soft, flowing cloth that drapes around her head like a scarf.

The garbasaar is unique to women of Somalia, and Abdi wears it with pride.

Especially because she created it herself.

"It is the most important thing for us to have this skill, to make our own clothes, to keep our customs and our culture," says Abdi, who fled Somalia with two of her children because of a civil war that has torn apart her homeland. "This is a dream for us."

Abdi spends two days every week learning to sew through the Somali Sewing Project -- a program that teaches refugee and immigrant women to make their own traditional clothing, apply for jobs in factories or start microenterprises of their own.

"This project is very critical," says Abdi Mohamoud, executive director of the Horn of Africa Center, where the classes are taught. "Many of these ladies have large families, many have come here without their husbands, and many lack any sort of marketable skills. This is just one of the attempts in trying to cover those needs."

The Somali Sewing Project began four months ago, created by the La Jolla Golden Triangle Rotary Club, a service organization that has strong ties to East Africa and works to enhance world understanding and peace.

The sewing project has grown to six classes a week with about 50 women enrolled. At least as many have completed the classes, which are offered in six-week sessions.

And, almost 200 women are on a waiting list.

Not surprising, says Mohamoud, since there are more than 20,000 people from East Africa in San Diego, more than half from Somalia.

City Heights is home to so many Somali refugees that it is often called Little Mogadishu after the country's capital.

Being able to work with the people of Africa in his home of San Diego is what drew Steve Brown to help create the project.

Brown, past president of the La Jolla Rotary Club, has been to East Africa at least half a

dozen times and says he has developed a tremendous fondness for the people of Africa. He has organized many ventures between San Diego and East Africa, including clean water projects and programs in education and computers.

"I think there's a real satisfaction in being able to help people improve themselves," says Brown. "And in doing it in ways other than charity."

Earlier this year, Brown met a local Somali leader, Osman Fattah, who wanted to develop a project to buy sewing machines for Somali women.

Through his contacts, Brown raised \$10,000 from Rotary clubs in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Tanzania, as well as Mexico and San Diego. Another \$10,000 came from the Rotary Foundation Matching Grants Program.

He pulled together people from the garment industry, the refugee community, social service agencies. They bought 14 sewing machines, found teachers, got space at the Horn of Africa Center in City Heights and began offering classes to both Somali women and Latinas. Classes are taught in Somali, Arabic and Spanish and cost \$5 a week.

Some of the refugee women in San Diego spend much of their time at home, with few marketable skills and little chance for social interaction.

Others who were teachers and artists and government workers in Africa are in college taking classes in English, child development or business.

"People are here from every walk of life," says Rhoda Abdi. "They see this original idea and they grab at it. They see they can learn this skill."

Abdi joined the classes after walking into the Horn of Africa Center two months ago. Always, there are men sitting downstairs. They come to talk and share each others' company. Abdi asked the men what was going on, what all the women were doing upstairs.

"They have found out through word of mouth," says Abdullahi Amir, one of the men who spends his days at the center. Amir now organizes the requests of the hundreds of women who stop by. "Many women are talking about how the program is benefiting them."

It benefits Kadra Jimale because she has a thirst for learning.

"Even though I have other skills, education doesn't have any limits," says Jimale, who was busy at one of the industrial machines. "It is good to learn more. Now I can help my family or get a job sewing."

The women learn to sew by creating traditional clothing -- the scarf-like garbasaar, or jalbabs and hijabs, full-length garments that cover the head and body. While creating

their own clothing, they are learning a skill that can easily be translated into the job market.

Gerry Robbins, a manufacturing consultant in the local garment industry, has helped put together the program. He has also organized tours of local factories and set up employment tests for the women who are interested in factory jobs.

It is unrealistic for most of the women to work full time in a factory, Robbins said, because they don't have transportation or they have children at home to care for.

More realistic is opening a small business, working in a tailor shop or just fixing and making clothes for their families.

"I would hope that one or two of them would get into business and sew some of the ethnic products they know very well," Robbins said.

Perhaps Halima Abdirahman will. She says it is hard to find the clothes she wants to wear. Many Somali women buy fabric at swap meets and have clothing made for them, or relatives send them from overseas. A few shops carry their traditional clothing, but it can be expensive.

"Now I can make my own," says Abdirahman as she holds up one beautiful handmade garment after another. "And maybe I will work in a store."

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