Carrying a Culture: Huntsman Entrepreneur Brings Guatemala Home with Hand-woven Wallets

Andy Thunell's eyes gleamed with passion as he recounted his recent visit back to Guatemala.

During that visit, Thunell was approached by a mother and her 3-year-old daughter Milendy, who had just finished her very first weave. Milendy proudly held up the art piece for Thunell to see.

“She was holding onto it and was so, so proud...I pictured my 3-year-old son and couldn't imagine him doing anything like that at that young of an age,'” Thunell said.

Thunell, program coordinator in the entrepreneurship center in the Huntsman School of Business, has had many experiences like this one, ever since he made it his mission to preserve the culture and art of weaving -- a practice that is central to Guatemala.

He travels to Guatemala to mentor and work with female artisans who weave. Together they design and produce colorful handwoven textiles that are transformed into wallets and sleeves for electronic devices and sold as products of his startup company, WeaveSleeve.

Thunell's love for Guatemala, the people and the culture began when he served an LDS mission there over a decade ago. “Giving back to the people who gave me so much became an important goal in my life” Thunell recounted. “I met individuals and families with great talent who worked hard for what little they had and I knew that there was something I could do to help them get further ahead.”

From the beginning of his time in Guatemala, Thunell was fascinated with the art of weaving and the elaborate process to create such beautiful products. Conversations with weavers led him to discover that although the art was still alive and well, it was not being taught to younger generations like it had been in the past. It was becoming more difficult to make money from selling handwoven textiles. According to these families, other opportunities that were more lucrative took precedence and their focus on weaving became less important.

Thunell began to be intrigued with ways to utilize handwoven textiles to create more functional everyday products that would appeal to a larger audience. “If I could create a product with a higher demand, I’d be able to help these women provide income for their families and assure that the tradition of weaving would be passed on.” Thunell stated. “I realized that I might not be able to make a huge difference, but I can still make a difference in the lives of the people within my reach.”

An entrepreneur at heart, Thunell had already started one venture, a kayaking school, after graduating from USU with degrees in business and Spanish. He's now making a difference in the lives of people he loves, as this important part of Guatemalan culture is now being passed on to the next generation of female artisans due to the opportunities created by WeaveSleeve.
ABOVE: A mother teaches her two daughters how to weave. The girls’ father died more than five years ago and the girls never had the opportunity to learn to weave since they focused their time on things that would provide income for their family. Weaving wasn’t something that they could make money doing at that time.

BELOW: Andy with Milendy, who is showing off her very first weave.
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