

Aid to Artisans

Summer 2020 Newsletter



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Cover Image: Spinner at Indigo Lion, photo courtesy of Indigo Lion

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First Virtual eMRP Creates Connections and Opens New Doors for the Future

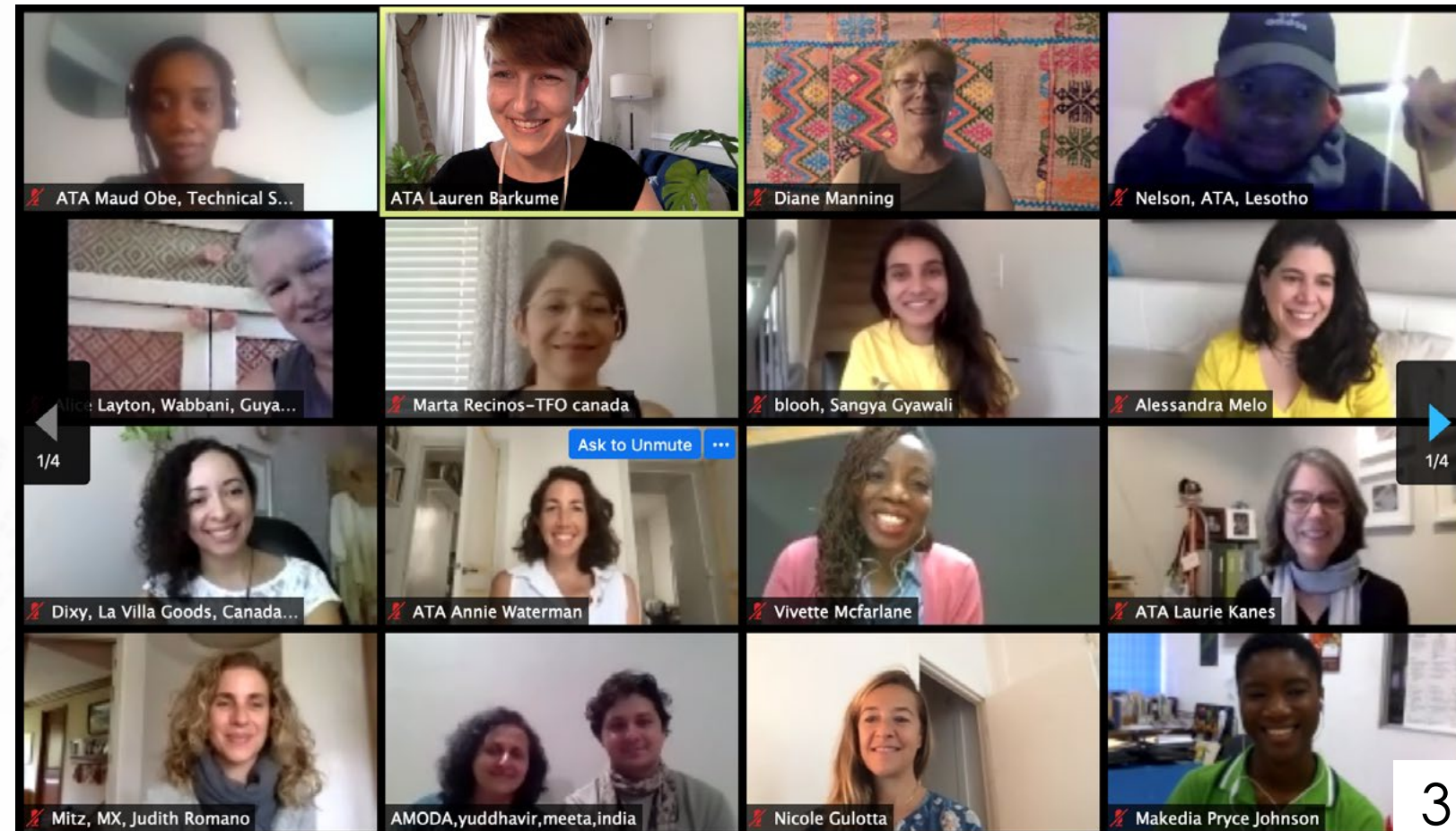
From the beginning of the pandemic, we have watched artisan communities around the world face unprecedented challenges. We realized that we needed to expand opportunities for artisan entrepreneurs to survive COVID-19 disruptions—and we knew we had to do it virtually. “There was just no way that artisan entrepreneurs could travel to our training, so we had to bring it to them” says Lauren Barkume, ATA’s Director of Training.

ATA responded to the need by offering its first-ever virtual eMarket Readiness Program in August. The initiative proved to be very

popular with 52 participants joining live from 16 countries and 7 U.S. cities. The 12-hour training program offered over 4 days included expert panels on global opportunities and trends, how buyers were reacting to COVID-19. There were also seminars on US retail sector and color trends, using product development to pivot, online marketing and branding, costing and pricing, distribution strategies, and connecting with buyers online.

“It is wise that every so often one makes (a) stop on the road to re-organize, re-prioritize, and reload. This for me was the number one take away. We all need to recreate ourselves

A virtual group photo of some of the August eMRP alumni and ATA Mentors





and during COVID-19 times, this is a priority,” shared Judith Achar of [Fundación Mitz](#) after attending the course.

The eMRP brought together a team of 11 ATA experts, including Patti Carpenter, Annie Waterman, Laurie Kanes, Mimi Robinson, Carol MacNulty, Stacy Spivak, Susan Easton, Stacey Edgar, Nicole Gullotta, Dondrill Glover and Lauren Barkume. The ATA Mentors shared their own real experiences and stories with how they have been adapting their businesses to the conditions of the pandemic. Mimi Robinson taught how a pivot in her product development and design work with [Rise Beyond the Reef](#) during the pandemic was able to re-create handprinted fabrics and woven floor mats as masks, Zoom backdrops, wellness products and beautiful wall art.

“I loved the example of the work all of the presenters do... this course reconnected me with interests and seeing others doing multiple things has empowered me to try too,” shared Dixy Valdez of [La Villa Goods](#).

In the final session of the eMRP, participants shared their key takeaways and their goals. Many shared the value of the program

and asked ATA to continue to offer virtual trainings and shorter courses on more in depth subjects.

In addition to the workshop, ATA also hosted it’s first virtual speed networking event, the ATA Virtual Cocktail Hour, which has traditionally been hosted at the NY NOW show as a way to connect with others in the artisan sector. With over 50 individuals attending, many requested more networking events, and ATA plans to host additional networking events soon.

Former MRP alumna, Jane Taylor was so inspired by the ATA Virtual Cocktail Hour, that she decided to launch a virtual networking event herself to connect the handmade sector in her home country of Zimbabwe, saying “ A chance to connect in our currently disconnected environment can only be positive and meaningful in some way... I have already had great feedback!”

ATA will be launching a Spanish version eMRP for Latin America this fall. [Let us know if you would like to participate.](#)

An eMRP reservation list is available to [reserve your place at the next English version of the eMRP](#). Stay tuned for the dates and details of both programs by [joining our email list](#).

As Lauren observed, “I am so excited about the potential for ATA to expand its online learning to reach more handmade sector entrepreneurs than we ever could before. We are planning to grow a platform that offers in-depth classes on critical topics for the artisan sector today.”

Photos and words by Lauren Barkume



The live Zoom training included post-COVID-19 color trends presented by Patti Carpenter

Aid to Artisans Launches the “Komon A’tel Alliance”

Integrated development in communities of San Juan Cancuc, Mexico is the goal of ATA’s new program funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF). The Alliance, known as “Komon A’tel” means “Working Together” in Tzeltal (the indigenous language spoken in San Juan Cancuc). It is a collaborative intervention designed to increase access to healthcare, income generation and clean water.

San Juan Cancuc, is one of the poorest municipalities in Mexico; 97.3% of its people live in poverty. Aid to Artisans initiated the Komon A’tel Alliance in June 2020, bringing four civil society organizations to work across 15 San Juan Cancuc communities to

achieve three objectives:

1. Strengthening the leadership skills of local men and women through training,
2. Developing and implementing community health and water access plans and agreements.
3. Increasing incomes by supporting the coffee industry, women’s venture groups, creating community savings funds, and commercializing local foods and handicraft.

The Komon A’tel Alliance’s members are:

- CONIDER, which empowers communities by developing leadership in 25 communities. They work on town-lead participation processes an using a “dialogue

Yanchen community, dialogue with a women's group.



knowledge” approach.

- MUCOSDI, which focuses on the empowerment of women and youth. They implement strategies based on reflective dialogue and incorporate gender issues from the indigenous perspective.
- XNICHIMAL JLUMALTIK are experts in dialogue. They are deeply conversant with Mayan cultural dynamics and are focused on building their self-esteem and confidence in their identity.
- YOMOLOTIK promotes community planning, sanitation, health, nutrition and access to water.
- CREATIVE LEARNING-AID TO ARTISANS – supports income generation and women’s leadership and empowerment. We work with over 300 women artisan ventures and have helped set up of more than 60 savings groups.

For over eight years, Creative Learning-Aid

to Artisans, has been deeply imbedded in the southeast region of Mexico. “We understand and adapt the way we work to the local culture, [...] and we have established strong relationships with community leaders and have gained people’s trust. Key members of our team are Mayan women (promotoras) who implement trainings and follow up with the communities” – says, María Eugenia (Maru) Pineda Meléndez, ATA Country Director in Mexico, who leads this project.

“The alliance of local organizations supported by our expertise in various areas will impact the project goal: Increasing the well-being of the people of San Juan Cancuc,” continues Maru.

Everyone at Creative Learning-Aid to Artisans is excited about this new initiative that ends in May 2022.

Tsaltealja community, dialogue with women.





A Success Story from San Juan Cancuc

Since 2018, Creative Learning-Aid to Artisans has been implementing a project in the community funded by the TrickleUp Foundation. This project empowers women and young people by giving them access to financial tools, teaching them how to run businesses, participate in community saving groups, and grow through investing in their businesses.

Here is the story of Anita Aguilar Cruz from the village of Chiloja' in San Juan Cancuc, Chiapas. Anita is a single mother and one of five in her household. Before joining the community saving group "El Banco" in February 2019, her sole income came from working at her parents' coffee farm. Being a woman in a community like Chiloja', is not easy. This culture is intensely patriarchal,

and women have voice and less power. Since joining the group with 12 other women, Anita has grown to be an active member, participating in human developing trainings that has positively impacted her life.

In September 2019, Anita received a seed capital grant of \$6,000 MXP (\$350 USD), for opening a grocery shop. Supported by the project, her commitment and initiative have helped her overcome the fear and shame she felt about having her own business and she as had great success. In one year, she tripled the seed capital grant and is now supplying several shops in her community. Her increased earnings have transformed her family's life, allowing for economic independence and better health and nutrition. Anita's dream is to become the biggest grocery supplier in her town and the surrounding area.

"This program is a comprehensive approach that improves the living conditions of women, people with disabilities and families,

through empowering women," says Elena Gómez ATA Mexico Project Coordinator for this project.

Anita Aguilar's grocery shop



Anita's community savings group "El Banco"





Yennie Tse (left) and Mary Louise Marino (second from left) with Somdeth (far right) visiting Ban Lue Handicrafts, Laos

People-to-People Connections: The Story of Mary Louise Marino of Indigo Lion Handmade

A social enterprise focused on making people-to-people connections with artisans in Laos, Mary Louise Marino started [Indigo Lion Handmade](#) in 2016. During a three-month trip to Southeast Asia and Northeast India, Mary Louise and her husband became inspired by the artisans and their unique handmade crafts. Mary Louise found herself returning to Laos, drawn by its inviting people and vibrant culture. Pulling from her art background, Mary Louise started her business by sourcing handmade textile accessories and home accents that both honored the cultural heritage and empowered Laotian weavers.

Connecting with people is the foundation of Mary Louise's mission and business. In 2018 Mary Louise was invited by DC-based [Hands Along the Nile](#) – along with [Sharmila Karamchandani](#), artist, designer, and senior trainer at Empowered Women International – [to train Egyptian women artisans](#). It was a great success for everyone involved that prompted Mary Louise and Sharmila to think, “How can we offer a similar needs-based training to weavers in Laos?”



Preparing cotton at Ban Lue Handicrafts, Laos

The types of training usually offered to social enterprises didn't fit Mary Louise's vision. While many tours offer tourists exposure to handmade craft techniques by artisans themselves, Mary Louise felt the experience could be enhanced through the people-to-people connection. She began to think: “What if training was also a cultural exchange? What if a small team of creative experts in design, art, craft, and business could share their knowledge and skills with artisans and also receive training on traditional handicraft techniques from the artisans themselves? What if these trips could be a mutual exchange for everyone?”

A year later Mary Louise and Sharmila met [Andrea Chapman](#), an accomplished sewer and influencer, and soon the Sew Laos Creative Exchange was born, offering sewing skills training by creative teams in exchange for learning the cultural skills from Lao weavers. Teaching sewing skills to Laotian weavers in exchange for teaching traditional handicraft techniques to the creative teams meant that both groups would gain new skills and cultural understanding.

Mary Louise recruited her Laotian partner, Somdeth from [Ban Lue Handicrafts & Homestay](#). This business was already offering tourists hands-on experiences with village artisans in weaving, natural dyeing, bamboo basketry, and paper making. Somdeth immediately loved the exchange idea. In his village of Nayang Nua, sewing skills were rare while weaving skills were abundant. This meant Nayang Nua artisans could improve the quality their through better sewing/finishing and could broaden markets. Mary Louise visited Somdeth in Laos in February 2020 and he proposed an additional step to make the idea more sustainable. He that the weavers learn enough to offer how to sew a small coin pouch using their handwoven textiles to future tourists. This would be income-generating for the weaver, as well as for Somdeth's handicrafts center.



Loom weaving at Ban Lue Handicrafts, Laos



Handspun and woven, naturally dyed products from Indigo Lion



The creative team of Mary Louise, Sharmila, and Andrea, are focusing their efforts on developing a needs-based, creatively engaging, and sustainable project in collaboration with Somdeth and the artisans. They will be fundraising for a new sewing center to include several sewing machines and related materials to kickstart the project.

While originally planning to pilot the Sew Laos Creative Exchange project in January 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic has delayed their plan to a later time when travel is safe again. They also envision inviting others to join future creative teams in the project moving forward!

While expanding and developing this new initiative, Mary Louise has used her network to brainstorm and receive feedback. Two important connections for Mary Louise remains are Nureen Das, founder of [The Artisan Gateway](#), and Yennie Tse, founder of [Atelier Nomad](#). The three social entrepreneurs met in 2015 at Aid to Artisans' [Market Readiness Program \(MRP\)](#) in New York City, and have remained close ever since. "Being



Yennie Tse (left) and Mary Louise Marino (right) visiting Ban Lue Handicrafts, Laos

in the MRP program really created a network for me. I trust their opinions greatly, and since we all work in the craft sector in different ways, their perspectives are invaluable."

With her passion for people-to-people connections and networking, you can see this visibly in the [textile accessories and home accents](#) Indigo Lion Handmade has to offer, in the stories she shares on her blog, [The Handmade Chronicle](#), and on [Instagram](#). She also has recently launched her own [Artist Collection](#), creating one-of-a-kind works of art inspired by her connection with Laos.

Sign-up for email updates, stories, and promos at the footer of [Indigo Lion Handmade's website](#).

Written by Rachel Landale
Photos credit of Mary Louise Marino



Natural indigo dyeing

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What's Next!

Handmade Futures Summit September 23 & 24, 2020

Trade+Impact Association and Williams-Sonoma Inc. have come together to present the first ever Handmade Futures Summit. The virtual event will bring together artisan businesses, leading social enterprises, industry experts, global buyers and the Williams-Sonoma buying teams. Together we are reimagining partnerships, design, technology, and more.

Attendance is reserved for social enterprises in the craft sector from across Africa & Middle East.

[Register as an attendee.](#)

Spanish eMarket Readiness Program November 2020

The [eMarket Readiness Program™ \(eMRP\)](#) is a live online training for the artisan sector. Aid to Artisans has distilled 27 years of experience in offering the Market Readiness Program at the NY NOW trade show to develop this 12 hour online program. It will give you the tools and market information you need to sell your products into the changing US retail market.

Designed for international artisan producers, designers, exporters, and leaders of craft-based enterprises, this immersive training offers intensive learning, hands-on exercises, one-on-one coaching, and small group learning.

To join the Spanish eMRP waitlist, [email Lauren Barkume.](#)

[Or, Join the eMRP English waitlist](#)

Aid to Artisans

Artisans around the world need your support!

Please make a donation by clicking [here](#)

