

# INVESTING IN HOPE

## AFGHANISTAN

Text: Keith Recker

Images: Courtesy Arzu Studio Hope

*Arzu Studio Hope, purveyor of top quality artisan-made rugs from Afghanistan, challenges the notion of "business as usual." They operate in one of the toughest business environments in the world and employ Afghan women – one of the world's more disenfranchised groups. They maintain a sharp focus on supporting their artisan partners with steady wages and an impressive menu of social services. And they are thriving.*

**HAND/EYE:** What motivates ARZU STUDIO HOPE customers to purchase: the goodness behind the product or the beauty of the product? Does one bring them in the door while the other closes the sale?

*Alyssa Rome, Chief Operating Officer:* ARZU STUDIO HOPE's story is the truly unique part of the organization and the product. When we sell direct to the consumer, the story behind the rugs – the artisans, the process – is what helps grab their attention, and the high quality and beauty of the rugs closes the sale. When we sell to the design trade, the unique beauty of the rugs definitely plays a huge part in sales. Designers love the colors and designs and the fact that the rugs are hand-knotted.

**H/E:** What are the three most challenging things about working in Afghanistan? What is the greatest asset? Will any of these things change in the near future?

*AR:* The three most challenging things about working in Afghanistan are security, communication and the unstable economy. After 30 years of war, the Afghan economy is in shambles and infrastructure (though improving

thanks to international aid) is nearly non-existent. We work at a grassroots level in some of the poorest villages in the country - where basic needs like access to clean water and transportation to medical clinics are daily challenges for people in the community.

The greatest asset is the amazing talent of our artisans - women who have had traditional weaving techniques passed down through their families for generations. The skill and passion of our weavers to produce beautiful, hand-knotted rugs is incredible. As our global community continues to support efforts to rebuild Afghanistan, we hope that these challenges will decrease. Within our own programs, we have spent the last six years working to build trust within our rural villages, where we proceed with respect and caution so that the difference we make can be sustained over a long period of time. Due to our way of partnering with local communities, we have been able to expand a variety of programs to provide increased access to jobs, education and healthcare. In addition, we are currently rolling out our most ambitious project to date - the construction of a trio of facilities in Dragon Valley, Bamyan: a Women's Community Center, a Community Garden/Greenhouse and a Sports/Wellness Complex.

Will things change? They are already changing. We work with over 600 weavers, and we are committed to their well-being. Their wages, and our social programs, affect the lives of over 2000 others in their families and communities. We have statistics to show that our services make a difference. For example, we have 288 women and girls enrolled in our fourth grade classes. And none of the women in our care have died during childbirth, a remarkable feat in a country with one of the highest maternal death rates. Our rugs are a means to a greater end.

**H/E:** How are designs developed? Does design always travel from HQ to artisan, or do artisans have a voice too?



*Angela Attento, Creative Director:* Sometimes there are designs that come from ARZU (US) and go to our graphers and weavers in Afghanistan. A lot of the modern pieces start that way. However, without the weaver's hands, these rugs wouldn't have any vitality. That, for me, is an enormous contribution and one that we rely on when designing a rug. The tribal and traditional rugs that we carry are designs that our artisans have been weaving for generations. Like oral histories, the various motifs have meanings to them, and weavers add and subtract different elements depending on what kind of wool they have, how the overall design feels to them, and what they are trying to express. Given the human decisions going into the rug and the variation that is found naturally in vegetal dyeing, no two rugs are the same. Each is a work of art, so the artisan's voice is never silent at ARZU STUDIO HOPE.

**H/E:** What do you, as a designer, learn from the artisans?

*AA:* The artisans have taught me to anticipate their creativity and artistry. What I design and send to the weaver is flat,



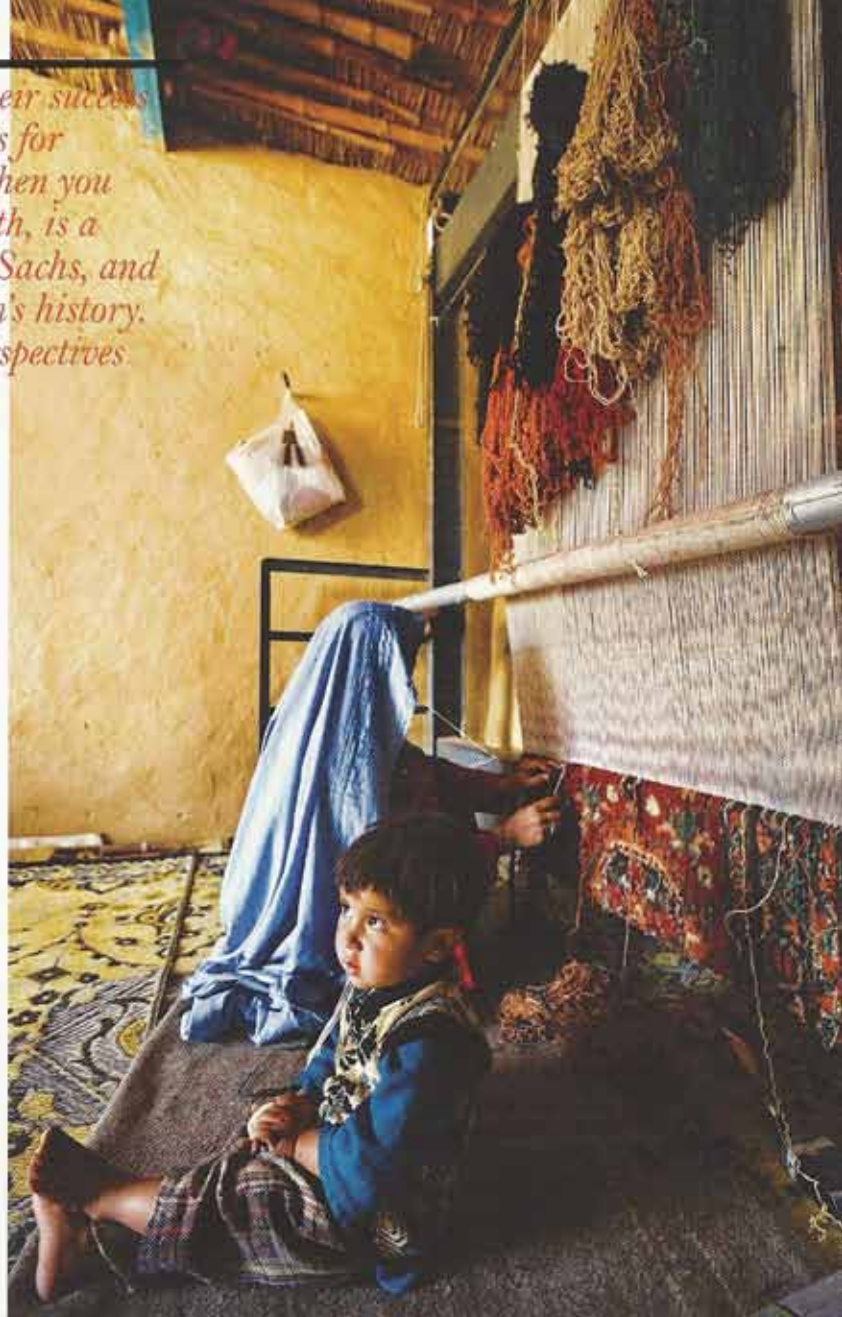
as they fundamentally change women's lives, their success in business and as a charity suggests new standards for corporations of the future. Which is not surprising when you learn that their founder and CEO, Connie Duckworth, is a senior partner and managing director at Goldman Sachs, and the first woman sales and trading partner in the firm's history. The founders of Arzu Studio Hope's leaders shared their perspectives with HAND/EYE, and their words are eloquent.

and the artisan injects passion and energy into it. I can always see a human hand in the work once the piece comes off the loom. Everyone can. It's intangible, but it's why the world still loves the hand-woven rug. We are drawn to its beauty and depth. This cannot be captured by machines. An artisan transforms the design - they breathe life into the rug.

**H/E: Is it harder to run a successful social business enterprise or a straightforward "for profit" entity?**  
*Connie K. Duckworth, Founder and CEO:* Running a successful SBE is similar in many ways to running any successful business. As social entrepreneurs learn early on, it's a 24/7 job—you think about it constantly and it requires the same three "F's": focus, feedback and flexibility. But, there are added complexities with SBEs. Outcomes cannot be measured in simple, quantitative terms like share price and P/E ratio. How do you really capture the return on investment on restoring human dignity or improving the quality of life at the bottom of the pyramid? In addition, capital markets for SBEs are in their infancy, and raising funding for this

**H/E: What are the personal rewards of running a social enterprise?**  
*CKD:* We stay in Afghanistan because we know that what we do makes a difference. On a daily basis, we see the lives of destitute women and their children transformed by the jobs we create and the social services we deliver. ARZU has created over 800 jobs - 90% of which are held by women. We are empowering and educating a generation of women who, for the first time, have access to opportunities that strengthen their mind, body and spirit. Being a part of the positive change in the lives of these women and families is an indescribable reward.

**H/E: What is the future role of social enterprise in the "big picture" of American business? Will this be**



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 studio Hope.  
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**"the new normal" at a certain point?**  
*CKD:* There is enormous interest in social enterprise. As a nation and a world, we face any number of intractable domestic problems and critical global issues that the three sectors of the economy--public, private and non-profit--have been unable to successfully mitigate. Interestingly, there is great enthusiasm for finding new solutions from people of all ages. Boomers want to give back and leave the world a better place. Gen X'ers and Gen Y'ers want their children to live in a peaceful, prosperous, and clean world. And the Millennials recognize that the future is in their hands, and they are ready to engage. I believe that social business is the fourth sector--a growing, innovative and permanent part of business's "new normal." 📷

Please visit [www.arzustudiohope.org](http://www.arzustudiohope.org) to learn more, to purchase rugs, and to donate to support their social service and outreach. 93% of ARZU STUDIO HOPE's expenditures directly support their work, which makes a donation to them a sound investment in bettering our world

