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Her Rugs Give Afghans A Big Lift

By MARIE BEERENS

What propels people? Often passion about music, business, science.

What about passion for helping destitute women in Afghanistan? Now that takes a special person.

That's Connie Duckworth for you. And passion she has.

She utilizes Afghan women's weaving talents to make and sell high-quality rugs to the West.

In return, she helps raise the literacy and health care standards of Afghans, especially women.

She does that via her organization Arzu, which means hope in Dari and which she founded in 2003.

Arzu employs 700 women in 10 Afghan villages. The firm has a local staff of 15, with eight in America.

"It's like any startup business," Duckworth told IBD. "I think about it all the time."

The purpose of the project is twofold, she says. "It's not just about our offering hope for a better future for these families in Afghanistan. I think the flip side is what they do for us, by weaving these incredible rugs and sharing their stories.

"They give us, here in the West, something tangible that we can do to have hope that something we do is making a difference in the world."

The start came soon after the U.S.-led invasion toppled the Taliban in 2001. The State Department asked Duckworth to join the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council.

Through that mechanism, she visited Afghanistan for the first time in January 2003.

"I found the status of women there so compelling that I personally committed to doing something to help women in Afghanistan," she said. Her response to her own pledge was the founding of Arzu.

She created it as a nonprofit and NGO, or nongovernmental organization, and funded it with her own money.

Later, Arzu received funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development, a federal organization responsible for most nonmilitary foreign aid.

Duckworth wants Arzu to support itself, and she's confident it can. By 2007, the company stayed afloat mostly from its rug sales, which totaled \$800,000.

"Our mission in Afghanistan is multifold," Duckworth said. "It's to employ women. It's to invest in the future of Afghanistan by requiring that the kids are in school, both girls and boys. And by requiring that women attend literacy classes.

"At the same time, we are trying to help seed some private-sector activity in Afghanistan. Because I believe that any developing country has to have private-sector activity if they're going to advance."

Duckworth was born in 1954 far from the mountains of South Central Asia — in Chicago. She moved around a lot, since her dad was in the military.

She earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas and had her sights on law school. But after working a few months with lawyers on the political front, she yearned for something else.

She applied to just a few business schools and was accepted at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

The way she sees it, she made the right call: "Wharton gave me a whole new tool kit."

After landing degrees in finance and accounting in 1979, Duckworth went to work in Los Angeles for Arco, a major oil firm. Two years later, **Goldman Sachs** (GS) hired her for its bond department. That also is where she met her husband.

Since retiring from Goldman in 2001, she fills her business need by serving on corporate boards.

"That keeps me fresh, that keeps me current on the industry and business," she said. "And then I wanted to give a good portion of my time to philanthropic initiatives. I'm very much in the social entrepreneur camp, and that's Arzu."

Duckworth was the first woman to be chairman of the board of Evanston Northwestern Healthcare. She sits on the boards of Northwestern Mutual, Smurfit Stone Container, Frank Russell, DNP Select Income Fund and the Wharton School.

Ed Zore, CEO of Northwestern Mutual, knows why she's in such demand. "Connie is a true professional, she's very smart, and she works very hard," he told IBD.

Those traits lifted her into the chairwomanship of the Committee of 200, for women entrepreneurs. In 2003, she published a primer, "The Old Girls Network: Insider Advice for Women Building Businesses in a Man's World."

Duckworth took that expertise to Afghanistan, where she has been three times.

She has built a local team for Arzu despite tough logistics. "This is a country that had been at war for 30 years and still has security issues," she said. "So you're looking at a country that has no infrastructure, no roads, no civil society rule of law, no education system, no health care system, no banking system."

How does Arzu make headway? Her team first approaches village elders, who tend to be male.

"It's a gender-segregated society," she said. "We explain the rights and responsibilities of our program and what the Arzu program can offer."

Arzu has hired world-renowned designers so that Afghan women can weave their designs and deliver a beautiful and luxurious product.

"When someone hears 'charitable' item, they basically think souvenir, junk, some little trinket," Duckworth said. "And so they'll buy one. That's not the market we're trying to establish."

Her goal is to establish a luxury brand: a Lexus Hybrid, as she likes to call it. She points out that the rugs are not only beautiful, but also eco-friendly and "Oh, by the way, that rug you just bought has employed a family for six months."

The women who weave them receive market price for the work, plus get all the materials for free, thereby eliminating the expensive middle man.

They also get a 50% quality bonus, which has allowed them to pull themselves out of their impoverished level, says Duckworth.

Arzu is gaining international acclaim. It recently received a \$1 million award from the Skoll Foundation, which from its base in Palo Alto, Calif., promotes socially conscious entrepreneurship.

"If we can get this thing working in Afghanistan, I think we can overlay it in virtually any place," Duckworth said.