

PACIFIC RIM

M A G A Z I N E

TRAVEL

DREAM WEAVER

Inspired by her travels, Ashli Akins turns passion into progress, helping Peruvian communities maintain their traditions and provide for their future.

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PHOTOS **ASHLI AKINS, KATIE LARONE & ALLIE DICKHOUT**



ABOVE A backstrap loom used by the Quechua.



ABOVE Ashli Akins started Mosqoy in 2006 after backpacking through Peru's Sacred Valley.



ASHLI AKINS, AN AMBITIOUS 20-YEAR-OLD, decided to exchange her classroom studies for a real-world education by learning Spanish and backpacking through Peru. She fell in love with the small village of Ollantaytambo, nestled in Peru's Sacred Valley, and made friends with the high school students there. The students are of the Quechua culture and were torn between the desire "to preserve their indigenous culture and the need to develop economically for a more prosperous future. They couldn't find a way of doing one without losing the other," says Akins.

Hand-woven textiles using patterns that have been handed down for centuries have kept alive the important stories of Quechua culture. Globalization, synthetic dyes and fibres, and machine-made products now compete with the culturally rich handmade textiles in the local markets. Economic development in the villages has brought new jobs requiring expensive post-secondary education, which is out of reach for many. Uneducated youth are left unemployed and often more poor than prior to economic development. "I tried to figure out an innovative way to marry the two problems (tradition versus growth) so they could help and support each other," Akins explains.

Akins' vision to address the tension between tradition and progress led to the evolution of three non-profit organizations:



Mosqoy (meaning "dream" in the Quechua language), a post-secondary initiative for promising underprivileged youth; Q'ente Textile Revitalization Society (which means "hummingbird"), an ambitious program to promote Quechua weaving; and Global Stewardship Education Initiative, which enables Canadian students to experience world development issues in their schools. Volunteers drive these programs. "It's at the point where we know the model works," Akins says. "What we need now is financial longevity."

All three organizations have been met with success. The Ollantaytambo municipality now employs Rosemary, a Quechua graduate of Mosqoy. Recently she launched a recycling campaign in the municipality to help rid the local river—where people get their drinking water—of plastic. She enlisted the help of 800 local high school students, educating them about recycling and the need for clean drinking water. She is just one of over 25 university graduates who have found meaningful employment in their communities and are now able to help support their parents and younger siblings. Q'ente Textile Revitalization Society currently works with nine communities in the Sacred Valley, helping the weavers promote and commercialize their textiles locally. The Society also sells the



LEFT Three Quechua women carry their goods in the traditional *manta*, a thickly woven shawl that protects against the harsh Andean climate.

MIDDLE Volunteers meet with a weaving community in the Mapacho River Valley.

RIGHT Newly dyed yarn dries on rocks near the Urubamba Valley, Peru.

weaving at Fair Trade markets and events they host in Victoria, B.C. And as part of the Global Stewardship Education Initiative, a grade three class from Calgary, Alberta raised enough money last year to build a library for an elementary school in Peru. "When I tell people that children raised this money, they are just amazed," Akins relates.

Akins' dream has moved far beyond her initial vision of raising university tuition for her friends. Many people ask her, "Why Peru? Why not support something like this in Canada?" Her response: "I guess I see the world as somewhat borderless. It is our business, and we are part of the problem if we are not directly and actively being a part of the solution." ■

When viewed from the air, Machu Picchu is the shape of a hummingbird: a powerful symbol of regeneration and rebirth for the Quechua people of the Sacred Valley of Peru. Each year tiny hummingbirds make a remarkable journey from Peru to Canada.