

THE INNOVATORS

Weaving a better life for Peru's youth

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Nominator: Wade Davis is an acclaimed author, renowned anthropologist, UBC professor and long-standing explorer-in-residence at the National Geographic Society.

Innovator: Ashli Akins is the founder and executive director of the charity Mosqoy and a PhD student at the University of British Columbia.

"In her vision, intellectual passion, intense focus and ambition, not to mention her deep commitment to social justice and the rights of indigenous peoples, Ashli personifies the values and qualities that anthropology needs to celebrate and support, both for the sake of the discipline and more importantly for the well-being of humanity." - Wade Davis Anthropologist

Ashli Akins already knew she didn't want to be another tourist with a temporary desire to help a developing nation. A letter from one of the young men selected as part of a scholarship program she helped create in southern Peru stands as a reminder that the people she's trying to help don't want that either.

Eight years ago, Ms. Akins, 29, was a university student on a backpacking trek to visit the ancient Incan ruins of Machu Picchu. She was drawn in by life in the nearby rural villages and by the indigenous Quechua population in Peru's Andean mountains.

"I met a lot [of] weavers who were making beautiful tapestries filled with hundreds of colours made from plants of the region. There were marketplaces with loud music, noises and sounds ... it was such vibrancy along the juxtaposition of the quiet and serene history of the people," she said in an interview.

She immersed herself in the local culture to learn Spanish and figure out how she could "make a difference."

For months, she hiked up and down the Andes, physically transporting traditional weavings to be sold at a local museum.

The many female weavers she met presented her with a call to action from which she couldn't turn away.

"They felt like they had to choose between keeping their culture alive or developing economically but they couldn't have both," recalled Ms. Akins. "Eventually, when they worked with me long enough, they asked me if I could figure out a way, so they no longer had to choose. That was the beginning of it."

She decided that she would bring the weavings to Canada to sell and send profits back to the Quechua weavers she had come across. In four months, she had sold \$20,000 of textiles to family, friends and her local community.

“I sold some at the UVic [University of Victoria] textiles fair. I set up a booth. I gave lectures to my classes. I did what I could.”

When she asked the weavers what they wanted to do with the money, they voted to start a scholarship fund for their disadvantaged youth starting in the community of Ollantaytambo in southern Peru, where they have access to only one school.

Her charity Mosqoy – named for the Quechua word for “dream” – designates 25 per cent of all sales to the Andean Youth Program and works across 15 communities in the region. It provides moving costs, housing and tuition for students to pursue higher education in the nearest city of Cusco.

Mosqoy is dedicated to supporting Peru’s Quechua women and children through economic empowerment and education. With credits as a human-rights photojournalist and writer, Ms. Akins sees herself as an “artist, academic and advocate.”

She said she owes her sense of commitment to a belief in social justice and to the letter from the young man.

“It read, ‘I hope you don’t just give us illusions and you actually see this thing through,’” she said. “It made me realize how many times people have come into this community and communities all over the world and been given these types of promises.”

For almost a decade, she has been selling traditional Peruvian textiles through fair-trade channels throughout North America, despite her lack of business experience. Her charity has used the funds to send 60 Quechua youth to university or trade school and has made a major impact in their communities.

“One of our alumnus, Marleni, has 12 younger brothers and sisters and she’s making enough to support all of them in high school and pay for life-saving medication for her mom.”

Ms. Akins has spent three to nine months a year for the past seven years in Peru living with one of the families she first met.

“I have a room in their house. I’m the godmother of their youngest child who was born four years ago. They’re my family now.”

A series introducing the next generation of innovators. We asked prominent British Columbians to nominate people they’re watching.