

TIMES COLONIST

Victoria student makes a difference in Peru

What: Woven in Time, photographs by Ashley Akins and weaving from Peru's Patakancha Valley

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ON EXHIBIT

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Where: McPherson Library Gallery on the University of Victoria campus

When: Until Sept. 29. 250-721-6562

At first glance it is a display of large-format photographs of indigenous Peruvian weavers. Then you notice the informative collection of their textiles, woven from alpaca and sheep wool. Slowly you discover the project that has resulted in this show, dedicated to preserving the traditions of a community and helping the people integrate into the modern world. All this is the initiative of a University of Victoria undergraduate Ashley Akins.

Akins went travelling in 2006 and, without planning to, found herself in the Sacred Valley, a highland area between Cusco and Machu Picchu in the Andes of southern Peru. There, among the campesinos, she experienced an ancient way of life, a life of subsistence farming and weaving. Dedicated to getting beyond tourism, she spent four months working on her Spanish and experiencing the culture. Akins has always been determined to live her life with a positive purpose, "to make a difference," she said.

"Farming and textiles go hand in hand," she told me. Beyond the corn fields, the alpaca roam freely in the mountains, with little ribbons tied on their ears to indicate ownership. Since a time even before the Incas -- before 1,400 AD -- the Quechua communities here have collected the wool and natural dyes, and have woven useful and beautiful yardage on simple backstrap looms. Their warm hats, belts and hairbands are known to the outside world.

The young Canadian was charmed by the timeless lifestyle, and during her stay it became clear to her that this culture was at a crossroads. "If the youth don't learn the art from their elders in this one generation," she said, "the tradition could disappear entirely." Beyond the weaving tradition, the indigenous culture was embedded in the symbols and activities that made up the basis of the weaving.

At the same time as these traditions are dying out, Quechua youth need to integrate themselves into the ever-developing society around them, in order to fend off poverty. What could a young woman from Canada do?

First Akins used her camera and created memorable photos of the people and their culture. Then, in that first summer of 2006, she established the Colibri Project, a textiles revitalization program to create sustainability and cultural integrity in the Sacred Valley. Colibri means hummingbird, named for the powerful Andean symbol that represents regeneration and rebirth. It is one of the only animals found in both Victoria and Ollantaytambo, Peru.

The Colibri Project buys textiles directly from weavers, at a fair price, to sell abroad. More than 40 weavers in 12 communities are involved. The profits are shared among the weavers, the community's revitalization project and Akins's education fund, Youth Bank for the Future.

Akins was surprised to find that the weavers spent the first proceeds of the project on floor looms so they could weave larger goods, while still using their traditional colours and patterns. This seems a perfect resolution of her goal to preserve the past and integrate it with the future.

The Youth Bank's objective is to provide educational opportunities for the children of the Patakanca Valley to continue studies after high school, to create more leaders in the community and to help families sustain themselves. Now, two years later, 20 students are enrolled in their second year of post-secondary education in Cusco, with six more ready to begin in January.

These two projects are part of what she calls the Mosqoy Foundation, a charitable organization working to bridge cultural gaps between North America and Peru.

Where does Akins go from here? "We are looking for non-profit venues to sell our textiles," she said. And, with a crew of volunteers, she is promoting a global education program in Canada and the U.S. "By encouraging high schools to get involved," Akins told me, "we are spreading awareness to youth, opening doors to global compassion and leadership."

That's a tall order for a young woman who is still at work on her bachelor's degree. "It's easy to keep busy when you love what you're doing," she reminded me. "And it's so crucial. I left a lot of promises behind in the Sacred Valley."

To learn more about these activities, visit www.mosqoy.com, where you can participate in a silent auction and see more of Akins's photographs.

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