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HOPE

Story | BRUCE FARR

Connie Duckworth and ARZU are changing the world one patient step at a time.

Several years ago, when retired business executive Connie Duckworth rolled up her sleeves to found a trailblazing women's rug-weaving collective in Afghanistan, she freely admitted that she knew little about Afghanistan, less about rugs and almost nothing about international development.

Never mind those trifling details, however. Since then, ARZU Studio Hope has taken hundreds of Afghan women out of the impoverished ranks and helped restore their strength, dignity and livelihoods.

Now, nearly a decade later, Duckworth is chairman and chief executive officer of ARZU, which, in the native Dari language, means "hope." She's molded this collective of more than 300 Afghan female weavers (and 400 support workers) in dozens of tribal villages to become a highly-praised, international nonprofit that's winning hearts and minds around the world, largely as a model for how to rebuild war-ravaged countries' economies.

"But how?" one might wonder. As Duckworth describes it: "In a slow, patient build."

mom with a mission

Despite the demands of being a mother of four school-age children, Duckworth wasn't about to join the soccer mom ranks after retiring from her position as managing director with Goldman-Sachs (she was the first female to achieve that title).

Shortly afterward, she got a call from a friend who told her that she was about to be tapped for a bipartisan commission called the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council. The Council is a public-private partnership, created in 2002 by Presidents George W. Bush and Hamid Karzai. It serves to connect the U.S. and Afghan governments, the private sector, academia and non-governmental organizations to develop and implement initiatives in support of Afghan women and children.

"It intrigued me," Duckworth says of her appointment. "I had been following the Taliban abuse of women in the general press, so I had an interest in it. But it was going over for that first trip in January of '03, and seeing the conditions for women and the scope of the need that really captured my heart."

The difference between Duckworth and millions of others who have been touched by the awful plight of Middle Eastern women,

however, is that she acted on her passion.

On the way back to the airport in Kabul, Duckworth recalls stopping at a bombed-out cinderblock structure that belonged to the Soviets during their occupation.

"It was January and freezing," she recalls. "There were dozens of widows and their children huddled there, living in this 'shelter,' and you looked at these beautiful children and realized that for a quirk of where you happen to have been born, they could be your kids. That was the hook for me. I came back and said, 'OK, I'm going to do something.'"

What she did was to head home and flip through her Rolodex, and begin to phone friends and friends of friends, reaching out to them for advice on everything from how run a nonprofit to rug-making design ideas.

"I really think it was this collective wisdom that allowed ARZU to take its first baby steps from 'idea' to execution," Duckworth notes.

In 2004, after a year of research and red tape, Duckworth founded ARZU Studio Hope, an organization that she likes to refer to as "a social business enterprise." Technically, it's a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, built on a model that's deceptively simple and yet—considering its base in one of the world's most precarious trouble spots—is actually quite complex and fragile.

private sector inspiration

The idea for ARZU, Duckworth says, sprang directly from her private sector business experience. She formed a theory that she successfully put to the test following her first trips to the Middle East.

"When I saw Afghanistan for the first time, I really saw the immediate need [for jobs]," she explains. "I firmly believe that the starting point for poverty alleviation is gainful employment, because, with that, people have the means to acquire the basic needs of life—food, water, shelter, clothing—and once they satisfy those basic needs, they can then pursue higher-order needs: education, personal enrichment, all those other sorts of things."

Duckworth brought to bear another professionally inspired mantra in her early ARZU planning.

"I have this personal motto, which is, 'she who writes the check controls the agenda,'" she states. "If women earn a paycheck in any culture, their status in that culture changes, because money talks—again—in any culture."

ARZU opted for rug weaving via a process of elimination, because it happened to be one of the only products that Duckworth rightly surmised could get up and running immediately in Afghanistan. War-ravaged as the country is, and with a devastating lack of infrastructure, other manufacturing ideas would have been seriously hampered.

THE ARZU MASTER'S COLLECTION

The once unlikely prospect of having a famous architect design a rug for your home or business has become a distinct reality, thanks to ARZU Project Hope's inspirational new Master's Collection of fine rug designs.

Giants of modern architecture including Frank Gehry, Stanley Tigerman, Michael Graves, Robert A.M. Stern, Zaha Hadid and Margaret McCurry have joined ARZU's cause by creating 10 modern rugs in varying size and color schemes. Each piece represents a limited edition, custom order, numbered work. These designers' inspired works are woven into area rugs by the ARZU female weavers in Bamyan Province, Afghanistan.

According to Connie Duckworth, ARZU chairman and CEO, the collection represents the pinnacle of what ARZU has attempted to achieve.

"It's an amazing marriage of design and skill," says Duckworth. "The fact that little ARZU, working with highly skilled weavers in the middle of nowhere in Afghanistan, can create and execute on designs by some of the most famous names in the world is, well...to us, it's a real milestone." arzustudiohope.org



SGT. HEIDI AGOSTINI, USMC

Developing and supporting women in business is absolutely key to greater acceptance of women in public life and the continued economic development and stability of Afghanistan. By empowering these women through economic sustainability, ARZU and partners like U.S. Trust are helping change the world one beautiful rug at a time.

– Karen Hughes,
Worldwide Vice Chair of Burson-Marsteller and former Under
Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs



ARZU began with just 30 weavers and now employs a total of 700 workers who produce a fascinating array of more than 300 styles. Among them are centuries-old tribal patterns, traditional floral patterns and a line of modern and contemporary prints.

One of the reasons for the collective's success, Duckworth feels, is the fact that ARZU is operated exclusively by Afghans.

"We decided—in what was mostly a gut decision—to go with an all-local Afghan team from day one," she explains. "It was difficult because, in a country that's been at war as long as Afghanistan, it's hard to find workers with a sufficient 'business context' to run a business successfully. It takes extensive, hands-on daily training."

'conscious consumerism'

The main Afghan ARZU facility is situated in a very rural section of the country, which is yet another reason Duckworth says the enterprise has been successful.

"We made a decision to move ARZU out of mainstream cities and into the rural provinces," she explains. "Kabul is an example of what happens when the fire hose of international funding is fully turned on, there's a lot of corruption. It creates very weird labor dynamics, and it's a 'wild west' kind of atmosphere. While it may have been logistically more difficult to establish our footprint in a province, it's actually much easier to make it work there."

Not only are the Afghan women who work under ARZU's banner paid a fair wage, they're also provided assistance with healthcare, education and other life-supporting programs.

"Our idea was to link the workmanship of the women weaving these beautiful artisan rugs, with selling them to socially responsible



corporations and individuals here in the United States, and then have the funding from those sales go back to pay for those social programs," Duckworth explains.

ARZU products are moved through distribution networks and exported through regular channels.

"With no marketing, advertising or PR budget, we've had to use social media, word of mouth and other means to market our product," she explains. "But we've gotten traction through some of the design awards we've won."

Duckworth describes how the product distribution got started with the residential design community, and now operates with a small but prestigious group of high-end distributors.

"The real breakthrough with us that we've been working on for the last three years has been the commercial market—commercial design firms that work with 'socially responsible' businesses around the country. This is about 'conscious consumerism,' that is, buying product with a purpose," she emphasizes.

"It's important to remember that ARZU is a prototype, a 'learning laboratory,'" Duckworth continues. "What we're trying to prove is a workable, scalable model in what is ranked as the worst country in the world to be a woman. If we can do it here, then that model is replicable anywhere." ♣