

Fair trade stores growing in cachet in North Jersey

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"This necklace," says Cynthia Thek, "is made of a reed that you find in Kenya."

Every item in Fair World After All, an Englewood fair trade gift shop, has a story: handbags, bracelets, vases, gloves, chafing dishes, lampshades. And Thek knows them all.

"A couple of years ago there was a big drought in Kenya," she says. "The Maasai men would leave the women and children to go out herding goats and whatnot. So the women staying back had to find another source of income. A group of them work on these necklaces."

Here's a green and white bag, one of Thek's favorites. It's made of cotton thread woven with recycled cassette tape — you can see it glisten — and comes from a vocational organization in New Delhi. "They focus on



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children and young adults that have developmental or physical disabilities," she says.

Try going into a big chain store and asking the back story of one of their handbags.

Not only would the clerk not know but — if the words "made in China" or "made in Mexico" appear on the label — it might be tied to some sordid story of child exploitation or underpaid factory workers.

That's why "fair trade" has become a buzzword in progressive circles, and fair trade stores like Thek's are popping up across the country and around the world.

So much so, in fact, that the neighboring town of Teaneck has taken the next step. On Oct. 21, following a May vote by the township council and under the auspices of Fair Trade Towns USA, Teaneck officially became one of 21 fair trade towns in the U.S. (three others are in New Jersey: Montclair, Highland Park and Red Bank).

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"It's a very exciting development," says Bruce Prince, owner of Teaneck General Store, which carries a large selection of fair trade goods: jars, mirrors, clocks, candles, cooking utensils, coffee, tea.

Some fair trade goods are competitively priced; others can cost 10 to 15 percent more than their non-fair counterparts. But, advocates say, can you put a price tag on a clear conscience?

"The onus is on us as consumers," says Carmen K. Iezzi, executive director of the Fair Trade Federation in Washington, D.C. "We need to ask, where is this from? Who made it? What is the impact of my choice?"

The Fair Trade USA seal of approval — a little black and white figure balancing baskets in each hand — on clothes, crafts, tea, coffee and chocolate is as sought after, among the "fair trade" crowd, as the Prada label is among fashionistas.

"The message is that we have to be mindful of our global neighbors, mindful of how they live, mindful of the earth," Prince says.

Broadly speaking, the fair trade creed is: (a) fair compensation for artisans, (b) safe and healthy working conditions, (c) no exploitative child labor and (d)



environmentally sustainable production practices.

Just as fair trade goods have to meet certain standards before they can be slapped with a Fair Trade USA sticker, so a fair trade town has to win its wings: There must be, among other things, the minimum number of stores carrying fair trade goods (eight retailers and eight non-profits, in the case of Teaneck's 40,000 population) and the sanction of local government. Teaneck, which harbors fair trade goods in places as unlikely as Dunkin' Donuts, Stop & Shop and Holy Name Medical Center, fits the bill.

"Fair trade has arrived," says Dennis Klein, chairman of the Fair Trade Teaneck steering committee. "People are thinking more and more about, how does their food arrive on their shelf?"

Fair trade developed in the 1940s, among missionary groups like the Mennonites that did heavy trading in Africa and other developing regions (Ten Thousand Villages, a chain of fair trade stores, was launched by

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A large, colorful advertisement for All American Ford. On the left, there is a cartoon character of a man in a blue and red uniform with the number 1 on his chest, holding a football. To his right, the text "PRE-SEASON SAVINGS" is written in large, bold, red and yellow letters. Below that, "ITS GO TIME!" is written in a similar style. In the center, "\$500 OFF" is written in very large, bold, yellow letters with a black outline. To the right of this, "MSRP" is written in large, bold, black letters. Below the "\$500 OFF" text, it says "TOWARDS THE PURCHASE OF ANY NEW FORD • LINCOLN • MERCURY • SUBARU VEHICLE". At the bottom, there are logos for Ford, Lincoln Mercury, and Subaru. To the right of the logos is the website "www.ALL.AMERICAN.FORD.NET" and the text "MUST BE PRESENT AT TIME OF PURCHASE".

Mennonites). But it's taken on new urgency in the 21st century. Like the green movement, it challenges Americans to not be passive consumers but to be aware of a product's origins and afterlife.

"If [workers] don't make money, they can't afford to support their family," says Dave Walters, co-owner of SmartWorld Coffee in New Milford (it has sister stores in Denville and Montclair).

"If the price of coffee goes below the cost of what it takes to produce, then farmers don't have any money to live on," says Walters, who serves only fair trade brew. "Under fair trade, they're guaranteed a certain amount of money for the crop."

Food and crafts are just part of the story. Flowers — and flower mills — are a concern as well.

"Pesticide exposure has been devastating to women in particular," says Tim Blunk, owner of Tiger Lily, a flower and gift store in Teaneck. "They're out in the fields where a lot of these pesticides are being used overhead. Your average rose has 1,000 times the pesticides you'd find on fruits and vegetables. You get cancer, birth defects, other genetic abnormalities."



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Blunk sells both standard-issue roses and fair-trade blooms (13 to 15 percent more expensive) from approved farms in Ecuador. But he has a preference.

"I proselytize," Blunk says. "I offer them a choice of fair trade or non-fair trade. The response is usually half and half. Some folks are happy, delighted in fact, when they find out their purchases are making a difference in improving someone else's life. Others want their \$15 bouquet."

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A large advertisement for All American Ford. On the left, a cartoon character in a blue jersey with the number 1 is shown. The text "PRE-SEASON SAVINGS ITS GO TIME!" is written in a bold, stylized font. To the right, "\$500 OFF MSRP" is written in large, yellow, 3D-style letters. Below this, it says "TOWARDS THE PURCHASE OF ANY NEW FORD • LINCOLN • MERCURY • SUBARU VEHICLE". At the bottom, the website "www.ALL.AMERICAN.FORD.NET" is displayed in a bold, yellow font, followed by "MUST BE PRESENT AT TIME OF PURCHASE". Logos for Ford, Lincoln, Mercury, and Subaru are also present.