

## Santa Fe Hosts World's Largest Folk Art Market



**AP**  
**JERI CLAUSING** 06/26/12 11:50 AM ET

SANTA FE, N.M. — The stories are as diverse as the artists themselves: Afghan women who have lifted themselves out of poverty through a cooperative that sells their traditional embroidery; a former cook for the Sudan People's Liberation Army who now sells beaded corsets to help support her family and send her many grandchildren to school; and sisters from Kyrgyzstan who make hand-stitched felt and silk scarves using a family tradition that dates back some 300 years.

The women and their tales are just a sampling of the real lives behind the work that will be featured in New Mexico next month at the popular Santa Fe International Folk Art Market, which sends 90 percent of its \$2 million-plus annual proceeds back to the artists and programs that can dramatically alter their lives and their communities.

The market is the largest of its kind and runs July 13-15, turning Santa Fe's Milner Plaza into a global destination where buyers can mingle with artisans, some of whom have left remote villages for the very first time.

The show is among this artistic mountain enclave's many popular summer events, drawing 20,741 people last year.

The biggest difference between this and Santa Fe's other shows, like its Spanish and Indian markets, is the impact it has in far-flung corners of the globe. Besides making life-saving or life-changing contributions like helping communities build schools, houses and wells for clean drinking water, the effort is also helping to preserve traditional art forms while teaching the artists how to create cooperatives and businesses for selling their wares year-round.

Now in its ninth year, the market was founded by of Charlene Cerny and Judith Espinar, two longtime fixtures in the Santa Fe art scene and lovers of folk art.

Espinar says the idea blossomed quickly after she called UNESCO for help locating artists.

"(They) said come to Paris, look through the files. We'll give you 10 Gold Medal winners," Espinar said.

Local businesses quickly lined up to help support the show and sponsor the artists. And the rest is, well, history.

Cerny originally agreed to join Espinar in the project only if it had no more than 25 artists. The first show had 18. This year, more than 150 artists from 49 countries will be in attendance selling everything from traditional scarves and attire to jewelry, rugs and baskets. Fifty-four participants will be representing cooperatives with more than 20,000 artisans. Since its inception, the market has earned more than \$12 million. Prices at the market range from \$5 to tens of thousands.

Espinosa and Cerny travel the world looking for new artists. A jury vets the applicants and some first-timers are offered financial assistance. The artists are also offered training to help them market and sell their wares, enabling many to return in later years on their own.

Among this year's first-timers will be Mary Padar Kuojok, who spent many years traveling with and cooking for the Sudan People's Liberation Army. When the Republic of South Sudan was created in 2010, she moved to Juba, where she joined the Roots Project, which helps tribal women from around the country revive long-ignored art traditions.

Kuojok, now a grandmother, hadn't made the beaded corsets that were unique to her Dinka tribe since she was a child, said Roots Project founder Anyieth D'Wol, a former human rights worker.

"I asked her if she knew how to make something traditional ... and it was beautiful," D'Wol said. About 15 such corsets will be available at the market, but D'Wol said pricing had not yet been set.

Kuojok's trip to Santa Fe will be only her second time to leave South Sudan; her first trip was to Nairobi to get a visa.

She will also bring beaded work from artisans from other tribes represented by the Roots Project.

D'Wol said the Roots Project not only helps women learn to take care of themselves and establish a business sense, but is also helping to revive traditions that have gotten lost in two decades of war.

"When I first started working with the women, it was 'What do you know how to make?' I had no idea what they were. They are not documented and many of the items are rarely even worn by the tribes anymore."

A similar project in Afghanistan, Kandahar Treasure, is giving financial freedom to women who do the traditional geometric embroidery unique to the area. Started by Rangina Hamidi, an Afghan whose family fled war to the United States when she was a child, the project now has more than 400 women selling products.

Some of the women earn up to \$100 a month, which is almost double the average government salary. Homes with mothers and daughters participating have dramatically improved their family's economic standing, and given women more control over their lives.

"One of the women has 13 daughters," Hamidi said. "In a country where manhood is so great, any woman who gives birth to that many daughters is cursed. Now that they have been earning money for almost nine years ... they have risen themselves out of poverty. They are no longer invited as servants to weddings and parties, they are invited as guests."

Some of the artists are well established, but this year, 40 percent will be showing at the market for the first time.

Cerny and Espinar say the market has become a destination, drawing visitors last year from 26 states.

"More and more people are looking at they do as a vote for what they care about," said Cerny. "... They are getting the idea that they are helping build a school in Pakistan, helping put a roof on a women's shelter."