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# FROM THE HEART OF GUATEMALA

Sharing *culture* through traditional textiles

STORY BY LIZZ DANIELS

Guatemala is a country, rich with history, dating back to the ancient Mayan empire. The heritage of the people that live there grows from deep within the rainforests, branching high up volcanic mountain tops, and is a tale told in the elaborate cotton textiles woven by the indigenous population.

The huipil is a traditional garment worn by the women of Mexico and Central America. In essence, it is a loosely fitting tunic constructed of rectangular pieces, which are held together, and decorated, with elaborate stitching, ribbons and beads. Styles differ from region to region, but one thing they all share in common is that the embroidery tells the story of a people and the land on which they live.

Ollie Booker was enchanted by the traditional attire of Guatemala more than 20 years ago, and has since turned her love for the country, and its clothing, into her business back home in Seguin.

"I used to go to Honduras, and then I branched over to Guatemala and fell in love with the country," Ollie said. "I started out doing basic learning about the huipils, meeting women over there, making friends and learning the culture."

In interacting with residents, and hearing their stories, Ollie formed connections that are the foundation for her shop, Ollie's Gifts and Imports. Each year in May, Ollie packs her bags and flies south to journey beyond the typical tourist destinations, deep into the heart of Guatemala where she hand selects huipils, belts and fabric skenes to bring back home.

Some of the clothing she brings back will be put on display in her at-home showroom and then sold in her online shop. The fabric, however, will be transformed. Working with her tailors, Ollie, de-

signs and brings to life, an assortment of bold fashion items, which incorporate the Meso-American style.

"The material is from a remote region we go to, and it only comes from that area," she said. "What I'm doing is buying the material and making it into assorted things, which we then design into jackets and dresses."



*Photos by Lizz Daniels*



When Ollie first started visiting Guatemala, the residents were wary of the foreigner, who spoke only rudimentary Spanish. The country was recovering from a 36 year civil war, wherein, the government committed mass human rights violations along with genocide against the Maya population — the same people Ollie hoped to befriend.

"This one village we go to is way up past where we normally stay," she said. "The women wear this beautiful red material, but they're very leery of outsiders because during the war they were slaughtered."

Ollie's affable personality and genuine interest in their lives and culture eventually overcame their distrust, allowing for open trade and collaboration to take root. Each time she returned, Ollie reconnected with locals and began sharing possibilities for projects. Over time, her network grew, and she now describes the women she's met on her travels as close friends.

"Now I get invited to the women's homes when they see me," she said. "When I'm shopping they'll bring out all these huipiles that I can look at. Last year, a woman took me to her private bodega where she got high up on a stack of giant material and threw stuff down to me."

A yearning for adventure, and the urge to seek out the unknown initiated Ollie's traveling-merchant life, but it was the honesty she sees in the people that drives her annual return. She describes a strong sense of spirituality that exists in the rural areas of Central America, unmarred by the troubles of a modern day life. The people are real, authentic, and exist in much the same way their ancestors did, living off the land, relying on their family and friends to hold each other up. Ollie Booker found an earnestness in something crafted by hand, and seeks to bring that kind of mindfulness to others as they appreciate the pieces offered by Ollie's Gifts and Imports.

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*Ollie is pictured with her Guatemalan friends selecting huipil fabrics on one of her trips to Central America. The fabrics she selects are then brought home to be modeled (as pictured) and sold in her at-home studio in Sequent.*

*Photos by: Douglas Manger*