**San Jose Mercury News: Business Major Launches Socially Conscious Startup**

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**"Lisu Voice," one of nearly two dozen pillows offered by business major Aimi Duong's startup (Oimeico image).**

**A passage through Asia leads San Jose State student to a soft launch**

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By Bruce Newman

Aimi Duong is 24, so the fate of the world is naturally a matter of some concern to her. Not surprisingly, she believes there may still be some hope for it, although urgent action may be required. That’s where she comes in.

Duong was well into her studies as a business major at San Jose State when she realized that the primary objective taught by virtually every business class she took — maximize profits, destroy the competition — posed a conflict for someone determined to save the world.

So after returning to San Jose from Asia two months ago, she launched Oimei Co., a socially conscious startup where the only bottom line that matters is empowering marginalized workers in developing countries. “Oimei” is the Chinese version of Aimi; it means “love beauty,” which, as a matter of fact, she does.

Oimei operates under the banner “Pillows for Peace,” and through the company, Duong sells hand-woven textiles made in Thailand by women who are artisans, yet barely able to scratch out a living from the remarkable treasures they produce. When she met those women last year, Duong recognized something about their stories that touched her in a very familiar way.

Her mother and three siblings escaped from Vietnam as boat people in the early 1980s, then spent 11 months in a Malaysian refugee camp before making their way to San Jose. To keep the family together in a small apartment, Duong’s mom worked an assortment of odd jobs, always hoping her children would have a better life in this country. So when Duong first raised the possibility of an extended tour of Southeast Asia, her mother made no secret of her dismay.

“I’m the last child in my family, and my mom is quite dependent on me for her happiness,” Duong says. “So I never even thought of going to college far from San Jose because I always felt a really big sense of guilt. But I recognized that I can’t help anyone else if I can’t help myself.”

**Extended sojourn**

Duong had no particular sense of direction in high school, a situation that improved only slightly after two years of junior college. But after a year as a business major at **SJSU**, she had grown disillusioned with the engine that drives most businesses: the emphasis on the bottom line. “I chose business because I thought it would be more practical,” says Duong, “but when I began taking classes, I didn’t like the idea of everything being so profit-driven.”

To set herself apart from thousands of other soon-to-graduate job candidates, she hit upon the idea of studying abroad for four months. “It was scary just to drop everything, not have an income anymore and go somewhere where I don’t speak the language,” she says. “But when I got there, I saw how easy it was to travel around to other countries. So I decided to stay for four more months, and then four more months.” Her Southeast Asian sojourn eventually stretched to 16 months.

During her last semester in Thailand, as she was applying for jobs back in the U.S., Duong dreaded the idea of heading for some entry-level position in the corporate world. “I felt I was kind of selling myself short,” she recalls. While interning for a nonprofit in Thailand, her fascination with the handmade textiles she loved to buy at local markets in Burma, Malaysia and Laos became the inspiration for the company she wanted to form.

**Great determination**

But by that time, Duong had nearly depleted her savings. “My family was saying, ‘You just need to come home and come back to reality,’ ” she says.

Instead, she found a website called [StartSomeGood.com](http://startsomegood.com/), where she posted her idea and a short video asking for support, hoping to raise seed money. “I figured it doesn’t hurt to try,” she says. To her surprise, in 45 days she raised $5,600, some of which she used to go to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and other parts of Thailand to meet the women — most of them from Chiang Mai, Thailand — who would become her pillow manufacturers. Most of the weavers subsist on less than $200 a month. Duong hopes to change that.

Chatchai Aphibanpoonpon, a recent MBA graduate from Thammasat University, was impressed by Duong’s determination. “Even though, from a business point of view, the textile market is highly competitive, she still strongly believes in her idea and keeps pushing it forward because she knows that many women that are now living under poverty depend on her,” Aphibanpoonpon says via email from Thailand. “She is an inspiration to me, and I hope to many young and talented people out there, to follow her path, to do something that really creates an impact to society and make this world a better place to live.”

As soon as Duong returned to classes in San Jose two months ago, she began assembling a team of like-minded young women as partners, and opened her website (<http://oimeico.com/shop/pillows>) for business. Everything is certified fair trade, and the weavers keep about 60 percent of what Duong pays for the pillows. The website originally claimed 50 percent of net profits would go to charity, and Duong’s plan for herself was to “live minimally.” But her partners informed her that the business would never survive if she gave away that much profit. “We need to grow in order to increase impact,” she says.

Her goal now is to begin working with women from a small village in northern Vietnam who are victims of human trafficking. Ramping up a distribution network from such a remote location is daunting. But with the fate of the world in the balance, her work won’t wait.

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