

Introducing Gone Rural

Gone Rural
Swaziland

(music playing over footage of baskets and Swaziland)

Julie Nixon: Gone Rural was started in the late 1970s by Jenny Thorton and it was a way to empower women. Our products go to 30 countries around the world and we have about 400 active customers. We have 781 women all together, collectively they earn about 2.5 million rand per year.

So Gone Rural is about “trade not aid”. We work with powerful women that are doing it for themselves, we don’t believe in handouts. Our women negotiate the prices that we pay, so they currently earn 47%-52% of the wholesale price that we sell our products for. So everything we do here is driven by the women. We went to them and we asked them what their needs were. So all our social projects, our empowerment projects, all come from the needs of the communities that we work in.

African women are incredible. They are strong, they are powerful, they are what the community is built upon, so we go out there and we do what we can to assist them because they deserve it.

The income-generation side of Gone Rural is about making craft. Our women work from home and it’s a traditional skill they’ve had passed down through generations. We buy the products every three weeks throughout the groups. We take the products and we export, but we also have two retail stores within Swaziland. It’s mainly tourist, in Swaziland, but the rest of the world is home décor products.

Philippa Thorne: So we’re preserving the techniques that are passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter and um you know and so those techniques have been around for generations. And what that means at Gone Rural is really connecting the Swazi women and their craft and taking that and making it accessible to people in the west and tourists coming to visit Swaziland. What we’re really passionate about is really showing people about those hand skills and again really elevating craft. That really involves empowering the women further. At the moment we talk about economic empowerment, and we have the social programs, but it’s also about creating leaders now within the community. And they’re very humble and modest but they have this inner strength. They have their struggles but they still have this sort of amazing inner peace and connection.

Zinhle Vilakati: Here we do product development where new things are being created. So maybe we feel someone can come with new ideas we make new things we look for how is it going to be like a seasonal or which maybe customers would like, colors would like and then we make it whether into a basket or into anything that can be new to our customers. Then we send them to our customers so they bring it back for an order, we just train all the ladies in our development groups and it’s good because the ladies are getting more orders to the communities because we have started making new products. So customers must like it, so it’s very important.

Nixon: Then on our social side we have schools projects. We educated 343 children last year on full education scholarships. Then we have clean water because water brings everything. Once you have

water in a community, everything can go from there. In 2006 we had to open an NGO because income generation is so extremely important because that's what grows and develops villages, mainly through education of children. So we started our NGO in 2006 to complement the income generation side with health and education programs.

Sibongile Zwane: We do gardens, school fees, and peer class. Like me, I'm a peer educator, I teach people how to grow vegetables in the community and how to keep them healthy and get healthy vegetables. We use organic to make the people to fight HIV and be strong.

Nixon: Every day we're out in the mountains. So Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays we're out, Tuesdays the women actually come to us.

Thorne: So all the projects come from the artisans. We have an artisan board and they brainstorm every year and they come up with the programs that we run.

Mkhuleko Hltajwako: This home it was acquired by the community. It appeared to them that they are proud this area, this rainy area. In winter they have too much rains and it's very cold. As you can see the artisans are working outside, the cold affect them so they need the shelter to work under. They made a request to Gone Rural and Gone Rural provided the building for them.

Nixon: We place an order with them and then the following week they bring their order. We buy it and then the following week they come back, they get another order. What we say to our women is that we go to them even if we don't have a single order, we will order a certain amount of money with them every single time we visit.

Throne: And we focus on from the business side the strategies, the business and also the project side. So what is the focus, you know, is it water, is it school fees, I love the fact that the women we've built one community center and that's a home for them. And that's something they're all wanting now as well which shows a sense of community also within the Gone Rural women outside of our central hub.

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