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Business and Charity Wound on Same Strand

by Heather Stewart

Four years ago, Wendy Bird decided develop her home-based jewelry-making hobby into a direct-sales company focused on pearls. Since that time, My Princess Pearls has grown into a business with nearly \$400,000 in annual sales, 52 national distributors and a new retail shop that will open in Lehi next month.

Along the way, Bird also launched a charitable foundation dedicated to improving the lives of the Filipino women who handcraft her pearl jewelry. The foundation, Pearls With a Purpose, has shipped hundreds of boxes containing food, clothing and educational supplies to several remote Philippine villages. In addition, the foundation raised \$12,500 in 2005 to send 96 children to school.

"The business and the foundation are really closely intertwined," Bird said.

Bird became aware of the extreme poverty in Philippine villages from her pearl source in that country. Just after she launched her company in 2002, she gathered supplies from friends and neighbors and sent 44 boxes to the Philippines, paying \$5,000 in shipping costs for the used books, clothing and household items. The expense caused her to rethink her business, nearly abandoning it.

"My husband and I had a serious discussion about the business. It had become an expense, and we never wanted the business to create a hole in our budget—to go into the red," Bird said. "But after I got letters from villagers thanking me for the supplies, I knew I couldn't stop."

At that time, Bird created the foundation for "a more organized way to make the charitable side of it work."

The business and the foundation have grown together. From bringing in \$22,000 in sales the first year, My Princess Pearls grew to nearly \$400,000 in sales last year. Bird said the company is on target to exceed that figure in 2006.

The growth—and the daily parade of clients into her home—prompted Bird to expand into a retail store, Gifts That Lift, which

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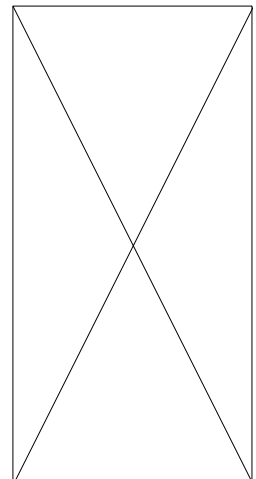
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will open June 1 on Main Street in Lehi. In addition to pearl jewelry, the store will feature handcrafted silk skirts with gold embroidery, embellished shoes, quilts and silverware.

In order to launch the store, Bird secured funding from Grow Utah Ventures, which will allow the company to open the store, pay employee salaries and expand its Web site.

Bird said her distributors are enthusiastic about My Princess Pearls because they can help women and children in the Philippines while they are earning extra income for their own families. "Every single woman has told me, 'I want to sell this because it makes a difference,'" she said.

The employment also benefits the 50 contract workers in the Philippines. According to Bird, the Filipino jewelry-makers earn about five times the average wage of the country. "They come up with really unique, creative styles that have done well for us in the United States," she said.

Clients often have a hard time understanding why custom orders for the handcrafted jewelry take weeks to arrive or why sold-out items can't be re-ordered. "We're not Wal-Mart. We can't just get it again," said Bird. "Mother Nature is the creator of the pearls, and they come in many unique shapes, colors and sizes."

Pearls With a Purpose is holding another fundraiser on Saturday to raise enough money to pay tuition for another year for schoolchildren in the Philippines. The event will be held at the McKay Events Center in Orem from 2 to 5 p.m. More information about the fundraiser can be found at www.pearlswithapurpose.org.



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