

PERSONALLY *speaking*

EARTH HEIR — A BUSINESS OF TWO MISSIONS

By Jennifer Jacobs

While driving home from work one day, Sasibai Kimis fell asleep at the wheel. She had been working 16- to 18-hour days for six months (including weekends) and the intense pace finally took its toll. It happened in a split second but thankfully, the car didn't veer to either side. But it was the straw that broke the camel's back. Sasibai decided that no job, however well paid or interesting, was worth dying for.

She gave up her day job at Khazanah Nasional Bhd and went full-time into what had attracted her as a child — making a positive difference in the lives of people who were not born to the same advantages (or to be politically incorrect, “the poor”). For two years, she had loved being on the sustainable developments team

“
Yes, my life has changed but I don't regret it at all. I don't need to go to expensive restaurants or buy expensive bags, shoes or clothes. I have more than enough and I realise that we don't need so much stuff.”

at Khazanah and had developed deep expertise in the carbon markets. Sasibai had studied finance at the highly prestigious Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and environment and development at Cambridge University. She had spent two years in Ghana, working first for the United Nations and then for an NGO that helped people displaced by mining activities to adjust to modern life (they had lived off the land for generations).

But Sasibai had always figured that, to help the poor, you needed money. And the way to make money was to get a high-paying job in the financial sector, either with an investment bank in New York or a private equity firm in London (both of which she did) and then use that money to do some good in the world.

“I used to think that money was the only thing poor people needed and then I realised it wasn't. I wanted to understand why there is poverty. It's not because of the lack of money that people are poor. There are other things that are working in the world to keep them in that state.

“And I've always had an interest in the relationship between poverty and the environment. Poor people depend on the environment. In the city, we don't care whether the river is clean or whether there are a lot of trees because we don't live off the land,” she says.

After Khazanah, Sasibai decided to take time out to do some soul searching. She went for a Christian missionary course with Youth with a Mission (YWM), during which she was sent to Cambodia for two months to teach English and help build shelters and schools for villagers. It was here that she learnt the culture of silk. “I thought, why don't I just buy some of these scarves they make and sell them to my friends? I could use the money to help these people,” she remembers.

It seemed simple enough. Most of the weavers were not receiving fair compensation. They were squeezed by



WHERE DOES THE NAME [EARTH HEIR] COME FROM?

“IT REFLECTS MY BELIEFS. GOD GAVE US THIS EARTH TO STEWARD, BOTH THE PEOPLE AND THE NATURAL RESOURCES, AND WE HAVEN'T DONE A VERY GOOD JOB BECAUSE THERE ARE A LOT OF POOR PEOPLE AROUND AND THE ENVIRONMENT IS BEING DESTROYED.”

middlemen who bought the scarves for a pittance and sold them for a much higher price. They could choose not to sell to these middlemen but there were not many other options available to them.

Sasibai thought of doing this as a side business while continuing her “sensible” money-making job at HR consulting firm Trinitas Partners, which she had set up with a friend. And then it became more than a part-time endeavour. “Late last year, our HR consulting firm wasn't really busy, so I didn't have much to do. And I thought, why not look more into this scarf thing? Maybe I can really make a difference if I do it big; much bigger than I had originally intended,” she says.

This meant a much greater commitment. She started travelling to Cambodia more often, making her way to the villages in the silk-producing regions and identifying non-profit organisations that she could work with. Her vision had become that much bigger. Not only would she buy from the weavers directly but she would also apportion half of her profits to non-profit organisations that helped victims of sex traffickers. She chose to help these victims after visiting a Cambodian woman whose daughter had been “adopted” by a man 20 years previously. He had promised the woman that he would give the little girl a better life and an education, and that they would keep in touch, but has never heard anything from the man or her daughter. “It broke our hearts because we realised that the child had probably been sold into prostitution,” Sasibai remembers.

So, Sasibai identified two non-profit organisations and listened to their horror stories of rescuing victims. “This is a cause that really speaks to me, and one that I want to help. So, I'm working with one non-profit in Cambodia that provides shelter for abused and exploited women and one in Malaysia, which does roughly the same thing. They try to help these women by helping them find alternative sources of income.”

At first, she was content to help the weavers by buying from them at a fair price and helping the two NGOs

with part of the proceeds. But then she met Datuk Kim Tan of the Transformational Business Network and he expanded her vision. “He said, instead of working with what happens after trafficking, perhaps I should build a business that would help prevent trafficking altogether. He said don't do anything just for charity's sake. If you're going to do something to help people, build a business because it's only through building a business that you can create a long-term impact.”

And so, Earth Heir, the company she founded to sell the scarves, expanded its vision. One of the things Sasibai is working on right now is to create a luxury line of scarves that will sell for more. “I'm thinking of travelling to different parts of the world to source high-quality work directly from the weavers.”

Where does the name come from? “It reflects my beliefs. God gave us this earth to steward, both the people and the natural resources, and we haven't done a very good job because there are a lot of poor people around and the environment is being destroyed.”

She registered the company officially in February and has only participated in two bazaars — at Bangsar Shopping Centre and Publika Solaris Dutamas. So far, she has made no money and is surviving on the rent from two properties she purchased back when she had a “real job”. “It's one-sixth or one-seventh of what I used to earn, but you learn to adapt. I don't go out as much and when friends call and ask me out, I will have to consider it based on how expensive it will be.

“Yes, my life has changed but I don't regret it at all. I don't need to go to expensive restaurants or buy expensive bags, shoes or clothes. I have more than enough and I realise that we don't need so much stuff.”

Visit Sasibai's blog and online shop at www.earthheir.com. 