

STITCHES OF TIBET

A HANDICRAFT INITIATIVE OF TIBETAN WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION





Stitches of Tibet (SOT) is a program that was implemented by TWA in 1995 to fulfill these goals by empowering female Tibetan refugees as well as Tibetan women already in exile. The first group of six students graduated on 5 October 1996.



EARLY SPONSORS OF STITCHES OF TIBET:

SOT is a non-profit vocational training program that was established with the funding of the Lolwe Foundation of Denmark, Mr. Uli Franz (in memory of his late uncle Mr. Hans Franz) of Germany, The Cathedral Church of Saint David Hobart of Australia, the Danish Tibet Society of Denmark, and the South North Store of Germany. The seed money given by the five donors laid the basic foundation for setting up SOT and supported its expenses for five years.

But for the last 11 years, since 2000, TWA has been bearing all the expenses related to SOT.

PURPOSE OF THE PROGRAM:

The purpose of the program is to enable economically disadvantaged women who lack employment and education to be self reliant by teaching them tailoring skills such as sewing chupas, blouses, and Western clothing so that they can be economically independent in the future.

The program was inspired by a need among the increasing number of Tibetan refugees, uneducated, illiterate, and unskilled Tibetan women, Tibetan women who have dropped out of school, and single mothers who lack income.

The purpose of the Tibetan Women's Association as it relates to Stitches of Tibet is to empower Tibetan women in educational, social, and economic fields as well as help those who are poor, weak, disadvantaged, and elderly, especially women from Tibet. SOT helps to achieve this goal by teaching women skills they can use to empower themselves and exercise economic independence. For many graduates, this goal has been achieved while others are still struggling.

TRAINING DURATION and SELECTION PROCESS:

Each training session lasts eighteen months and trains ten students. Eight of the ten slots are reserved for new arrivals from Tibet; SOT reserves the other two slots for Tibetan women who are already in exile. To enter the program, women must undergo an application process which becomes increasingly competitive each year. Most of the women found out about the Stitches of Tibet Program through friends and relatives and as many are unable to read or write, they approached the TWA directly. Due to only 10 places being available each year and a very high demand each application must be considered carefully before a decision is made. The main consideration is the need of each woman for assistance in gaining a trade. However enthusiasm for fashion and tailoring and previous experience is also assessed.



TRAINING COURSE:

The training sessions are held from 9 am to 5 pm, 6 days a week (closed on Sundays). The women start by learning basic sewing techniques in the first month and each consecutive month they learn a new item to make. First a chupa then blouses, trousers, men's shirts, bags all of which are sold in the shop in the training centre. Upon graduation, each student receives a sewing machine. From 1997-2005, Mrs. Phurbu Dolma la, former executive member of TWA raised funds to provide these machines and from 2006 onward TWA provided for them.

The skills the women learn enable them to not only recreate the national costume of their native land but also to create their own designs and recreate a customer or employers requirements.

STIPEND and FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS:

During the program, students receive Rs.1200 stipend each month (a recent increase from the previous stipend of Rs.500/month).

It is especially difficult for the stipend to cover all of the expenses of women supporting families and in making their ends meet. In earlier cases one woman took on an extra job as a cook, another sold noodles, and other women borrowed money from friends.

Graduates of SOT report experiencing financial difficulties during their training as well. All of the graduates interviewed were from Tibet and their ages ranged between twenty-eight and fifty-seven. Reasons for leaving Tibet included getting an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, better educational opportunities for themselves and their children, a better life, and to visit relatives. Upon arrival in Dharamsala, women cleaned toilets, made tea, cooked, and stitched to earn money. When they realized that this would not be enough to support them or their families, women took the advice of their friends and enrolled in SOT.



Financially surviving the program proved difficult, but all of the women were glad to have completed it. Many graduates complained that the monthly stipend of Rs.1200 was too little to live off of, especially with no supplemental income. Some thought there were not enough language and math skills taught, that the training was too short, and that it needed more variety. The students suggested that SOT provide a larger stipend, train more people, teach more skills, serve lunch, introduce effective training, and provide housing.

FUTURE:

With financial support from Horizon Foundation, TWA plans to introduce English language classes, basic math and accounting skills, health lesson over regular interval given by Tibetan Deleck hospital or other health experts. With this TWA hopes to produce Tibetan women entrepreneurs at the grassroots level.

We plan on increasing the stipend and salaries of the tailoring teacher and the assistant teacher and make the courses more effective and pertaining to the changing demands of the market. TWA also plans to recruit professional Tibetan women either with a master's degree in business Administration or Communication to take over as the full-time manager of SOT. Her role will include: teaching English and math, communicating with Horizon staffs (Louise and others) and starting an on-line merchandise site for SOT and look for market and sales opportunities.



TWA also hopes to open a bigger shop in Mcloed Ganj and showcase the products of SOT and thereby introduce more designs (bags, pouches, file cases, jackets) during the training. TWA aims to create a production center for SOT which will employ future graduates and put back profits into SOT so that the program will become self-reliant in the future.

CONCLUSION:

To ensure the success of all past, present, and future graduates, TWA aims to expand SOT as a self-sustaining vocational training program that will create employment opportunities for women particularly single mothers so that they can afford a better life for their children.



Success Stories:

SOT Graduates (1965 to 2011)

Following are seven selected cases of SOT graduates; who are using the skills acquired during the training in getting employed and earning their living.

The cases recorded here are limited in terms of its geographic representation as it records the graduates who are in Dharamsala only. Unfortunately we have not been able to gather information from our graduates who are in other Tibetan settlements in India, Nepal and Bhutan.



Dolma Tsering (age 46)

Graduated in October 1996 and belonged to the first batch.

Calm, kind Dolma was born in Dharamsala after her mother fled the Chinese occupation by walking over the Himalayas. She was unable to attend school as she is physically challenged and that has rendered her deaf and dumb. But she stayed at home and helped her mother make ends meet as they struggled in poverty in early 1990's.

At SOT, Dolma got the opportunity to study English and tailoring for 12 months and was among the six students who were the first graduates of SOT. For the last six years Dolma has worked as a permanent staff at the Tailoring Center run by the Federation of Tibetan Cooperatives in McLeod Ganj. Dolma earns a daily wage of Rs. 111 per day (excluding the provident funds) and the manager lauded the stitching skills of Dolma saying that she makes the best chupas.

From the little conversation we had with Dolma using sign languages, Dolma recalled her enriching experiences at SOT and conveyed that still cherishes her teachers at the centre and the warm and relaxed environment the group are given to learn.

Tashi Lhazom (age 39)

Graduated in 1997 and belonged to the second batch.

Lhazom spent her early years in Chamdo, eastern Tibet and made her living as a farmer along with her husband until life became too difficult. The couple worried about starting a family as the education native Tibetans receive is of poor quality or non-existent so in 1995 they decided to leave their beloved families and try and escape to India. The journey took one month of daily walking and took them through dangerous border crossings between China and Nepal and India. Lhazom was very afraid at times but now is happy that she took such a risk.

A year after her graduation in 1998 she joined Tibet Fashion shop, the famous tailoring shop located on temple road in Mcleod Ganj. She now earns between Rs. 3000 to Rs. 4000 per month depending on the business. Lhazom regrets not being able to reproduce any children after two miscarriages but she plans on adopting one. Her husband also runs a home-based tailoring business and earns a decent income. Lhazom aspires to continue working in Tibet Fashion for another five years and then along with her husband open her own tailoring shop in Norbulingka, located in south Kangra, it is at a one hour drive distance from Mcleod Ganj and it is home to around 500 newly arrived Tibetan refugees.

Lhakchung (age 38)

Graduated in March 2002 and belonged to the 5th batch.

The elegant, kind matriarch of the group spent most of her life wandering in the beautiful untouched wilderness of Tibet, tending to her herds of goat and cattle. She never married due to poor health but dreamed of a better life and when her sister's husband made the dangerous journey across the mountains to India it inspired her to do the same and in 2001 she paid all her life savings to a Nepalese sherpa who guided her alone on a safe path through the Himalayas. Lhakchung never had a formal education in Tibet and especially loves the opportunity to learn English as it opens the door to so many new possibilities.

Lhakchung was one of the brighter students among her batch and stood 4th position in the class. Upon her graduation Lhakchung was employed at the tailoring center in Mcloed Ganj run by Gu Chu Sum Movement for Tibet and earns a daily income of Rs. 140.

She hopes to start her own small business making clothes for friends and relatives and make enough money to return to Tibet and start a tailoring center in her hometown.

Pema Yangchen (42)

Graduated in October 2006 and belonged to the seventh batch.

Leaving her family in Tibet to make the long, dangerous and often terrifying journey across the mountains alone, Pema paid her life savings, about 800 Chinese Yen, to a Nepalese Sherpa who guided her and together they walked for over one month before arriving in Nepal. She arrived in Dharamasala in October 2002 where she met and married her husband. The couple now has an 18 year old daughter. Her husband is a tailor by trade but is finding it difficult to find work so for now Pema is the principal breadwinner. She is thankful to have found a good job upon her graduation from SOT and has worked at the Tibetan Handicraft centre in Mcloed Ganj for the last four years.

Pema is a skilled chupa maker and enjoys working in the co-operative. She feels very supported by her colleagues says that they all have a lot of good times together. Pema confesses that it's relatively simple to get a job in Dharamsala if you are a very skilled tailor but that many of her friends and peers from Stitches of Tibet have left the area for other parts of India as work is more plentiful there.

She is happy in Dharamsala but would relish the opportunity to return to Tibet if it became independent as she misses her family a lot.

Lhazom Tsering: (age 32)

Graduated in April 2008 and belonged to the ninth batch.

Lhazom was born in Dharamsala and has always lived in the area. Her husband is in the army so spends much of his time stationed away. Lhazom Tsering lives with her 7 year old son, retired father and blind mother. She completed her training in 2006 and used her newly acquired skills to start a small tailoring business from her home catering for the needs of friends and other local people. From this she has been able to support her aged parents and young son. Lhazom Tsering loves the flexibility tailoring has given her. She would love to continue the profession but focus more on fashion designing. If she had a dream this is what it would be.

Lhazom is very grateful to TWA for the opportunity to study more through her work as sales person cum assistant teacher and loves most the opportunity to learn English which she know will open many doors. for her in the future. She now earns around Rs.4500 per month at TWA' s SOT shop and she vows to never retire from her working for TWA and is committed to serve SOT, the project that gave her - identity ,experience and meaning to her life.

Sonam Dolma (age 31)

Graduated in June 2011 and belonged to the eleventh batch.

Born in Ngari, Tibet, Sonam fell in love with Nyima and to escape their parent's disapproval and in pursuit of a better living, they escaped into India and made it to Dharamsala in 2007. Sonam says she was fortunate to have joined SOT in November 2009 and she studied with the 11th batch and graduated on May 30, 2011. Sonam's marriage to Nyima resulted in her giving birth to her son in October 2010 during her training. Post the one-month maternity leave, Sonam brought her month-old son to the training classes since her husband (only earning member then) had to attend to his sales-person job.

Today, Sonam is sitting at home in Mcloed Ganj and has set up a home based business. She has rented a two room apartment at Mcloed Ganj and her home-based work allows her to tend to her 9 month old son as well as earn an average income of Rs. 150 per day. Sonam confesses that she is indebted to TWA and to the SOT project. Through Stitches of Tibet Sonam is also able to realize her dreams of making clothes and relishes each new garment they are given to make as a new challenge. She would love to be able to go to America and earn good money in order to give her family a better life. She misses her parents and the untouched beauty of Tibet but wouldn't wish to return to her homeland unless it became free.

Teacher's profile:**Dhamchoe (age 42)**

Dhamchoe has been the much respected tailoring teacher since 2001. Born in South India she is a long term resident of Dharamsala. Both Dhamchoe and her husband are tailors and they have 3 children. Dhamchoe's 5 year old daughter is the school's mascot with all 11 women dotting on her as if she were their own. Her 2 sons are currently living and studying in the Tibetan Children's Village as the couple struggle to make ends meet. The boys come home for the weekend every 2 weeks. Dhamchoe hopes to have them home full time sometime soon but is thankful for the education and support her children are receiving.

Still her dedication to teaching her trade to the 10 lucky women is commendable. Each student is given the encouragement and space to learn at their own speed, which they do in a good humored and calm environment. Each of her students rated Dhamchoe's teaching as their favorite thing about Stitches of Tibet and its clear that she has helped to create an extremely special community and solidarity amongst the women.