My husband, John, and I are directors of Friends of Kenya Schools and Wildlife (FKSW), a small nonprofit corporation registered in Oregon, www.fksw.org. FKSW partners with the Kenyan nongovernmental organization (NGO), Network for EcoFarming in Africa (NECOFA), in Molo, Kenya. Together, we support community development in rural areas in Kenya. In 2007, we spent a day with sheep producers in Molo who had asked John, a sheep farmer himself, to help them with ideas for marketing their lamb.

NECOFA director Samuel Muhunyu also invited a local man to demonstrate spinning. Because of the perception in this community of small landowners that working with fiber was a “peasants’ occupation,” shearers were often paid for shearing and also to take away the wool. Samuel hoped to change that perception and practice in the group. Surprised to learn that I was a spinner, he asked me to spin, too. On a rickety wheel made of old bicycle parts and pieces of wood held together with strips of rubber, I did my best and produced a short, lumpy piece of yarn. But it was good enough for the women, who decided that if women in the United States could spin and work with wool, so could they. The Molo Wool Project was born that day.

Since then, FKSW and NECOFA have provided training in spinning, the members of the Karunga Women’s Group have become fiber artists through participation in the Molo Wool Project.
knitting, weaving, and dyeing for eager learners. Project participants produce woven rugs and knitted animals that have earned over $25,000 in income from sales in the United States and Europe. Now the challenge is to diversify by developing local markets to decrease dependence on international sales.

MOLO, KENYA

On this October morning, under a gray sky heavy with clouds, sixteen women gather at the home of Beatrice Kamau, chairlady of the Karunga Women’s Group. Eleven of the women have come by matatu (minibus taxi) from the town of Njoro ten miles away. Others have walked from their small plots of land nearby. The members, all of them knitters, bring with them plastic sacks bulging with several hundred items they’ve made to fill an order from Oregon. The group can make over sixty different stuffed animals, including lions, elephants, leopards, camels, cats, parrots, tortoises, and zebras.

Six spinners in the group spin the yarn from the fleece of local sheep, and the group buys the yarn from the spinners to knit the stuffed animals. It used to be that some of the women in the group had their own sheep—during the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008, their animals were stolen or sold (to prevent them from being stolen)—but now all the wool is purchased.

The spinners use handcarders and drumcarders to process the fiber and then spin the yarn on Ashford wheels provided by donations through an American organization that supports fiber arts in indigenous communities. The yarns are dyed with plant materials that grow in the area—producing orange, yellow, green, and brown. The group also uses Mother MacKenzie’s dyes to get the colors they can’t get with their natural dyes.

The women sit in small groups on the grass, exchanging the news since their last meeting. They knit as they talk. A young mother nurses her tiny baby. A few yards away, beneath a sagging tarp, three women prepare lunch for the group over an open fire. They cook cabbage, beef stew, ugali (maize polenta), and managu (greens). A fourth woman boils water and milk for tea.

The women are from different ethnic communities, but the majority are Kikuyu, a Bantu people. Among themselves, they speak their mother tongues, but for group discussions, they use Kiswahili, the common language of Kenya. Six of the women speak English.

Karunga Women’s Group has thirty-five members. Only the sixteen women here today are participants in the Molo Wool Project. They range in age from twenty-three to sixty-seven and include ten married women with families, three widows, and three single mothers. All of them are poor, and all of them do extra work to make ends meet, including day labor on farms, taking in laundry, braiding hair, or caring for other people’s children.

Over 50 percent of their income is generated from the sale of their knitted products. Jane Wambui, a thirty-five-year-old mother of three, told us, “The knitting is the backbone upon which everything else depends. With payment for my work, I was able to buy a plot of land on which we built our house. I purchased materials for the construction, and with a second payment, I bought iron sheets for the roof. I’m also able to feed my children, and they’re well dressed by the local standards. We live well. This has made a lot of development in our lives. I used to rent a house, but now I don’t pay rent. Now I live in my own house where I feel so good, and it’s all because of the knitting.”

The Molo Wool Project has provided a supportive environment for the women to discover and express their natural talents. More artists than craft people, they don’t use patterns to produce their products but instead create items from...
Anastasia Njuguna is a new knitter. She says, “I wanted to make a chameleon, and I started knitting the body. But when I made the legs, they looked like chicken legs. So I went to the forest for three days looking for a chameleon. When I found one, I brought it home on a stick and studied its legs, and then I could make them correctly.”

Two years ago, FKSW loaned the group money to start a tree nursery. The 30,000 seedlings, now mature enough to sell, bring in from 30 to 50 cents apiece. The group treasurer deposits the income in a group bank account, or “revolving fund,” from which members can take small loans. Some use the revolving account for personal savings and investment, depositing funds to buy shares on which they receive quarterly dividends.

With recent sales from their tree nursery, the Karunga women bought a small plot of land on which they hope to construct a building with an office and a store room for materials and supplies. The building will also provide a secure place for them to meet and to hold the group’s wheels and looms, provided by donations through FKSW. Recently, friends in Oregon donated an industrial-quality Italian knitting machine so the women can produce school uniform sweaters, blankets, shawls, and other items for the local market.

As Jane Wambui says, “Now in the group we feel we are dignified women. I am able to feed my children well, even my husband. This has transformed my life. I believe I will continue in the knitting and eventually build another room. I am very happy.”

Gwen Meyer and her husband, John, live on a farm near Junction City, Oregon, in the foothills of the Coast Range when they are not in Kenya.