

ALUMNI PROFILES:

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1) How did you get involved in the Shea Butter business?

I was inspired to create a nonprofit after a moving Peace Corps experience in the West African community in which I was serving. A mother came to the health center with a very sick infant who needed emergency care, but all I could offer was a hydration solution that she could not afford. The harsh reality of her inability to financially care for her child challenged me to my core, and I decided I would commit my life to work that would help women in similar situations.

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After this experience I began to research income generating activities for women living in rural Africa. I identified shea butter production as a potential leading income source for women because it has become a mainstream product within the international body care industry. In many of these rural communities women control very little except for household chores and child rearing. Shea butter is unique in that it is socially recognized and accepted as a women’s activity. The challenge is how to assist women in profiting from their labor and creating a business infrastructure that links traditional processors to consumers. I created my nonprofit, Shea Yeleen International, Inc to tackle this challenge and provide business opportunities for shea butter producers.

2) What were you doing before you started the business and what did it take to get it off the ground?

Prior to creating Shea Yeleen International, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali. However, my first exposure to shea butter production was during an internship at the American Embassy in Burkina Faso. It was a natural transition to explore the conditions of women shea butter producers in Mali and the region as a whole and begin the process of assisting women to take advantage of this growing market. Starting a nonprofit with an income generating component has been very challenging. I went through the process of setting up articles of incorporation, recruiting board of directors, developing bylaws, and filing for 501c3 tax status with the Internal Revenue Service. I then leveraged local resources in Washington, DC like the National Black MBA to develop the strategic and marketing plan for the organization.

3) What does your company strive to do?

Shea Yeleen International strives to provide a voice for traditional processors of shea butter a popular product in the international body care industry. My work for shea butter producers has taken me from Mali to Southern Sudan in an effort to bring greater awareness to the issues of women producers in rural communities across the African continent. The goal of SYI is to be an organization that will serve as a model for equitable trade and economic development in some of the poorest areas of the world. In the next five years the organization will be able to show measurable outcomes that address the needs of small scale women entrepreneurs by providing competitive consumer products to consumers worldwide. Ultimately, SYI work will provide women in isolated communities a chance to participate in and benefit from global commerce.

4) What are your future plans for Shea Yeleen?

Over the next 12 months the key to moving forward will be (1) securing more funds through fundraising and increasing sales, (2) providing training to the cooperatives (3) increasing awareness of the issue and exposure of SYI. These goals will be accomplish through sales presentations in the DC metro area, working with Peace Corps volunteers in Mali, highlighting members of the cooperative on our website, and partnering with other organizations in both the private and public sector.

5) How can everyone get a hold of your wonderful product and learn more about it?

For more information on Shea Yeleen International, Inc. please check out our website www.sheayeelen.org. I can be reached at rwright@sheayeelen.org or 202-203-0024. I welcome and questions. If you know of an organization we can partner with or sales opportunities please contact us. We appreciate any support we can get. Also, we are offering a sale during Black History Month for MLT members and friends and family of MLT members. Please enter MLT as the coupon code to get a 15% discount on your entire order.