

# SPREADING CROCHET FEVER

Shades of taupe, marigold, crimson and gray yarn were scattered on the grassless grounds outside a secure compound in northern Uganda. Inside, several pairs of hands knitted accessories often seen on young, hip models in fashion magazine photos. When finished, they seized a label and sewed it inside. Afterward, fingers wrapped around pens and names were written below lines with typed letters reading: "crocheted by."

"My hat was made by Laker Florence," said Kohl Crecilius, CEO of Krochet Kids International. He took his hat off in the auditorium of Mass Media and Technology Hall to show the label inside. He paused, smiled and looked inside his hat again and rubbed his thumb across Florence's penmanship.

WKU sustainability coordinator Christian Ryan-Downing invited Crecilius to speak to students and faculty on a Wednesday night as part of a weeklong celebration of Earth Day.

"Our students, they love people. They care about people... They are very concerned with global issues that affect their fellow citizens," Ryan-Downing said to the audience before formally introducing Crecilius.

The majority of the crowd wore their own knitted hats in support of the engagement.

Crecilius co-founded the nonprofit business with his childhood best friends, Travis Hartanou and Stewart Ramsey. The three had made it their mission to combat poverty and sustain a community worldwide with their business's motto: "Buy a Hat, Change a Life."

The Spokane, Wash. native said he never saw himself and his two pals turning their crochet hobby into an entrepreneurial business to help others and neither did their families. Nearly five years ago, Crecilius said he caught the "crochet fever," as he dubbed it, from his older brother, Parc, after he returned home for winter break from college.

"He was crocheting," Crecilius said in a chipper tone. "I was like 'seriously?...Of all things that you learn how to do in your freshman year living in San Diego by the beach and you learn how to crochet?'" Crecilius said he teased his brother, but liked the idea of making his own headgear for his skiing and snowboarding activities.

Afterward, Crecilius taught his friends and sold 50 hats they originally made for themselves to friends and family for \$15 each. The fad trended in their hometown and the local newspaper coined the trio the "Krochet Kids." Their proceeds cashed in for an epic senior prom involving renting out a skating rink and a hot air balloon for them and their dates.

"The best \$200 I ever spent in my life was on a powder-blue tux... We thought life had reached its pinnacle," Crecilius said smiling and motioning his arms to the ceiling. "Luckily for us though that wasn't the case. We realized there was more to come, if you will. But that's like the beginning of Krochet Kids, having the spirit and this drive and understanding of fun to create and use your hands to make a brand."

Crocheting took a break as Crecilius and his friends branched off to different colleges across the Northwest. The three had an "itch" to travel, as Crecilius mentioned, but promised to keep each other updated in their journeys. The proposal of KKi was brought up in discussion after Ramsey's visit to a refugee camp in Uganda.

When they all returned home they listened to Ramsey's experiences. One of his stories included Franklin, a man and leader of an internal displacement camp on the outskirts of Lira, Uganda. After the country's independence from Britain in 1962, a declining economy and civil unrest had ensued for more than 20 years.

"Stewart told us that these people living in government-run camps are completely dependant on other organizations and the government for their every need," Crecilius said. "Franklin said 'We want to work. We are relying on humanitarian aid like a baby relies on mother's milk. I want to work so that I can provide for my own family.'"

For the last five decades \$2.3 trillion in aid had poured into developing countries, but more people lived on less than \$2 a day now than they did

50 years ago.

Halfway into college, their desire grew to impact the communities they had come across on their mission trips. At the time, Crecilius said he thought their high school hobby didn't feel big enough. In time, however, the hook and yarn got picked up again and late night sessions on Skype helped them build their comprehensive business plan for KKi.

The men looked to school as their planning period and sought feedback from their professors in business, marketing and anthropology classes. The next summer, Crecilius, Ramsey, Hartanou and six other friends walked through an airplane terminal with luggage and army bags stuffed with yarn ready to board a flight to Uganda.

"It sounds kinda crazy but that's what we did. As many times as we tried to put it behind us, we learned how to crochet," Crecilius said. "We were armed with naivety and that in so many ways seems like it has a negative connotation because if you don't know something how can you help? But in the same way if you know too much, does that prevent you from helping?"

In Gulu, Uganda, the men sat in a small hut and taught ten local women how to crochet. Crecilius said he and "his bros" cried tears of joy when he saw the women with quick knitting hands a few days later.

"They were receptive because we had a good product, but we were also providing a real job," he said.

Crecilius recalled words of late Apple Inc. cofounder during his trip when he said he worried that his plan and first trip to Uganda wouldn't work out.

"Steve Jobs, another really great guy, said 'Stay Foolish' I celebrate that. I question the way things are and don't take things at face value. We saw these [other] non-profits that were trying to help and offering this aid, [but] these handouts were potentially hurting these people and maybe even more."

KKi grew from the initial group of ten women to 87. Since then it had grown to more than 150 people in Uganda and then Peru working for and trained by KKi. While KKi became the Ugandans first job, Crecilius was focused to help them create businesses in their community.

In fall 2007, Crecilius and his seven friends returned to college, but they left the ninth person, Nic Lauten, behind in the region to oversee operations.

According to Lauten, KKi director of community involvement, 85 to 90 percent of all the sales went back to Uganda to pay for their wages.

"It's a very good living wage for them, to provide for their families, for their kids to go to school, for clothes and food and also for some programs that teach them some wisdom on how to save, how to budget and how to invest in the future," Lauten said.

As the business grew in size, so did the international company's marketing. KKi aired its first national televised commercial with Microsoft's Bing during the 17th Annual X Games on July 28, 2012. The business became one of the first to use social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The company emphasized online communication between the women designing the products and buyers.

KKi's website encouraged their customers to read about the women who create their hats and write them thank you notes and blessings.

KKi earned more than one million dollars, with 70 percent of that coming from the products they sold. Crecilius set KKi's main headquarters in Costa Mesa, Calif., less than a mile away from where he relocated in Newport Beach, Calif.

"If I'm honest with myself crocheting is not that cool, [but] we have three things that really make up our theory of change: employment, education and mentorship," Crecilius said. "People can be equipped with the tools skills and resources to become completely self-reliant. Not depending on anyone else for their livelihoods."



TOP | Kohl Crecilius runs a non-profit organization that teaches women in both Uganda and Peru how to crochet. Krochet Kids then took the products made by the women, sold them across the world, giving the profits back to the women who were a part of the company. Crecilius was CEO and Co-Founder of Krochet Kids International.

BOTTOM | Crecilius talks to WKU students after his Wednesday night presentation on the importance of sustainability in Mass Media. Crecilius' talk was a part of WKU's week-long Earth Day celebration, sponsored by the Department of Sustainability, GreenToppers and the Center for Environmental Education and Sustainability.

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