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COLOMBIA

SUCCESS STORY

Micro-entrepreneur on Her Way to Success

Indigenous art brought alive in new business giving displaced woman a second chance for success



Photo: FUPAD Colombia

All Kuna Art products incorporate indigenous fabric designs

“I received a \$750 grant to buy necessary supplies, and the business took off surprisingly well,” said Paula Correa, a recipient of a small grant through a USAID program to help Colombians displaced by violence.

Telling Our Story
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

Paula Correa is not the real name of this 24-year-old woman, who is still afraid of the danger to her and her 8-year-old son. Her story is one of loss and pain, survival and hope, hard work and an encouraging future.

Paula’s family had to abandon their farm in the province of Cundinamarca, where they grew beans that were often stolen by the FARC. After FARC rebels killed a relative, and threatened her mother, two brothers and her baby son, Paula had to run.

After arriving in Bogota, Paula became a beneficiary of a USAID income generation project for the displaced population in Colombia and received a small grant to launch a business. She decided to try her hand at creating hand-crafted leather products and used the funds to get started.

Paula had always admired the fabric appliques, “molás”, of the Kuna indigenous tribe from the Gulf of Uraba (Northern Colombia.) She started using them in her leather products.

After about a year, Paula’s business had grown substantially and she created her own trademark, Kuna Arts, named after the Indian tribe whose art she loves. She spreads the bright molás on the table and admires how they look combined with colorful leather samples. “I have so many plans for my business: creating a catalogue and a webpage. I think the best market is in the areas popular with foreign tourists.”

Paula rents special sewing and stapling machines from a shop not too far from the house where she lives with her mother, son, two brothers and their families. She dreams of owning her own equipment some day. Her unique items always attract attention and she has already participated in several different fairs and expositions in Bogotá and many other cities in Colombia.

In October 2009, Paula traveled to Miami to be part of an event in which she won the “Heroes of the Hemisphere” award, a recognition given to Paula and other outstanding leaders from throughout the Americas. More than 400 people from five countries in Latin America and the Caribbean celebrated these achievements during the ceremony. This experience showed Paula a vast amount of possibilities for her future. “I would like the whole world to see the beautiful Kuna molás, and my products as well. I also have a dream that some day I will study textile engineering and design,” she said.