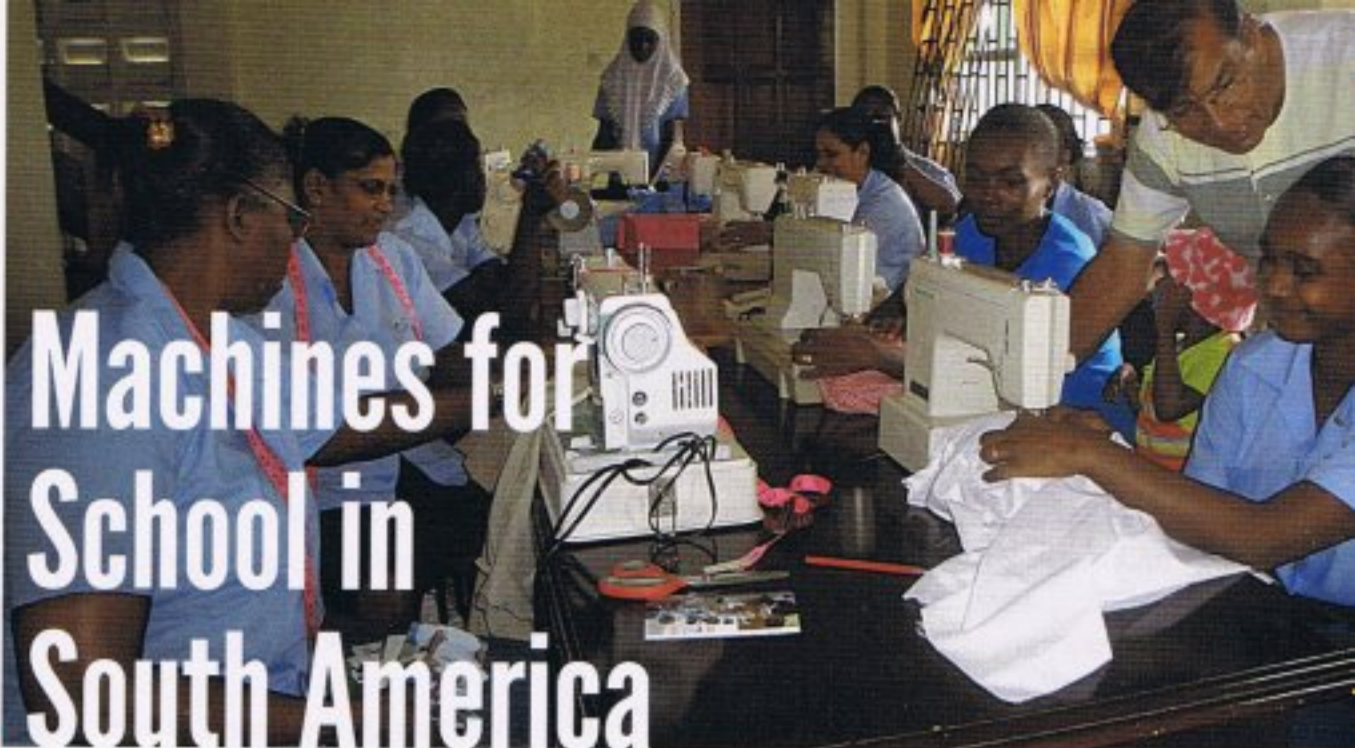




Sewing Machines for Sewing School in Guyana, South America



by Joyce Morrison,

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Imagine finding yourself in Guyana, a South American country bordering the Atlantic Ocean on the north, Venezuela to the west and Suriname on the east. Brazil lies along Guyana's southern boundary. Strolling along a street in the coastal town of New Amsterdam you notice a sign saying "Nanaimo Sewing School". Inside, working diligently, would be twenty-five women learning general sewing skills so that they will be able to run their own businesses. Bending over one or another student suggesting corrections or giving encouragement is a distinguished looking gentleman, Dr. Andra Thakar, who could easily be mistaken for a professor. Funny thing, he really is a professor—retired. He is also a journeyman tailor who, as a retiree, has combined both careers to help women develop their own businesses.

In Guyana, there are few opportunities for women to earn a living. Aware of the need because he was born and raised in Guyana, Andra decided to launch a program to not only train women to sew and to maintain their machines but also to run a business. The students taking the course learn on sewing machines that they will take with them, if they complete the course. My connection to the project started with those sewing machines.

It began with a very innocent lunch between old friends and colleagues. Over lunch, Andra happened to mention that he was trying to get a sewing project off the ground in his home country, Guyana. My husband, who is also interested in community development, immediately started asking questions—anthropologists do that a lot. As

he learned more, my husband was really impressed about Andra's life and about his decision to go back home and help others. As they talked, I learned that Andra had learned his sewing skills as a young lad in Guyana. First an apprentice tailor, then a journeyman tailor working for others, and finally a tailor with his own business by the age of 22. He immigrated to Canada in 1966 and worked at a variety of jobs to put himself through university. He didn't stop with just an undergraduate degree, he got an M.A. and Ph.D. He was particularly interested in both medical anthropology and applied anthropology, both sub-fields aim to help people anywhere in the world. His work took him to Nigeria and Ghana, India and Thailand, as well as the Caribbean. Along the way, in addition to his university teaching, he began to teach pattern design in Thailand and sewing/tailoring to various groups. He came to Vancouver Island in the early nineties and taught Anthropology at Vancouver Island University. Later he became the Chair of the Department. Today he is retired and an Honoured Research Associate of the University.

Getting back to our lunch with Andra—at some point he mentioned that he was really having a problem finding sewing machines for his future students. This is when my husband gave me that knowing look, before piping up to say that I as a quilter would surely give him a hand finding sewing machines. I, too, liked what Andra was trying to do. So I offered to help. I sent out a notice to my own guild, the PARKSVILLE QUILTHOUSE QUILTERS' GUILD and also to NANAIMO QUILTERS GUILD. We located 25 machines which Andra checked over, serviced if necessary and sent

off to New Amsterdam. From November 2009 to February 2010 Andra taught the requisite sewing skills—designing and creating patterns from measurements, cutting fabric, sewing the garments (shirts, shorts, blouses and skirts) and illustrated how to clean and maintain a sewing machine. There were additional skills to be taught, as well. Many of the students had little or no experience with math (or school!) and so he started with teaching multiplication tables and fractions. He also taught marketing skills and incorporated lessons in integrity, teamwork and many valuable life skills, some of which he teaches through recreation. Yes, this retiree plays and teaches softball and cricket at the school. He says that it helps the students to learn team spirit and discipline and it builds character. He started out with 25 students and 17 graduated. Of those, 3 graduates have started a small business, and another is teaching the inmates in a women's prison. Yet another, a social worker, has started teaching young single mothers to sew. There are many other successes from this group, as well!

One of the additional accomplishments of the school was that all the garments—student shirts, shorts, blouses and skirts—were donated to students from poorer families and orphanages. How many? A whopping 500 of them—quite an accomplishment for brand new sewers! And, the uniforms were very welcome indeed.

In the beginning I mentioned that the school had the unlikely name of Nanaimo Sewing School. In 2009, on the second day of school, one of the students asked, "What was the name of the place where he (Andra) came from in Canada". When he said "Nanaimo",

the student promptly piped up "We will call ourselves the Nanaimo Sewing School!" And so it was – the Nanaimo Sewing School, which fortunately was a huge success.

What is the current situation? When Andra returned from Guyana he asked if he could come out and prepare an Indian meal for us. Over a wonderful curry dinner we asked him what he planned for the future. This time he said he would require 30 or more sewing machines – some for a new school in Corriverton, Guyana, but also 4-6 machines for the women's prison in New Amsterdam as there were enthusiastic students there who wanted a skill to use after being released from prison! The timeline now was:

- need 30+ used sewing machines by August 1st in order to clean, service and ship them to Guyana by mid August
- Andra would go to Corriverton to do the preparatory work October 15-30, 2010
- School would be held November 1, 2010 – March 4, 2011 (16 weeks)
- Return to Canada March 2011

I got busy in May and June and through

the generosity of quilters, their friends and connections with other networks, received many, many machines – from Port Hardy to Victoria. A few people really stepped up and offered to be receiving points for the machines so people would have a place to drop them off. When these wonderful folks were driving through Nanaimo or Parksville, they dropped them off. In addition to the Guilds, a church member in Campbell River collected many machines and even brought one load of them to Nanaimo to leave with Andra. We were truly appreciative to have not only attained our goal of 30 sewing machines but have exceeded it by 7 machines! So, in mid-August, Andra has happily shipped off 37 fully-serviced and functioning machines.

Once again Andra will be setting off this October to teach sewing skills that will last a lifetime. For many, this will mean the difference between severe poverty and making a living. And again, garments sewn in the course of training will be donated to poorer children in schools as well as orphanages; it is anticipated that 600-700 garments will be donated from their efforts at this school.



If you would like further information, please feel free to contact

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