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Exploring the World Through Scarves

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COURTESY OF PAM KUBBINS

silk scarves that drape gracefully. Luxurious pashmina wool from the underbelly of Tibetan goats. Floral prints fresh from the garden. Jamavar patterns dating back 400 years. Hand-dyed, hand-woven, hand-embroidered, with fringe that is hand-tied.

Pam Kubbins could not be more passionate about the beauty and workmanship of the scarves sold by her company, Pam's Pashminas. Stories bubble out of her about craftspeople she has met and how they create their wares. She'll tell you about generation after generation of weavers using ancient looms, the origins of silk and bamboo threads, and where textiles are made with centuries-old techniques and tools.

I met with Kubbins recently in the Wellesley home where she and her husband, Paul Criswell, have lived since 1988. Pam and Paul, an attorney, are longtime Town Meeting Members and active in local organizations. They raised their daughter, Rachel, and son, Trevor, in this house, built in 1868, that is decorated with stenciled floors, abundant artwork, and treasured items

Pam Kubbins wrapped in a silk Jamavar at the Golden Temple in Punjab, India



business “beautiful handmade pieces”

KAYLA ANDREWS

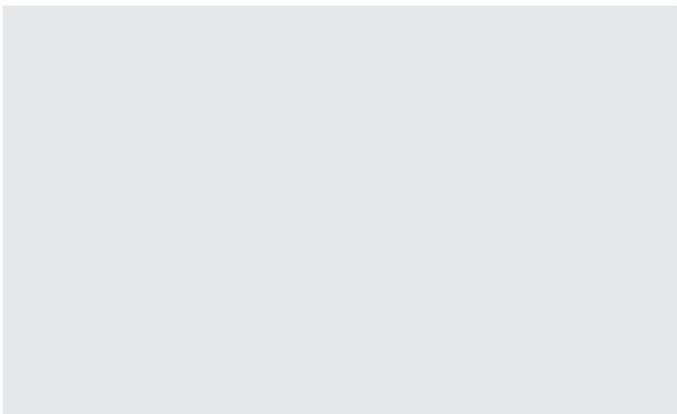
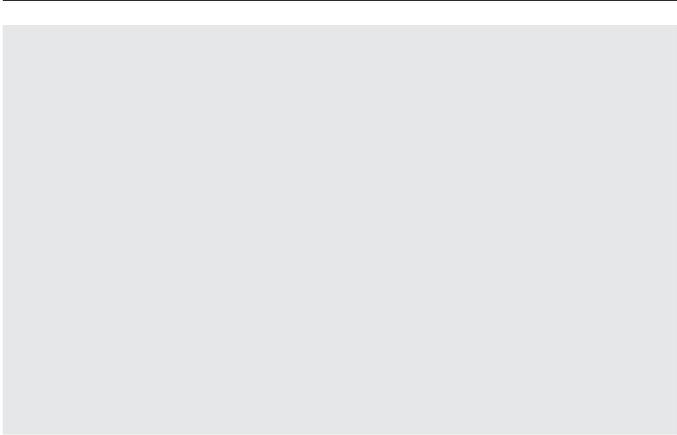
collected from around the world. They are avid gardeners who for decades have composted every inch of their yard. Indoors, too, she never throws anything away. Near her grandfather’s big wooden desk, we sat on her parents’ carefully restored couch.

Salome posing on the banks of the Seine River wearing the Big Flower Scarf

Over herbal tea, Kubbins told me Pam’s Pashminas, her home-based business, began shortly after 9/11 when she was still a Delta flight attendant. That November, she said, few people would fly.

“I was working on a transcontinental flight that had just 25 passengers on a jumbo jet that held 300,” she said. “I met a gentleman who had a huge bag of pashmina scarves: John Maguire, the brother of a flight attendant. I upgraded him to first class, and we spent the entire time, six hours, talking about the scarves he sourced in Turkey. I wore one. I sold them to first-class passengers, took them up to the cockpit, and it was the beginning of a wonderful thing because we became friends and he taught me about the business.” Later they traveled together to the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, a marketplace with 4,000 stalls, where scarves from all over the world are sold.

“I brought the scarves back and my friends in Wellesley went crazy,” she said. “I started re-selling them. I thought, ‘hmmm,’ because I just love scarves and have been wearing them my entire life starting when I was just a little child in a Ukrainian babushka.” Babushkas are head coverings from her grandparents’ homeland. They kept her young ears warm, and at the time they were stylish, too. Jackie Kennedy Onassis and movie stars wore babushkas in the 1950s and the ’60s. In 2001, pashminas—fine cashmere wool products traditionally made from the



long hairs of high-elevation goats in the Himalayas—had just hit the American market in solid colors with hand-tied fringe, debuting on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 1999.

Kubbins was ready for a career change. She retired from Delta after 28 years but her wanderlust remained strong. In 2004, she traveled for the first time to India alone.

“I got off a plane in Delhi and hit the main road, where stalls are jam-packed, mainly with Kashmiri fabrics,” she recalled. “Serendipitously, I walked into a very famous shop owned by a family, the Wangnoos, who were featured in *National Geographic*. I started sourcing from them beautiful handmade pieces woven of merino wool with hand embroidery. Gorgeous. They got me into India’s silk Jamavars [scarves] and gave me a lot of information.”

While riding in a signature Pink Ambassador taxi in Jaipur, the capital of the Indian state of Rajasthan, she had another pivotal chance encounter. The driver asked Kubbins what she was doing in India. When she related her mission, he insisted on introducing her to his friend, Helen Webster, an Australian who runs a similar textile business back home. Webster opened the world of scarves wider for Kubbins and became both her mentor and a dear friend. She taught her how to design patterns and brought her to Indian graphic designers with whom she has now worked for more than six years.

Today, Pam’s Pashminas also imports lacy scarves from Buenos Aires and Russian wool scarves from Kiev. She sells alpaca scarves from Peru and Thai silks. Among retailers carrying her collections are two shops in Wellesley—Pine Straw and Sloane & Ivy—as well as at Artisans Way in Concord, Oropa in Duxbury, and The Nehalem Beehive in Oregon. She also sells online at www.pampashminas.com, at annual garden club events, craft shows, fundraisers, major events including the Boston Flower and Garden Show, and from her home by appointment.

Helen Webster and Pam Kubbins designing scarves in India for their Embroidered Merino Wool collection



COURTESY OF PAM KUBBINS



top: Models at Loch Lomond, Scotland draped in colorful scarves from Pam's Wool Collection; bottom: Posing in front of Sacré-Cœur Basilica, models in Pam's Paris shoot are wearing silk Jamavars and embroidered wool shawls



business “we wear them for style”

“Scarves serve a large purpose in many cultures,” said Kubbins, selecting a gold-embroidered burgundy Jamavar to demonstrate its versatility. “Number one is modesty. You cover your head in public. Or for religious purposes when visiting churches or mosques. Another is warmth. In Europe, scarves are always current. In America, scarves are becoming more popular because of their warmth and style.”

“Wearing a scarf gives you confidence,” Kubbins continued. “We all have things about our bodies we want to hide. Bellies. Sagging skin. And a scarf deflects that view. It distracts people from judging you.” But they are not just practical.

“A soft shawl around your shoulders is like a hug,” she said. “It envelops you with a sense of being cozy and secure.”

As an independent entrepreneur, the owner of Pam’s Pashminas believes in compensating people well for what they do in life. Additionally, she looks for fabrics that are sustainably produced and environmentally safe because ultimately it means the scarves will last for many years. Pam’s Pashminas sells only pieces made with natural fibers. The same cannot be said of those sold by street vendors, online stores, or even by major retailers.

“I know who makes everything I source and where the materials come from,” said Kubbins. “I’ve gone through huge cultural experiences and made friends all along the way. I’ve been to a friend’s wedding on the Ganges River. My suppliers come from a variety of religious backgrounds, and I enjoy working with them all.”

Her scarves are priced from \$25 to \$189. Their quality and designs are comparable to those sold in stores like Nordstrom for hundreds of dollars more, she said, explaining that she can keep prices low because she relies on no middle man and has no brick and mortar store. Moreover, she has “corralled local talent,” referring to a half dozen Babson College students on whom she relies for their expertise in finance and computer science. In particular, she credits Kayla Andrews, a Wellesley High graduate now a student at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, with overhauling her inventory, shooting fashion photography in Paris, and building her website. “They are all unbelievable,” she said.

PHOTOS BY KAYLA ANDREWS

“A scarf can completely change your day, your mood, your point of view,” said Kubbins.

Among the many styles she offers is one that contains 19 colors in a “missing weave” pattern. Woven on a huge hand-worked loom, it looks fragile but the fabric is strong, she assured me. Lately blanket wraps are popular, especially among young adults. The wraps are oversized at 42 x 82 inches. They were being made primarily for the European market when Pam’s Pashminas began carrying them.

Jamavars once were her bestsellers and they are still among her personal favorites. Jamavar patterns are reversible, woven from silk in India in thousands of patterns that date back four centuries. But now, patterns Kubbins and Helen Webster design and manufacture have taken the top spots. Kubbins’ newest stemmed from discovering floral paintings by Carol Wallace, a watercolor artist in Connecticut. She worked to adapt Wallace’s paintings of wild roses in a variety of pastels on sheer organic cotton.

Kubbins also works with Boston designer David Joseph, maker of bespoke clothing for women. Their collection, Atelier DJPK, ranges from formal evening wraps to silk and cotton scarves and custom-made jackets.

“What I love about my business is that it has put me in touch with so many creative and talented people,” she said. “I trade with Etsy artists and craftspeople around the world. Their energy wears off on me.” 

