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**Supporting Art Teachers and Programs Through the Entrepreneurship of Bruneian College Students in Brunei Darussalam**

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**Abstract**

All experiential art lessons require art supplies of some kind if they are to capture and record the students' creative impulses. Children learn early on that an array of colored crayons is far superior to a small pack of basic hues. However, as all teachers and practitioners of art know all too well, having enough art supplies on hand is not always possible or affordable. In rural areas and smaller counties like Brunei Darussalam, the problem of getting good quality art materials at a reasonable price can greatly impact both what lessons are taught in parochial schools and the quality of art that is produced in universities and private studios. The need for a source of consistent quality art supplies is being addressed for the first time in Brunei Darussalam by a group of art students at the University of Brunei Darussalam. In this paper I will present the precipitating events that led these students to form a trading company that has gone from supplying the students themselves with high quality art supplies for their courses to supplying some of the schools in the region with materials after opening a brick and mortar store in under one year's time. Furthermore, this case study in entrepreneurship will explain the benefits of encouraging students and providing them with the basic knowledge for understanding how to select quality art materials to use and sell as a means for establishing a business in the arts that can further help to educate and sustain school art programs and community artists. As one of two art professors from the United States helping the art students in our university to first establish a store where the students can sell both their artworks and quality art supplies, and secondly to offer art classes to the Bruneian community, I will highlight how my students have taken the serious need of having access to professional art materials and turned it into a business that will

help to anchor these budding artists to their community so that they can not only share their knowledge of art with others through teaching, but provide themselves with a livelihood at the same time.

## **Supporting Art Teachers and Programs Through the Entrepreneurship of Bruneian College Students in Brunei Darussalam**

### **The Importance of the Visual Arts as Part of the Creative Industries in Brunei Darussalam**

A great many articles and books have been written in the past two decades about the rise and importance of the creative industries, also called the cultural industries or creative economy, as an important social and economic phenomenon. Matching this rise in the formal research being conducted in this new suddenly popular area of social science is the number of people who are actively employed in such creative areas as music, design, science, the visual and performing artist, and other knowledge-based professionals. According to Richard Florida's definition, this new group of professionals whose ranks are swelling to such levels that they are shaping the values and structure of today's shifting American socioeconomic geography, is what he calls the "Creative Class" (Florida, 2002, p. xiii). In his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida (2002) explains that a force greater than the one that transformed society when it shifted from an agricultural society to an industrial one, is already here in the form of the creative industries which he explains are built fundamentally on human intelligence, knowledge and creativity.

It stands to reason, however, that the issues that Florida writes extensively about as they apply to various widely recognized economic models in the United States can also be seen to be at work in other countries that also follow many Western economic and social patterns. These same countries also engage with trading partners who are part of the whole global economy that is now driving markets around the world and as such they too are experiencing a huge upswing in the creative industries. In Britain the UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) defines the creative industries as: "Those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property" (Flew, 2012, p. 9).

In Brunei Darussalam, the University of Brunei Darussalam's faculty are encouraged to recognize the term and concept of the creative industries and to exploit its use as a kind of

discipline for encouraging the visual, performing arts, and new media based knowledge to promote all forms of creative thinking. To the best of this researchers knowledge, the importance of copyright and intellectual property are not driving creative industry forces in Brunei like they are in Hong Kong, China, however, it is conceivable that the Brunei government would hope that someday they too may have such an outpouring of creative pursuits in every field from music to science that they would also need to place a great amount of emphasis on protecting the creative material produced by its citizens.

### **Education and the Brunei's New Creative Class**

The signs for the emergence of a new creative class are everywhere in Brunei. One can see this interest especially in the visual and performing arts where dance and art galleries for instance are opening around this small nation where traditional ethnic arts and crafts are struggling to survive. It appears that the general population of Brunei, like the creative class participants of the United States do not merely want to see or occasionally collect art, but they also want to express their own creative abilities and desires through some sort of art making activity. This is where new entrepreneurs like Zairah Enterprise are becoming very important—they offer products for the hobbyist and professional artist alike. Furthermore, an art supply store like Zairah Art Supplies (which is one branch of Zairah Enterprise) can, for the first time ever, offer top quality professional grade art materials to organizations like schools and to individual artists who previously had to order all of their materials from over-seas.

In his book *The Creative Industries: Culture and Policy*, Terry Flew (2012) explains that higher education has been keen to create programs that provide professional training leading to employment in disciplines such as media and communication, digital media, design, film, and other related fields. Flew goes on to say that, "... more traditional areas of the creative and performing arts are also increasingly attuned to the employment outcomes of their graduates." (Flew, 2012, p. 7). However, the best intentioned programs, whether they endeavor to train their students to be commercial designers, or fine art producers of work aiming to rock the art world with avant-guard "art-for-arts-sake" one-of-a-kind of pieces, the availability of equipment and art supplies for students studying within university programs is profoundly important. Because

universities are acutely aware of the importance of the demands of students for the best training possible so that they can succeed in the highly competitive creative industries market, it stands to reason that their professors would encourage their students and their departments to invest in the latest computer software and the best traditional art supplies and equipment. However, when Professor Kong Ho arrived at the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD), Brunei in the summer of 2011 and assumed the position associate professor of art, he discovered that the students were learning to paint with hobby grade paints and little to no equipment. The problem of a computer lab was finally slowly resolved over the course of the next two semesters, but the need for better traditional media supplies such as acrylic paints and drawing pencils was more of a problem. This was because the arrival of the new computers in the new state-of-the-art lab space for graphic design, digital photography, and new media was ultimately provided by UBD, but no effort was made in response to Ho's requests for traditional materials and equipment. According to UBD, students are expected to purchase all of their art supplies because they are given money by the education department for books and other supplies.

Ho recalls that teaching his first painting module in the fall of 2011 was very difficult due to a lack of materials. Ho reflected on his frustration of teaching advanced acrylic painting in a cramped regular classroom space to students using low-grade tempera and so-called acrylic paints when he told me during an interview that "Because my 20 advanced painting students were used to using really inferior painting materials that had no saturation or life, they could not mix the correct colors or blend the paint on their canvases. When I asked my students to purchase better products they told me that they could only purchase cheap hobby stuff in Brunei and that sending for materials was very expensive and difficult." Not being the sort of person that gives up on his standards for teaching, Ho offered his own bought and paid-for acrylics to his class to use until he could figure out a way to get a supply of better acrylic paints to Brunei.

After learning to paint with better acrylics and acquire greater techniques for glazing and building up textured surfaces using acrylic gel medium and modeling paste, Ho's students were convinced that the dramatic improvement that they saw in their work had to be partly due to the improved quality of their paints and painting mediums. Soon Ho's students were as determined as he was to find a way to get high quality art supplies to Brunei. Happily for Ho and his

students, the answer to this dilemma would soon arrive and involve everyone's cooperation to implement.

### **The Formation of the Trading Company Known As Zairah Enterprises**

Three major factors brought about the formation of Zairah Arts Supplies store: first and foremost was the need by students at UBD and elsewhere in the region for good quality art supplies; next came the opportunity for entrepreneurship on the part of several students who realized that if they could start a trading company, they would be able to work and contribute in several ways to Brunei's fledgling creative arts industry: and lastly, Ho and his wife Dr. Martie Geiger-Ho (who was not yet employed at UBD) were putting together a large community mural proposal for submission to the United States Embassy for sponsorship that would require a substantial order of acrylic paints, gesso, gel medium and other supplies. It was the almost assured sponsorship of the mural project and its promise to order from the company that the students wanted to form that provided the inertia needed to push one student, Dk. Noor Affizah binti Pg. Hj. Abd Rahman, to ask her father and her elder sister and her husband to invest in and back a trading company with a retail store outlet that she and her art student friends could help run. The students felt from the very beginning that without a retail store where they could anchor their business, that any attempts to build a strong marketing identity would be lost. Furthermore, the students wanted to create a boutique style of store where they could feature their own artwork and put their design skills to work in arranging in-house product displays with creative tailor-made exemplars of finished art objects that the local customer could culturally identify with.

Pg. Hj. Abd Rahman bin Pg. Hj. Tahir immediately liked his daughter Affizah's idea for an art supply store for the following several reasons: in the past Mr. Rahman had been the sole owner of a dry goods retail store and he still held a registered traders license for importing and selling goods; Mr. Rahman believed that if Affizah's elder sister, Pg. Noor Affizan binti Pg. Haji Abd Rahman and her husband Mr. Joe Raihan Knights put capital into the opening of the store that it would indeed be a family business that his son-in-law could help run even when his elder daughter was busy practicing medicine as an ophthalmologist; Ho promised to advise the students on how to order art supplies from a company called Utrecht Art Supplies in the United

States and to help them to understand which art materials would satisfy the needs of most customers and the needs of the students in his art classes; since no other art supply store featuring Utrecht's products were available in Southeast Asia, they would be the sole agents in the region for these art supplies; Ho and Geiger-Ho's community mural project, "Transcending Culture and Space: A Community Art Project" was funded by the United States Department of State through the Overseas Federal Assistance Award and the United States Embassy Brunei Darussalam, and their order from a new business would help to assure that its launch would be successful; and perhaps most importantly, Mr. Rahman felt that it was important to establish a business where his younger daughter and her peers could hone their art design skills by creating a corporate identity using their design skills. Taking into account all of the positive reasons for establishing a new start-up brick and mortar store Mr. Rahman and his elder daughter, Dr. Affizah Rahman and her husband Joe decided to set-up a business called Zairah Enterprise with a division of four companies; Zairah Events, Zairah Design Services, Zairah Art Supplies, and Zairah Custom Badges.

Zairah Arts and Crafts was the first branch of the business to open, however, before things could really get under way, Affizah and her peer, Muhammad Nazreen bin Hj. Amin needed to finish their college semester abroad at the University Sains Malaysia, Penang Malaysia, where they took art courses during the spring session of 2012. When Affizah and Nazreen returned to Brunei in the summer just prior to beginning their senior year at UBD they joined up with several other UBD students, to work part-time in the shop space that would soon become a full-fledged store. Mohammad Nuriskandar bin Mohd Hasnen had also gone abroad to study in his third year and he became employed with Zairah along with Affizah and Nazreen, however three other third year UBD students were already working hard for the company because they had stayed in country to do an Internship Program that would fulfill UBD's requirements for Discovery Year Program. These four UBD art students were Amiral Jazli bin Jali, Mohammad Airul Arif bin Awang Damit, Muhammad Saifullah Al Waie bin Mat Jinin, and Mohamad Niq'Matul Ghizalif bin Md Jinin. These four latter students had also been working with another talented designer, Zaeem Omarali, who was finishing his high school studies at Jerudong International School (JIS).

## **Facilitating Art Production With Professional Art Supplies and Support Instruction**

Zairah Art Supplies delivered their first big order of art supplies to Ho and his crew of mural volunteers at Pusat Belia Bandar Seri Begawan (Youth Centre) on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012. According to Ho, the quality of huge acrylic on canvas community mural could not have been undertaken without the services and art supplies that were ordered through Zairah. Among the supplies that were delivered by Zairah were canvas, readymade frames for the canvas to be stretched on to, jars of professional soft bodied acrylic paint, gesso, brushes, and acrylic gel medium.

Since its founding approximately nine months ago, Zairah Enterprise has provided services from all four of its sub-companies, however, the first of these companies to open, Zairah Art Supplies, is still the life-line branch of the whole operation because of its importance to both the students who are now employed there, and because of the high quality art supplies that UBD students can now purchase for Ho's and Geiger-Ho's art and technology courses. The importance of Zairah Art Supplies to the art community of Bandar Seri Begawan and the area surrounding the city was confirmed in an article written for "The Brunei Times" by Ammirul Adnan (2012) who wrote, "Zairah Art Supplies brings in art supplies from the US and offers personal art tutoring including workshops, mural paintings and sells artworks done by the company's artists. Recently, a Korean living in Brunei requested for the company to make an eight meter mural which reflects one of the Sultanate's famous scenery which is Kg. Ayer. Zairah Enterprise artists took photos of Kg. Ayer and created the mural from their pictures."

Although the Zairah Art Supplies has several months to go before it passes its first birthday, the organization is already enriching the art community and hence Brunei's Creative Industries scene by supplying quality art supplies to UBD, JIS, and other schools and diverse communities centered in and around the city of Bandar Seri Begawan. If Zairah Enterprise can impact so many individuals and institutions in such a short span of time, surely its position as a supplier of fine art materials and art works, to include both commissioned and non-commissioned studio works, along with tutorial workshops and arts and crafts classes will surely encourage further artistic awareness, experimentation and growth by both students and laypersons in Brunei.

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### About the Author

Martie Geiger-Ho earned a Ph.D. (Fine Arts Interdisciplinary) with an emphasis in art education at Texas Tech University in 2003. Currently, Dr. Geiger-Ho is a senior lecturer serving the art and creative technology program at the Universiti Brunei Darussalam (2012-present). In 2006, she was awarded a University Fellowship from the Hong Kong Baptist University and worked at the Academy of Visual Arts (2007-09). Her art has been exhibited in ninety international and national exhibitions.