

From one village to ten thousand

by *Kirsten L. Klassen*



When Edna Ruth Byler traveled with her husband, JN, to a small village in Puerto Rico, she couldn't have anticipated how much her life—and the lives of so many others—would change. In that village, Edna, 42 at the time, was introduced to local women who embroidered linens to help support their families. They could not sell enough in their village, and asked Edna if she could help them.

It was 1946, and the Bylers had already been working in different capacities for Mennonite Central Committee for five years. Edna had been at the Akron headquarters, helping create a more homelike environment for the men who had been drafted during World War II and were serving their Civilian Public Service terms with MCC. Edna cooked their favorite recipes, encouraged cooperation, and (ahead of her time) supervised the sharing of household chores—equally by the men and women.

Edna returned from the trip to Puerto Rico with pictures and prices of the needlework. Soon after her return, the Lancaster Associated Sewing Circles invited her to come and talk about MCC. Edna showed them the needlework and the Pennsylvania women placed orders. That was the beginning, and the second village.

To increase awareness and sales, Edna began traveling across the United States, selling items out of the trunk of her car. She created sample packets for churches she couldn't visit personally.

In the early 1950s, after spending a year in Hong Kong, the Bylers returned through India, Jordan, and Europe. Everywhere she went, Edna looked for needlework to sell. She began to call the project the Overseas Needlework and Crafts Program.

In 1958, Edna's gifts of organizing to help others were to find another outlet in the Pennsylvania Relief Sale. She threw herself into baking doughnuts, collecting pies from people in the country, and coordinating the food and quilt sales.

One year, the relief sale made \$50,000, as Edna had predicted. No one had believed her, but her tireless energy inspired and motivated others to apply themselves to the greater good. According to the July 17, 1976 *Intelligencer Journal*, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, one member of the relief sale committee wrote that “The ladies’ part of the sale may overtake the men’s part in income.... I suggest... you get from Mrs. Byler her methods of getting this astonishing response.”

Meanwhile, the needlework program continued to grow and expand. It underwent several name changes, from SELFHELP Crafts in 1968 to Ten Thousand Villages in 1996. And, while the seed project with the Puerto Rico women’s embroidery had earned them about \$30,000 over five years, in 1986, the sales had topped \$3.6 million. In addition to embroidery, the stores added toys, household items, jewelry, and books.

Over the years, the number of countries supplying crafts to Ten Thousand Villages has increased to 30 countries, including Kenya, Uganda, Indonesia, Vietnam, El Salvador, Bangladesh, India, and Peru. Seventy percent of the artisans are women. “The organization works with artisans who would otherwise be unemployed or underemployed, focusing on areas where the need is great and access to other markets is limited,” according to the website <www.statemasster.com/encyclopedia/Ten-Thousand-Villages>.

In 2006, Ten Thousand Villages passed a milestone, selling \$20 million in one year and entering the world of online sales. In 2008, the organization was recognized as one of the “World’s Most Ethical Companies” by the Ethisphere Institute and Forbes Magazine. From the modest beginnings of one woman meeting the needs of a small community of women, Ten Thousand Villages has grown to have over 70 stores and 180 outlets across North America—relying heavily on volunteers. Yet the impression one gets of Edna is that she wouldn’t have been surprised. She worked hard and motivated others to work with her, believing that when people worked together, much could be accomplished.

Atlee Beachy, MCC executive committee member, remembers Edna as a kind and thoughtful person who was patient, long-suffering, cheerful, helpful, and emotionally aware. “Below the surface one sensed deep faith currents that were not easily disturbed. This inner spring provided substance to her own life, but was particularly a strong tower of strength for her husband and family. From this she also ministered to hundreds of others,” according to the July 17, 1976 *Intelligencer Journal*. 📖

Edna Byler was born in 1904 and married JN in 1925. The couple had two children, Donna Lou in 1928 and Delmar in 1930. After JN died of heart failure in 1962, Edna continued her work with MCC until 1970 when she retired. She passed away in 1976.

For more information on Edna and Ten Thousand Villages see Marion Keeney Preheim’s Something Meaningful for God: The Mennonite Central Committee Story, vol. 4, pp. 131–150 and <www.tenthousandvillages.com/php/about.us/about.history.php>.