



## *The Little Shop That Could*

College friends turned business partners **Lauren Conrad** and **Hannah Skvarla** empower women artisans by bringing their beautiful goods to a wider audience through online marketplace [thelittlemarket.com](http://thelittlemarket.com).

*By Lola Thelin  
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What if every day was International Women's Day, and around the world women empowered one another? That's the spirit behind The Little Market, a social enterprise co-founded by college friends Lauren Conrad and Hannah Skvarla.

Boutiques and e-commerce stores selling social goods are booming these days, yet The Little Market (TLM) stands out for multiple reasons that go beyond the fact that one of its founders is a recognizable face. "There is a design element and styling of the products that we believe sets us apart," Conrad explains. "We want to make sure these are pieces we personally would want to put in our homes or give as gifts." This means traveling around the world to Nepal, India, Thailand or Mexico to meet and work one-on-one with female artisans—even if those artisans live in a remote village on top of a mountain.

"Often we'll see a piece, whether it's an amazing textile or art piece, and while we love it, we just don't know where we would put it in our homes," Skvarla says. Rather than simply purchasing the items and reselling them, TLM partners with artisans by acting as an adviser. The items—pillows, quilts and stuffed toys—are created with Conrad and Skvarla's input on the color scheme, pattern or even which creature to use as inspiration for a stuffed animal. Some products, such as glassware and ceramics, are purchased as is. "There's something so special about an artist using a technique that's been passed down for generations. We're trying to preserve that and also make it more marketable—make it an item that is usable for people," Skvarla says.

Conrad and Skvarla met in 2008 while attending the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising in Los Angeles, where Conrad studied design and Skvarla focused on merchandise marketing. The two traveled overseas with Skvarla's uncle, a human rights attorney who opened the young women's eyes to human rights violations and the firsthand challenges faced by many living outside of the U.S. "Launching TLM [almost three

years ago] with Lauren allowed us to help people in a different way," says Skvarla, whose humanitarian experience includes working with the nonprofit Human Rights Watch.

Skvarla and serial entrepreneur Conrad sought the knowledge of experts in international development and the fair trade nonprofit Global Goods Partners to learn how to create sustainable partnerships across the world and how to navigate potential pitfalls. One of the greatest challenges has been teaching artisans not to undervalue their products and instead price products to include hourly wages and cost of materials and transportation. "We've learned that oftentimes items sold in the tourist marketplaces are underpriced so much that the artisans are losing money," adds Conrad, who also oversees her brand, which includes fashion lines Paper Crown and LC Lauren Conrad, online destination laurenconrad.com, and novels and styling books—most recently *Lauren Conrad Celebrate*.

"We want people to understand that everything about this company [TLM] we are doing as ethically as possible. That's an important message. Lauren and I don't take salaries," Skvarla explains. A member of the Fair Trade Federation, TLM focuses on building sustainable partnerships with female artisans, who can in turn help their families rise above poverty. "We've seen time and time again that when women have control of the money, situations are different. That's when the kids go to school. That's when domestic violence decreases. This is why we focus on women," Skvarla adds.

Although the moniker "fair trade" is often casually tossed around, it translates to strict guidelines and criteria for partnerships. TLM pays up front for all products, which helps the artisans work out the cost of material. "For the trip where we drove six hours into the mountains, we did so because often these artisans have other groups representing them that end up taking a cut. We want to pay the artisans directly, and we want to confirm they are working in a co-op that is supporting



them,” Skvarla says. “That’s our commitment to these women. We take the time to figure out how long it takes to create a product and how to pay them properly and fairly.” Adhering to the criteria means patience. It took nearly two years to find fair trade cotton quilts; now TLM works with two groups, one from Bangladesh and the other from India, who employ women who have escaped sex trafficking.

Conrad and Skvarla, who typically take two trips a year, traveled to Thailand in June. Prior to these trips Skvarla and director of operations Caitlin Beas research artisans and schedule meetings, but a lot of the partnerships are happy accidents. “We stumble upon many great finds. Once we get to a city, it’s easier to talk to people and find local artists because a majority of the groups we look for don’t have access to markets. They don’t have access to the internet. That’s really who we are looking to help: people who can’t sell their goods without a platform like The Little Market,” Conrad adds.

The website represents anywhere from 16 to 23 countries, and Skvarla is in product development talks with at least 25 other groups. Not every partnership is international, however. Two



of TLM’s artisan partners are GAIA Empowered Women and Prosperity Candle, whose mission is to improve the lives of women refugees in the U.S. by providing employment opportunities, job training and important resources.

A storefront is a likely option for TLM as well. “There’s such intricate detail and love that go into these pieces. When you actually hold them in your hand, they are so much more valuable,” Conrad says. Like any company, TLM has hit its fair share of roadblocks, from complications with bank transfers to expensive and unpredictable shipping. In fact, one year the company was awaiting a shipment of Easter bunny stuffed animals from Peru when a transportation strike hit. But despite the challenges, it’s all part of helping these women artisans gain independence. “I believe for a lot of people [the challenges] kept them from doing this [kind of work]. Even when we originally wanted to launch, everyone said, ‘Good luck; it’s not going to work.’ There are so many reasons why it shouldn’t work but we said, ‘Challenge accepted; we’ll just do our best,’” Conrad says. “Like any good business, we want to grow slowly and learn in our first couple of years. I am really proud of where TLM is but I’m not surprised by it.”