

The Green Zone

By Patricia Dines



Eco-Clothing Direct

Wear the change you want to see in the world

For savvy local eco-shoppers, one of this season's special delights is Indigenous Designs' holiday warehouse sale. During just a few days each year, the public can get significant discounts on Indigenous' beautiful, handcrafted, fair trade, organic and natural-fiber clothing, items usually available only through health food stores, high-end boutiques, and mail order.

I've long admired Indigenous' committed idealism, so I was pleased to sit down with the company's cofounder and CEO, Scott Leonard. It turns out that his eco-actions started early. In sixth grade, he saw heavy-duty aluminum lunch trays being thrown in the trash, prompting him to start a school recycling program and spend "lunch after lunch diving into dumpsters" with other students. He remarks, "You just do it, you stand up for what you believe in and you keep moving forward with it, and before you know it, you've taken 10 steps on a 1,000 step journey. Next time you turn around, you might find that you're 999 steps towards where you wanted to be."

In adulthood, he continued his support of environmental causes, such as the creation of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and the donation of mountain bikes to help indigenous Brazilians protect their forests. These topics echo his own vital connection with nature through surfing, skiing, and mountain-biking. The 1994 birth of Indigenous Designs was sparked when Leonard's friend Joe Flood mentioned a recent gift of a handmade Ecuadorian sweater and the craft people's low wages. With a background producing clothes, Leonard appreciated the handmade character of this style of sweater but

thought they could improve on its rough bulky fibers, misshapen design, and "gorilla arms." The two realized that, with Flood's Ecuadorian connections, they could work directly with artisans to create better products and increase worker wages. With trips to Ecuador and the business taking shape, Leonard reconnected with old friend and environmentalist Matt Reynolds, who joined the company as president.

Indigenous now collaborates with over 300 cooperatives, combining their traditional artisan skills with new materials and techniques to create unique pieces that appeal to modern customers. The workers are organized around community rather than factory assembly lines, preserving their agrarian cultural traditions while earning notably more than they otherwise would. "This is not charity," Leonard explains, "but paying a fair wage for their masterful work."

Leonard and Reynolds steer their organization toward a "quadruple bottom line" that benefits people, planet, profit and community. They use only natural and organic fibers plus natural colors and low-impact dyes, thus avoiding the toxics and synthetics in most mainstream clothing. Their alpaca wool is even harvested from free-ranging animals raised without chemicals. They also offer innovative financing to the artisan groups, provide employee incentives for using alternative transportation, buy solar power, support local nonprofits, and encourage greening of the outdoor industry. "We're clearly going well beyond the normal fair-trade-organic type of business," Leonard says.

Interest in Indigenous has increased with green's recent popularity, making

it easier for them to highlight their eco-features while continuing to offer high-quality fashion that's both timeless and "on trend." Leonard says, "We're proving you can do the right thing and still be successful."

Certainly, they've faced challenges on their journey, including finding investors to nurture their vision even during difficult times, having to refuse products and revenue not aligned with their mission, and incorporating their values into the company's structure as it has grown. "I mean," Leonard asks rhetorically, "why would we ever start a company and make such strides in creating this model only to have it break down if someone buys us that doesn't have the same value match?"

When others praise the company's accomplishments, he shrugs, saying, "To me, it's just a drop in the bucket. What we're proud of is that we've set a course, been steadfast in our values, been a catalyst and a beacon to other people interested in sustainability, and continued to effectuate change in every community that we're in, so that our impacts are much larger than the company we are."

As we say goodbye, I appreciate even more the bottom line that I see—eco-gorgeous clothing that encourages meaningful innovation for a better world.

Indigenous Designs' Holiday Warehouse Sale is Wednesday–Saturday, Dec. 3–6. Wednesday–Friday, 11am–6pm; Saturday, 10am–5pm. 2250 Apollo Way, Ste. 400, Santa Rosa. 707.571.7811. www.indigenousdesigns.com

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