

People

Peju Akintorin: Wrapping Kindness in a Handmade Scarf

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It began with a homeless woman shivering in the snow.

Worried about ravages of the Chicago winter, Senior Associate **Peju Akintorin** instinctively wanted to give the woman her scarf. But it didn't feel like enough.

"Giving her something would definitely help, but I wanted to do more; to find what had happened, how she ended up the street, and how to *empower* her to escape her situation," recalls Akintorin, who works in the Chicago Audit resource management group.

"And it came to me: I could give her the ability to make – and even sell – her own crocheted scarves."

That was in 2012. Since then, the UK native and daughter of Nigerian parents has outfitted hundreds of the city's neediest with handcrafted winter wear. True to her word, she took it upon herself to supply the materials and, more importantly, the skills the help people help themselves – thanks to her [Agape Scarf Project](#). First, though, she had her own hurdle to overcome.

"I had no idea how to crochet," she laughs, "and I'm not very crafty."

Weaving a Solution

A self-described "very organized person," Akintorin approached the dilemma with the same trademark determination that won her a position as the research manager for The Oprah Winfrey Show, where she worked for almost four years. After the daily broadcasts ended in 2011, Akintorin joined KPMG.

"I approach things in a certain way," explains Akintorin, "so the first thing I did when I decided I wanted to start the scarf project was to find a good crocheting class. I signed up in October. By December, I'd made 60 scarves and become addicted to crocheting."

She had also recruited a cadre of friends to help with the crocheting and to join her in mastering instructional skills. The group filled gift bags with their toasty hand-crafted scarves and other goodies and made the rounds of social service agencies, including the very grateful Matthew House.

"For many days after your giveaway, clients were talking about how warm the scarves were and how much they appreciated having them when they had to walk several miles to get to their overnight shelter," the director wrote to her afterwards. "Your efforts made them feel like human beings."

Generating Warmth

At [Deborah's Place](#), Chicago's largest provider of supportive housing exclusively for women, Akintorin found organizers as excited about sharing skills as she was. She set up weekly instructional sessions, navigated through some rough patches, and watched as initially-skeptical learners morphed into warm friends.

"Making one scarf takes between three to five hours depending on the yarn, so as we crocheted, we talked," relates Akintorin. "The women started to really look forward to the classes. They shared their goals, the stories of their addictions, and their desire to better themselves. It was like a therapy session".

Her husband, a seasoned professional photographer, enlisted friends to document the Agape Scarf Project and its benefits, which went beyond the friendships it forged.

The Profits of Progress

Meanwhile, with a single handmade scarf or blanket fetching anywhere from five to 40 dollars at local craft fairs, the 'hobby' became a lucrative source of financial support.

Akintorin smiles, "It was great to see these women earn money."

It was equally fulfilling for her, as a Briton, to make an indelible impact in a new country, a new city, and a new workplace. Akintorin had moved to Chicago to join her parents (who'd come for a job transfer) after earning her University of Leicester graduate degree. She'd met her now-husband, Olu, in 2007 and they wed in 2010. The couple's first child, a son, was born in December.

His arrival temporarily slowed Akintorin's involvement in Project Agape. But the effort had already achieved its own momentum, thanks to friends and colleagues who remain one hundred percent committed to her efforts.

"One of the things that drew me to KPMG in the first place was the firm's emphasis on charity and corporate responsibility," says Akintorin. "And giving back is something I intend to do for the rest of my life."



See Peju's touching story – in a video created with the help of her husband and friends.



Peju Akintorin (center) poses with colleagues and clients at Deborah's Place homeless shelter.



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