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MALAYSIAN ECO-BASKETS PROMOTE SOCIAL JUSTICE IN WASHINGTON

December 5, 2007, Washington, DC: When the annual crafts fair opened its doors at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, near Washington, last Saturday, Mariko Scavone's table was piled high with baskets made by disadvantaged women in Malaysia.

By the time the fair ended on Sunday, all 26 baskets had been sold. Ms Scavone – a student at Georgetown University – had earned \$470 for the craftswomen in Malaysia and shared their inspiring story with scores of churchgoers.

"It went very well. People like the baskets and they also appreciate the message," said Ms Scavone later. "There's definitely a market for this in the US."

The weekend fair marked the latest stage in the steady development of Salaam Wanita (Women Together), an innovative weaving project in Malaysia that mixes business and social justice.

The project was launched in 2002 by eHomemakers, a network of Malaysian women who work from home due to social constraints, disabilities and chronic illnesses. One basket weaver, known as Kanesgawary, has two children with cerebral palsy.

Salaam Wanita is now seeking to promote its message and its baskets abroad, with help from The Advocacy Project (AP). Ms Scavone is the latest of several American graduate students to volunteer with Salaam Wanita under AP's Fellowship for Peace program. This summer she helped the weavers to launch a new website (<http://www.justmarketing.info/>) and brought back baskets for sale in the US.

By exhibiting at the weekend fair Ms Scavone was able to test the basket designs, patterns and prices. This information is being shared with the weavers, and AP will recruit a Peace Fellow next year to explore new markets for the baskets in the US.

The eco-baskets are made from recycled magazine paper. The paper is wound around the spine of a palm leaf, which is removed before the roll is glued. The basket is then finished with non-toxic varnish for water resistance. This eco-friendly approach, and the skill of the weavers, appealed to Deborah Wood, one church member who bought baskets as Christmas presents. "I like the recycling, and the baskets are very usable," she said.

The Universalist Unitarian Church, which hosted the fair, is known for a commitment to social justice and this year 24 vendors sold \$24,000 of artifacts at the fair. The Salaam Wanita eco-baskets were displayed next to woven products from women in Uganda, who are raising funds for a local girl's school, and fair-trade coffee from Guatemala.

Meanwhile, next week in Malaysia, eHomemakers will chair a panel at the Third Global Knowledge Conference (GKP3) on ICT-enabled micro-entrepreneurship in Kuala Lumpur. The two-day conference will build on the UN-sponsored World Information Society meetings, and explore new possibilities for using ICT to help the poor to access information.

eHomemakers has won awards for its innovative use of ICT, including the development of software, which allows the group to coordinate sales by its members who work from home, like the Salaam Wanita weavers.

Julia Zoo, an AP Peace Fellow who is currently volunteering with eHomemakers as an AP Peace Fellow, has designed a virtual tent for the conference.

* For more on Salaam Wanita, and to order baskets online visit

<http://www.justmarketing.info/>

* For information about the Unitarian Universalist Church and the annual crafts fair, email Sally Recinos: salrecinos@verizon.net

The Advocacy Project is based in Washington D.C. Phone +1 202 758 3328. Visit the AP web site for information about our current projects at <http://advocacynet.org/>. For questions or comments about the AP and its projects, please email us at dcoffice@advocacynet.org.

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