

Interview with Mr. Mike Abri, Businessman

By Karl B Johnson



ILI: First of all I would like to thank you Mr. Abri for giving us this time. We wanted to learn more about your company, Global Trading Partners Incorporated. How did you get into this business?

Mr. Abri: I had this entrepreneurial desire within me. I remember when I was fifteen years old I wanted to get into business. In 1989-1990, some years ago, I became involved with a group of people from California. They were conducting a rug sale—oriental area rugs—hand made area rugs, and they hired me as a sales person. Obviously, if one knows about the country wherein I was born, Iran—Persia, it is one of the main or original countries wherein these types of designs—these type of rugs started. I have had some of this in my blood from the time that I was a kid. So, when I started working for them I became really interested in this business and three years later I started my own business of buying and marketing oriental rugs. In the beginning I was doing business with domestic vendors but gradually I began to expand. I started to travel overseas to purchase rugs for import into the United States. I traveled to countries like India, China, Iran and Pakistan. I began to become more focused on the distribution part of the business. Having the knowledge of the production, colors and trends put me in contact with companies such as Target, Sam's Clubs and other major retailers. I began distributing rugs to them. This is how the concept of Global Trading Partners Inc. was created.

ILI: It is my understanding that you travel the world looking for hand made merchandise for your business. Is there a particular standard that you apply when you are looking at merchandise?

Mr. Abri: Definitely. One of the biggest things for me when traveling to small villages in places like India, Pakistan, Persia and China, is making sure that the rugs are of good quality and that there is no child labor involved. I go through a process of testing and regulation to make sure that is not happening. By traveling to rural areas, small villages, in this part of the world, many of these villages production[of rugs] will consist of just 11 or 12 looms, and when you buy their production the communities become quite excited because you have just created jobs for the community. My concern in buying is color and trends. This is what people in the United States are looking for. They are not buying the rug as an investment but how well it fits in with the décor in their homes. This is just as important as the quality. We are looking for the correct size, trends and décor because these trends change very quickly.

ILI: You mentioned that when you go to these villages that they might have only 11 or 12 looms. Are these hand looms?

Mr. Abri: When you want to buy an area rug, you have basically three options. You either buy a hand knotted rug, which is done on the loom. These hand knotted rugs are labor intensive products. It takes a long time to make a rug. The quality in these types of hand knotted rugs will vary. A lot has to do with the number of knots per square inch. The more knots per square inch the longer it is going to take to make the rug. This way of making rugs is an art form. It is usually passed on from one generation to the next. The looms that we are talking about are set vertically and normally four people sit behind the loom. The master weaver has a design setting in front of him called a cartoon. He calls the colors and the other people follow his instructions. It's difficult to explain how fast they can tie these knots. It might take up to 9 months to make one area rug that is 10 feet by 8 feet with four people working on that rug. This is a hand crafted art form. If you were to go to some of these countries where the consumers are a little more educated about the process and hand production, these rugs are purchased as investments. If you were to go to Iran—to a wealth family—within their home

there might be a room where several of these rugs are stacked and stored. In the old days you might go to a bank and secure a loan using these rugs as collateral. Now days, in other parts of the world they are using machine made rugs and that has changed somewhat. The other two types of rugs you might buy in this country are machine made rugs or hand tufted rugs. These are a lot less labor intensive. The process from sheering the wool to dying the wool to weaving the rug is a process that has to be controlled from start to finish. Once you bring it down you have to make sure that the rug is sheered so that the rug is even. Each step takes an expert. This is what makes it a true art. Some antiques rugs can be valued at \$100, 000 or more.

ILI: What part of the world do you find to be the most exciting when you are on your purchasing expedition?

Mr. Abri: Well I would have to say India. Although the original process started in Iran, the process you see in India—the way they are made on the loom—the process is the same way it was in Iran or China when it started. India always relaxes me. The knowledge base in relationship to colors and trends is amazing in India. They are in many cases ahead of us.

ILI: I understand that you are a philanthropists. Can you tell us what causes you contribute to and why these particular causes are dear to you?

Mr. Abri: Although I have been in the United States for more than 30 years, I come from a third world country. I traveled back to my country—Iran—after 30 years and I saw their hardship, I saw them having to do things that they did not want to do—things that were not accepted by their parents or the society—but unfortunately they were put into a position where they were forced to do these types of things because they had not choices. I believe that if the world could come together we could create opportunities. These types of people are not begging or waiting for handouts. They want opportunities for educations and jobs. They want to see the same types of opportunities that we have in this country. In my travels to India I have seen schools that have dirt floors. With a small donation that amounts to around two thousand dollars they were able to put in a new floor. The joy on the faces of those children when you return is unbelievable. Part of the agenda within the International Leadership Institute is to try to help people and the directions of their lives. In looking at the world I see a lot of resources, I see a lot of people and I see a lot of waste. I believe that if we can come together we can gather the things wasted and change peoples lives for the better. We can put smiles on people's faces. April 13, 2009

Photograph by Heather Beal.