



## Crafting a New Life

Surekha Kulkarni teaches refugees to make jewelry so they can start businesses—resulting in confidence and cash that lead to a brighter future. *By Eliana Osborn*

### Class Act

Ten years ago, Surekha Kulkarni took a jewelry-making class while visiting relatives in India, figuring it would be a fun diversion. To her surprise, the Louisville, KY, mom of two loved it. Back home she began creating earrings, bracelets and necklaces to give to family and friends. Fast-forward to 2011: Surekha, a committed community volunteer, was helping out at a local nonprofit called Kentucky Refugee Ministries, whose members were trying to raise money by selling handmade beaded necklaces. “Something clicked in my head,” says Surekha, who thought

her do-good spirit and passion for jewelry could benefit these women.

### Party Plan

Surekha offered to cohost a jewelry party at a friend’s house to see if the women’s crafts would sell. It was a huge success. “We made more than \$1,000 in the first hour,” she says. “Then a friend offered to have the next party at her home.” And that’s where the idea for Beaded Treasures Project, a nonprofit that teaches marketable skills and financial literacy to refugees, took root.

Her first undertaking was to organize monthly workshops for 10 women. Not

only did she teach them everything she knew about beading, she also introduced them to every aspect of running a small business—buying supplies wholesale, refining designs, understanding microcredit and more. Plus, she found local venues for pop-up sales: jewelry parties, craft fairs and farmers’ markets.

### Support Team

As the refugees increased their sales, Surekha noticed they felt more confident at home. They’d come to the U.S. from patriarchal societies in Iraq, Nepal, Congo and Bhutan, where traditional gender roles were the norm. “Once husbands saw their wives earning money, the women had more say in family and financial decisions,” Surekha explains.

Being a part of Beaded Treasures also helped the women deal with difficult experiences in their past. Many had endured harsh conditions in their home countries or in resettlement camps. The support system made them feel less alone and helped them get acclimated to the quirks of a new country.

The initial group “graduated” in 2014. Today Beaded Treasures’ success has led Surekha to branch out with sewing and cooking classes as well. New participants can continue in the project indefinitely, as long as they agree to mentor new members and donate a portion of their sales to keep things running.

### A Bright Future

Starting over is something Surekha knows a thing or two about. She moved to Louisville from India in 1986 with her husband and their two children. The couple wanted to give their son, who’s dyslexic, a better education, and they’ve all thrived here. Her daughter, an immigration attorney, now helps her mother’s students with the citizenship process on a pro bono basis.

Beaded Treasures “has empowered me and helped me grow,” Surekha says, “which is why I feel so strongly about giving back.” She’s thrilled at how it’s expanded. “These women are so motivated to make the most of what they have in the States,” she adds. And she’s determined to help them do just that.

For more information or to donate, visit [beadedtreasuresproject.com](http://beadedtreasuresproject.com).