

Tea and decision-making sip well together

BY LINDA DeNICOLA

Staff Writer



Kirsten Kristensen (l) sells high-quality teas through a Web-based tea business. Above, Kristensen and members of a group she founded at Brookdale Community College to raise funds in support of a humanitarian program.

Success, it can be said, is part inspiration and part preparation. Add to that, imagination, teamwork and a nice cup of tea, and you have the foundation for a Brookdale initiative that has two parts: an awareness campaign and a fundraising component.

The program's mission is to raise awareness of an organization called the Central Asia Institute and to raise money to build a school in Asia in Brookdale Community College's name. It is the brainchild of Kirsten Kristensen, an Ocean Township businesswoman and a graduate of the community college, located in Lincroft.

Kristensen has a business called Tea 4 U LLC. She sells a range of high-quality flavored green teas from her home-based store and online at www.tea4u.com.

She also conducts seminars on tea, such as "A World of Tea," "The History of Tea and Cultures," "Tea and Health" and "Teas That Are

Not Teas," and also arranges tea parties with themes such as Victorian tea, mother/daughter tea, and Mad Hatter's tea, to name just a few.

It's not surprising that her interest would be piqued by a book titled "Three Cups of Tea" by humanitarian Greg Mortenson. She turned the ideas in his book into a two-year college project known as "Knowledge is Power."



The project consists of raising money for Mortenson's non-profit organization, Central Asia Institute, based in Montana, which has the dual mission of fighting terrorism and building schools. The second goal of the Brookdale initiative is to raise money for a school in Brookdale's name in the area that is the subject of Mortenson's book, the Karakoram Mountains of northeastern Pakistan.

Kristensen explained that "Knowledge is Power" is the awareness campaign, and "Spare Your Change for Change" is the fundraising part.

Kristensen graduated from Brookdale in 2003 with an associate's degree in social science. After she graduated, she was appointed a trustee on the board of Brookdale's Alumni Association, where

she presently serves as first vice president and service project coordinator.

On March 8, while listening to ABC News, she heard Diane Sawyer mention a program called TEA. Since Kristensen has a tea business, the story caught her attention.

Sawyer was interviewing humanitarian Mortenson about his just published book, "Three Cups of Tea."

"I had been looking for a charity organization to support, and as soon as I heard the purpose of Greg's project, I was 100 percent sure that this was not only the organization to be supported by my company, but by myself and my family as well," she said.

Galvanized, she ran out and purchased the book and within two hours, she was hooked. That same afternoon, she spoke to her friend Dr. Shahin Pirzad, adviser to the Brookdale honor society Alpha Pi Theta, and passionately told him about her "find."

As luck would have it, Pirzad had heard about Mortenson's project and he agreed that the project would fit into the Honor Study topic, which for the 2006-07 period is called "Gold, Gods and Glory: The Global Dynamics of Power."

In May she introduced Mortenson's organization, Central Asia Institute, to the newly elected president of Alpha Pi Theta, Kaitlin Tonti, who gladly accepted the challenge to incorporate the organization into the college project.

"Over the summer we had meetings with the college president, Dr. Peter Burnham, and the executive board of the honor society, who highly supported the idea. Soon after, I introduced the project to the president of the alumni association at Brookdale, Colin Casey, and to the alumni board, who have 'adopted' the organization as our service project for years to come," she said.

After the project idea was introduced to the honor society and the alumni association, the groups formed a liaison and now work as a team in the project. In addition, Kristensen has gotten Commerce Bank to donate hundreds of red coin

banks that have been distributed around campus for students to bring home so their families and friends can donate spare change to support the building of the school.

"While introducing the project to the students at Brookdale, I have done several sessions on the meaning of "Three Cups of Tea" and how tea has been an important influence of many cultures worldwide," she said. "We have formed a project committee consisting of members of the honor society, the alumni association and a variety of other clubs at Brookdale."

She explained that in his book, Mortenson writes about being injured while climbing K2 in Baltistan, the second tallest mountain in the world, in 1993. He was nursed back to health by the village people of Korphe.

During his recovery, he discovered that the children did not have any schooling, not even at an elementary level. He soon learned that this is still a fact of life in many secluded villages in the mountains bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Since 1993, Mortenson has been instrumental in building 55 schools in the area, enabling the children, especially the girls who didn't have a tradition of education, to get a basic level of schooling, she said, adding that the schools are built with local materials by local people, which is a major part of the success of the program.

Kristensen, who also has a degree in psychology from Thomas Edison State College, explained how her interest in tea grew.

In 2003, as part of the honors program at Brookdale Community College, she took the honors class on health and wrote her final paper on the optimal diet.

"This gave me an insight into the importance of tea. I followed this up with my favorite class at Thomas Edison State College, Science of Nutrition. She has also had a longtime commitment to the Girl Scouts and has been a leader for many years, most recently as the initiator and conductor of several educational tea programs for younger girls.

"Having had more than 300 girls participate in the tea parties, I decided that I loved this so much that I wanted to do this for a living and expanded the courses to the public at large," she said.

"Today, apart from selling my teas, I teach educational tea seminars at Brookdale's community classes and at the Monmouth County Park System as well as for a number of organizations, both private and business."

She explained that she was captivated by the way Mortenson works.

"He allows time for three cups of tea, which is the local culture's way to give time to get to know each other before any decisions are made. And to allow the decisions to be made the right way," Kristensen explained.

"Greg is a true humanitarian who sold all of his belongings and even slept in his car to raise enough money to fund the first school. All I can say is, read this book. It will change your view on charity work and open your eyes to a world most of us know very little about."

Kristensen said she has no idea where the school will be built.

"Korphe got their school in 1996, the first to be built by Greg Mortenson. We have no influence on where the school will be built. It will be decided by the Central Asia Institute in cooperation with the elders in the particular areas."

She explained that the decision is made by a lot of people after sitting down with cups of tea just as the book advocates. She said a decision will be made that will benefit the most needy.

"This is exactly what 'Three Cups of Tea' means. We cannot just decide to raise a school where we want it, but it is a cooperation among a lot of people, especially the people of the mountain areas in Pakistan and Afghanistan."

Kristensen urges people to sit down with a hot cup of tea and read the book, then "Spare Your Change for Change."

Visit the Central Asia Institute at www.ikat.org or contact Kristensen at info@tea4u.com.