

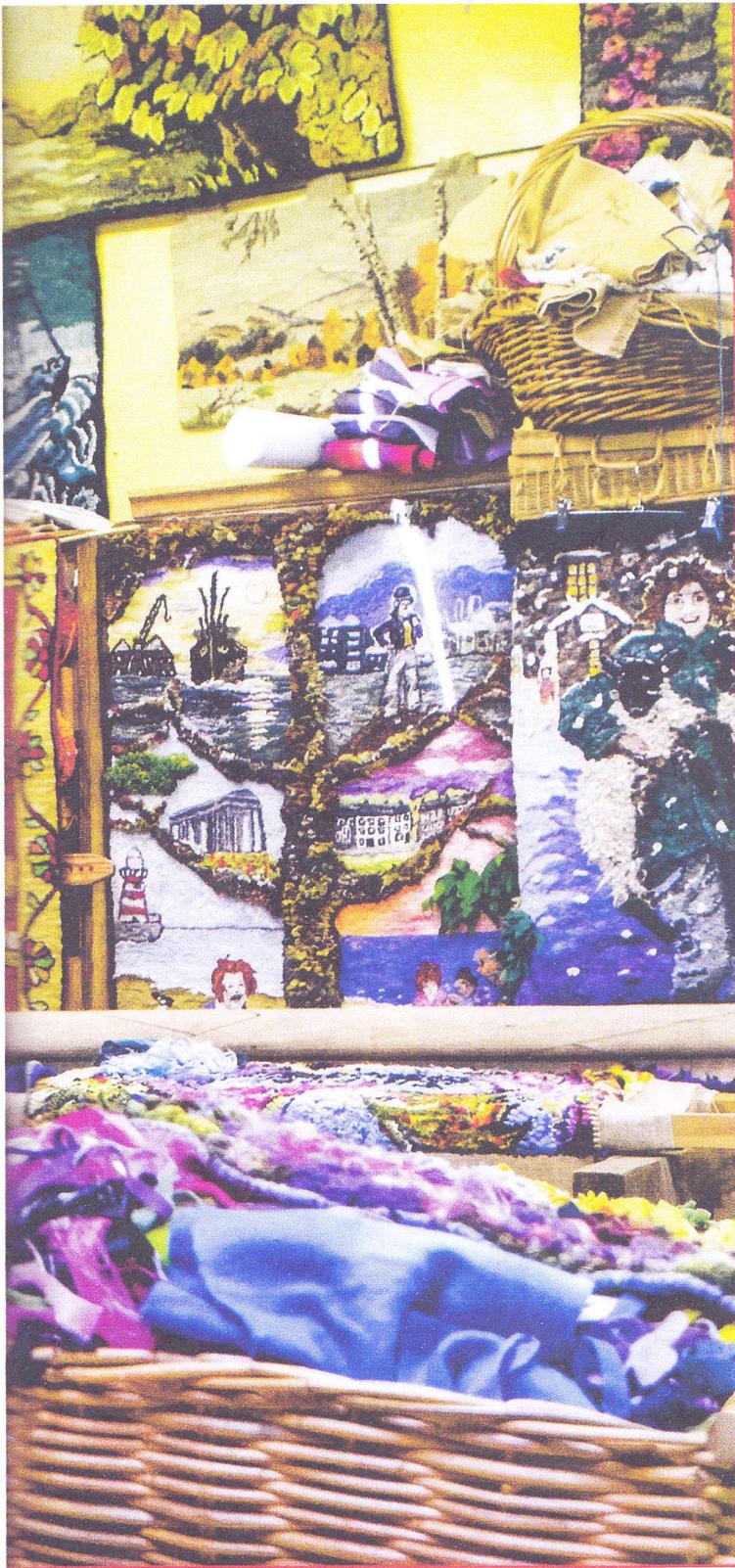


'If the sale of one rug could help buy medicine to save the sight of one child, all these years will have been worth it,' says Heather

From RUGS to RICHES

Rag rug maker Heather Ritchie uses her craft skills to change lives

Interview by LIZ FROST Photography ANDREW BILLINGTON



rug I'd made at home, they were so impressed they asked me to do some demonstrations. I was delighted when the Director of the school invited me back to teach the following year. That was 22 years ago and since then I've taught in 13 states, as well as Australia and Canada.

Rug making had given me so much, I began to search for a way to give something back. An idea came to me whilst on holiday in Zanzibar with my eldest daughter Vicky in 2001. We came across lots of poverty, with women on the streets starving. Back at the hotel I cut up some of my T-shirts, took a sack and returned to the village.

I had no idea whether it would work. Even though there are thousands of blind people in Gambia, there was only one school for the blind in the whole of the country, with just 50 children. I asked our guide to invite some of the blind beggars from the street too and we filled the school hall to the brim.

I had prepared suitcases full of materials and with Christina starting from one end of the hall and me from the other – each with an interpreter – we taught everyone how to make a basic hooked rug.

That was in 2007. Since then, I've set myself up as a

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After gaining permission from the village chief

I sat with the women and did an impromptu workshop. They were so thrilled and excited, I knew this was how I wanted to use my skills in the future.

As soon as I returned to the UK I applied for charitable status. I wanted to help more people in Zanzibar but the process was arduous and fruitless. Without financial help I couldn't afford to travel that far.

Around the same time I'd read an article about the plight of blind people in Gambia who were being criminalised for begging. My dad had lost his sight when I was six and my younger daughter Christina works as a rehabilitation officer for the blind, so it was a subject close to my heart.

Charitable status or not, I felt I could help those people by teaching them how to make rag rugs. Gambia was closer and easier to get to than Zanzibar, so I used £1,000 of my savings for a visit. Christina and I got in touch with the Sight Savers charity, who sent a guide to look after us.

community interest company – which means I can collect public funds – and leased a workshop in the grounds of the school. I travel to Africa two or three times a year to teach workshops and the funds raised pay for my transport and food for my students.

In Gambia, blind people are outcasts, to the extent where they will avoid using a white stick in public. Since I began teaching, many of these women have gone on to marry and to have children. I have even persuaded groups to attend public trade fairs with me in order to sell their wares. I feel that together, we are working towards breaking the taboo.

It hasn't been easy. At times I've felt like I'm taking two steps forward and one back but if the sale of one rug could help to buy medicine to save the sight of one child, all these years will have been worth it. **WI**

Heather Ritchie is a member of Richmond WI, North Yorkshire West Federation.

Find out more at www.rug-aid.org or email info@rug-aid.org

My first rag rug was made of sacks and stockings to keep out the draughts in our stone cottage. We had just moved to a village called Reeth in the Yorkshire Dales and the local farmers' wives taught me the basics. I had no idea then that my little hobby would end up taking me to far flung countries and would change my life forever.

A neighbour who had just returned from the US (where the craft is really popular) introduced me to different techniques and dyeing and as my

skills progressed, I set up a little shop in the village, selling my own patterns and teaching others the craft.

I was happy but I yearned to go to America and attend one of the many rug schools my neighbour had talked about. My husband Leslie was really supportive, so using some money I had made from commissions, I booked a place at Green Mountain rug school in Vermont.

It was only meant to be for a week but when I showed tutors a