

A HandCrafting Justice Story



[Huichol wall art](#) by Candida Torres Carrillo.

The Peruvian Government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission released in 2003 a visual documentation of the internal armed conflict that wreaked havoc throughout the country from 1980 to 2000. It was titled "Yuyanapaq. Para recordar," meaning "To Remember" in Quechua and Spanish. For the residents of La Florida, Peru, this investigative work portrays the anguish of their lives, which culminated in a devastating nightmare one September day in 1990.

Although it is painful to remember such an incident, the women of La Florida have persevered and demonstrated the strength of human will. "To Remember" is a mantra for Peru as a country. But for the former residents of La Florida, the motto is "To Live and Advance."

Embroiled in 20 years of domestic turmoil caused by the Maoist guerillas of the [Shining Path](#), most of Peru experienced the destructive nature of this conflict. The residents of La Florida, located in Junin, Chanchamayo, were situated on the front lines.

The climactic end for this small jungle village arrived on September 27, 1990. Ten years into the chaos that had ravaged towns throughout the mountain and jungle regions of Peru, the members of the Shining Path were fulfilling their philosophy of destroying all that represented the establishment in order to reconstruct a new society.

Unfortunately, on this date, the residents of La Florida became the victims of this reconstruction. The Shining Path pillaged their homes, schools, and infrastructure. The destruction concluded with the execution of seven residents of La Florida who were seen as threats to the goals of the Shining Path. The seven individuals were among 69,000 killed during this internal conflict.

One of the seven executed in the town square was Sister Agustina Rivas, a simple Good Shepherd Sister and member of an international Roman Catholic congregation of nuns. The Shining Path leadership determined that Agustina, through her association with the Catholic Church, was a symbolic obstacle to their cultural renewal and societal rebirth.

Fleeing from the jungle to the closest urban centers—La Merced, Huancaayo, and Lima—150 women and their families grabbed their belongings and began a new life. It was a daunting challenge to recreate a way of life that they had already developed in the rural surroundings of the jungles of Peru. They exemplified the resilience of the human spirit, and through tremendous hardship they abandoned rural life and embraced the urban.

The majority of the women of La Florida arrived and settled in the outskirts of Lima. Like many cities located along the Pacific Ocean, Lima is surrounded by hillsides that provide protection for those who arrive with hopeful ambitions.

Regrettably, these hillsides are precarious and limit growth. Drugs, violence, and crime have flourished in

these areas. It is this environment in which the residents of the La Florida were forced to reside. With few possessions, Lima became their new home. Due to fear and scarcity of available land, they scattered and dispersed throughout the slums.

Years after their arrival, contact was made with one of the communities of the Good Shepherd Sisters in Lima. Despite the risk of retribution from the Shining Path, relationships were reestablished. The women of La Florida articulated their needs for sustainable incomes, dignified work, and family support. They were eager to find work in a stable, healthy environment. Efforts to locate former residents, identify their skills, and organize them into a cooperative group were successful.

These women wanted an opportunity to be included in the global marketplace, to prove their worth and the quality of their merchandise. It was a positive step toward healing the trauma they had experienced in La Florida.

Within this cooperative group based on the principles of solidarity and unity, not only did they gather to work, but they also met to console, bond, and restore the social commitments that they had forged years earlier in the jungles. They had transplanted their community ideals and aspirations.

After solidifying their group in Lima, they contacted Global Women's Exchange (now known as [HandCrafting Justice](#)), a fair-trade partnership led by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in New York. Its mission is to work with women struggling for economic justice and independence in developing countries. Despite difficulties, their work ethic and resolve to better their lives created a sustainable source of income, resulting in the production high-quality goods to be sold in the United States and other countries.

The women began to participate in HandCrafting Justice in 1997 with small aspirations. Today they receive large orders thanks to the superior quality of their work. Despite having to travel long distances, the women gather as a community every Saturday morning in Magdalena del Mar, a neighborhood in downtown Lima.

During the week, they work at home to fill work orders ranging from Peruvian dolls to household items. On Saturdays, they bring the finished products for final review and last minute touch-ups. But these weekend meetings are more than simple business transactions. As they aim to improve their standard of living, these women hold onto the identity and community that shape their lives.



House visit to women involved with HandCrafting Justice.

Their participation in HandCrafting Justice provides them with decent working conditions and social advancement, which they have sought since fleeing their homes in 1990. Dignified work, fair wages, and potential for growth manifest real results.

In June 2002, I visited the home of one of the women, Veronica, so that she could show us her house. Miles from where they meet in Magdalena del Mar, Veronica proudly guided us through her house on the outskirts of Lima. She detailed the improvements that she had made.

"At first, the floor was dirt, and now it is cement," she said. "We used to have thatched walls, and now they are made of bricks. Look above: That sheet metal roof used to be a plastic tarp. And my children eat better and wear better clothing. All of this comes from my earnings."

This is just one of their testimonies. Not only are there changes in their personal lives, but they also continue to personify courage and generosity for their transplanted community. When one of the women in the group fell ill with breast cancer, the community rallied around her, assuming her workload and giving her money for medication.

The women of La Florida are an illustration of the indomitable human will and spirit. Notwithstanding the horrific events that altered their lives, they are a source of hope and inspiration. It would have been easy and understandable for them to succumb to despair, but they were galvanized by a desire to survive and to revitalize community with the genuine intention of achieving a modest, humble way of life.

The women of La Florida came to Lima as refugees but today are empowering themselves and their families.

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