

LIFE-CHANGING OPPORTUNITY

Alongside the new Yvel Design Center, Isaac and Orna Levy established a jewelry school called Megemeria to directly benefit the Ethiopian community. Each year, over 300 Ethiopian-Israeli men and women apply for 21 available spots to learn the art and science of jewelry design and manufacturing ■ Judy Goodman



Orna and Isaac Levy

Since the company's early days, Yvel founders and owners Isaac and Orna Levy have been purposely hiring immigrants to join the Yvel workforce. Today 90% of Yvel's more than 100 employees are immigrants from over 20 countries, including Iraq, Russia, Morocco and the United States. Yet, the ambitious and socially conscious pair aspired to do even more. In 2010, with the upcoming opening of the new Yvel Design Center in Motza, the Levys decided to launch a corporate social responsibility initiative focused on strengthening the most vulnerable of Israel's immigrant populations, the Ethiopian community.

Numbering more than 120,000 people, Ethiopian immigrants in Israel face higher poverty and unemployment rates than the general population, as they adjust to a completely different way of life than what they were accustomed to in Ethiopia. Despite making significant strides in many crucial areas, the community still must contend with daunting cultural, language, employment and economic challenges. Recognizing this inequity, the Levys committed themselves to helping this community.

Learning valuable skills

Megemeria, which means "genesis" in Amharic, the native language of Ethiopia, truly offers its students an empowered new beginning. "We purposely look for those people who exhibit talent but who have for some reason or another fallen through the cracks. People who



are older and lack skills, those who did not receive an education, or those who are not eligible for other types of assistance for various reasons," explains Isaac Levy. Not only do the students learn jewelry design and manufacturing techniques and skills from experts in the field, they also take classes in Hebrew, math and everyday life skills, where they acquire tools to help them succeed in their daily lives in Israel.

The Megemeria students' tuition is completely subsidized, and the students are also given a generous monthly stipend so that they do not need to seek employment while enrolled in the program. Additionally, the students receive help with finding employment in the jewelry industry after graduation, with many continuing to work at Yvel or Megemeria as full employees. The valuable skills the students acquire during the year-long course — from jewelry design to tool-handling, goldsmithing, gem setting and pearl stringing — empowers them to become economically self-sufficient and to break the cycle of poverty and unemployment.

Through the Levys' generosity and vision, and under their active leadership, the Megemeria initiative has blossomed from a jewelry school into a budding social enterprise. Graduates and students of the Megemeria School design, manufacture, market and sell their own independent line of jewelry, also called Megemeria. The contemporary handcrafted collection is inspired by the personal and collective journey of Israel's Ethiopian immigrants. Many of the silver and gold-plated pieces incorporate inspirational inscriptions in Amharic, such as 'forever,' 'love' and 'hope,' or Jewish verses and prayers in Hebrew. All profits from the sale of Megemeria jew-

elry are reinvested into the school and social business to ensure its continued development.

"The social business has great prospects of becoming a self-sufficient and socially responsible business that other successful companies can emulate," Orna explains. "The Megemeria enterprise is definitely designed as a for-profit business with the long-term goal of creating a financially self-sustaining venture."

A brighter tomorrow

The unprecedented Megemeria project quickly gained the support of the Israeli government, private donors and important Jewish organizations such as the San Francisco Jewish Federation and World ORT, among others. In July 2013, respected billionaire industrialist and Israel Prize winner Stef Wertheimer became Megemeria's newest supporter. Initially, Wertheimer came on a visit to Megemeria, where he was enthralled by the budding enterprise after a tour and meeting with the Levys. Shortly after, he joined Isaac and Orna Levy as a full partner in the Megemeria project.

The new team quickly got down to business, setting its sights on opening a second branch of the school in the mixed Jewish-Arab town of Nazareth in northern Israel. The Nazareth branch, situated in an industrial park built by Wertheimer, opened its doors in the summer of 2015 with a student body consisting of Christian, Muslim and Jewish students from the Galilee region who are unified in their goal of learning the art and craft of jewelry design and manufacturing. "We believe that this branch will not only help the individual students and the greater community, but that strong business ties also have the

A SUCCESS STORY

Yvel, a luxury jewelry brand renowned internationally for its exquisite award-winning designs featuring the finest pearls, diamonds and precious gems nature has to offer, was founded in Jerusalem in 1986 by Isaac and Orna Levy. The young newlywed couple launched their business when they were both unemployed and short on cash. With just \$2,000 remaining of their savings, the couple invested it all — along with an abundance of passion, energy and dedication — towards turning their jewelry business dream into a reality.

The Levys' initial investment paid off; Isaac Levy Jewelers evolved into Yvel (a mirror image of the Levy surname) whose exquisite nature-inspired designs are now sold on five continents, at over 600 luxury retailers, and to some of the most discerning customers, including an ever growing following of celebrities and royalty. In 2010, about 25 years after the Levys devised their business in their bedroom, Isaac and Orna inaugurated Yvel's new sparkling state-of-the-art Design Center located in the hills on the outskirts of Jerusalem, in the village of Motza. The 50,000 square foot facility is surrounded by lush flower gardens, sweet-smelling fruit trees and cascading waterfalls. Inside are Yvel's corporate offices, jewelry factory, showrooms, a visitor's center, an impressive wine cellar filled with Israeli wine from the surrounding Judean Hills, a 3-D movie theater and more. Tourists from Israel and around the world seeking a sophisticated and unique destination frequently stop off at Yvel for a tour of the facility, wine tasting, and an opportunity to try on and purchase the dazzling jewelry.

Yet, professional success was never the Levys' singular goal. Since the early days of the company they have been and remain staunchly committed to giving back to the community by helping Israel's immigrants. This passion to help immigrants better their lives is personal; as a child, Isaac immigrated with his family to Israel from Argentina. During the ensuing challenging years adjusting to a foreign culture and life in a new country, Isaac made a promise to himself to help other immigrants if he ever had the opportunity. Years later, as an adult, Isaac stayed true to his word. With the growing success of the family jewelry business, the Levys increasingly invested their resources and energy into giving immigrants to Israel an opportunity to succeed in their new home.

potential to bring much needed peace to this part of the world," says Isaac.

The dedicated Megemeria team is constantly moving forward. In addition to building brand recognition and expanding the markets where Megemeria jewelry is sold, Isaac reveals that their next project will be to open a third branch of the school in southern Israel. This branch will provide a life-changing opportunity to disadvantaged Bedouins and Jews living in the region.

In the meantime, along with designing exceptional jewelry and running a successful business, Isaac and Orna have succeeded in making the many immigrants studying and employed at Megemeria, as well as the many immigrants working at Yvel, a part of their family. Like the dedicated parents they are to their own two children, the Levys have given their extended "family" the priceless treasure of a better today and hope for an even brighter tomorrow in Israel. ■



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For more information about Yvel and Megemeria, go to www.yvel.com.