



## Stephanie Odegard

# walking Softly

| By Saxon Henry |

Stephanie Odegard is known for creating sumptuous carpets and rugs that grace the floors of celebrities' homes and celebrated institutions like the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. She's also known for her commitment to the betterment of the world. After a five-year Peace Corps assignment in Fiji, which ended in 1980, Odegard held positions with the World Bank and the United Nations, helping crafts merchants in struggling nations make their products appealing to Western markets. She founded Odegard, Inc. in 1987, turning her efforts to the carpet industry in Nepal where she had witnessed Tibetan and Nepalese artisans there being subjected to what she saw as unacceptable working conditions. She is a founding director of and the largest contributor to RugMark, a carpet-industry foundation that ensures its members' carpets are made without child labor. She has also instituted green principles that make Odegard Inc.'s wool, cotton and hemp floor coverings environmentally friendly.

With the principles of Gandhi as her guide, Odegard continues to search for deeper ways to be socially and environmentally responsible. She recently transferred her company's finances from a traditional bank to RSF Social Finance, which provides capital to companies and organizations committed to fair practices and improving economic conditions. "It's not easy," she says of her business philosophy, "but it's working."

*Companies that champion green ideals and corporate social responsibility are still relatively rare. What are the additional challenges posed by running such a company?*

The financial aspects are the most challenging. The people working in finance are usually less interested in corporate social responsibility than in the bottom line, so they create covenants that are difficult to maintain. To focus on both is always a challenge.

*Is there anything you can pinpoint that proves to you that what you are doing is making a difference?*

Many things: more people working, standards of living raised, schools created within factories, children being educated through RugMark schools, our suppliers creating clean water standards in facilities, and the installation of the only smoke-free boiler in the industry in Nepal.

*Tell me about your decision to bank through RSF Social Finance.*

It is important to me that we are dealing with socially responsible organizations as much as possible in our interactions. Knowing that our interest money is going to socially responsible, green and fair-trade companies, as well as non-profit organizations, rounds out my goals for becoming more and more the world citizen I wish to be.

*You're constantly searching for ways to manufacture green products and connect with companies that promote social responsibility. Do you have goals for the future that you've*

*not yet been able to achieve?*

Yes, many. We are restricted by the infrastructure in places we work, often having to work with self-interested and political labor unions that use extortionist techniques to prevent us from providing the quality of appropriate work environments that we strive to create. Implementing certification strategies and inspection processes are sometimes difficult, and local officials are not always interested in raising the standards of the poor, so we are up against this all the time.

*Is there a snapshot you can share with readers of a moment when you knew that your philosophies had touched others?*

Many special moments come to mind, but my first truly moving experience is still very vivid to me even now. It happened at the end of my five years of Peace Corps service in Fiji when I was about to leave. I went into the showroom, built by our craftspeople, and everyone was there, sitting on grass mats — the men bare-chested in traditional dress and the women wearing sarongs. They had made a traditional feast in my honor with roasted chickens and suckling pigs and dishes wrapped in coconut leaves. This was an important feast, usually prepared only for very important people and almost always reserved for someone who is native to the land. It took me a moment to realize that this particular feast had been prepared in my honor; that they had gathered together to say farewell to me. I was incredibly moved. It was the first time that I truly realized the impact that my work could have on peoples' lives.