

Edgemont/Hartsdale

Cocoa Compassion

A chocolate lover creates more than just a candy bar

By JULIE SCHNEYER

Joy Batashoff Thaler is trying to shed light on what she sees as injustices happening far from the New York metropolitan area.

Her vehicle for that is a new business venture involving raising consciousness about the lives of Central American cacao farmers by appealing to a consumer's sweet tooth. Through her new socially conscious chocolate products, Thaler hopes those consumers will raise their consciousness as well, all for the benefit of the farmers growing the beans that make the chocolate.

Thaler, a Long Island native who now lives in Edgemont, spent many years as a brand developer and quantitative analyst for companies like Thomson Reuters, Fujifilm and CBS News. She left Thomson Reuters 10 years ago and started hearing through business colleagues who worked as coffee bean traders about the variety of what they said were injustices in the world of coffee bean farmers. These included economic problems, such as not receiving fair market

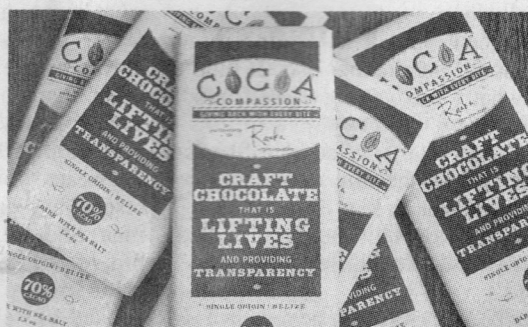


Joy Batashoff Thaler is trying to help one chocolate bar at a time.

JARED THALER PHOTOS

"Together, we can all transform communities."

— JOY BATASHOFF THALER



value for their products; social and human rights issues including child slave labor; and environmental concerns like deforestation, which impacts land quality.

Thaler wanted to find a way to help these farmers socially, environmentally and economically while offering the world something different in the form of chocolate. The idea for Cocoa Compassion was born and the organization officially launched its first chocolate bar and website last month.

Cocoa Compassion, which Thaler calls a "social enterprise," is trying to serve as a way to encourage buyers to purchase responsible, cocoa-based chocolate products. A portion of the proceeds of every bar goes to cocoa farmers, primarily in Belize and Guatemala, making sure they are paid fair market value for their products and helping ensure they practice sustainable farming methods. Thaler hopes customers will feel a part of the effort to help the farmers and take it, she said, "as one small act, but together, we can all transform communities. If you know why you're buying it, it's different."

The average chocolate bar available on the market, Thaler said, is offered inexpensively.

"Many industrial manufacturers are substituting ingredients for the sake of making a greater profit," she said. "They tend to use low-grade cacao beans, vegetable fats — palm, shea oil — polyglycerol esters of polycondensed fatty acids from castor oil, chocolate flavor and more sugar, high fructose corn syrup and hosts of mix-ins to mask the horrible taste from the low quality beans."

Cocoa Compassion's first chocolate manufacturing partner is Raaka Chocolate, which makes chocolate bars by hand in its Brooklyn manu-

facturing facility. The company uses primarily organic ingredients and fair-trade sugar.

Its cocoa bean supply has been directly traded with Maya Mountain Cacao in Belize, a social enterprise partnership that helps regional cacao farmers and provide them resources to create and maintain sustainable farming.

Ryan Cheney, one of Raaka's founders, recently traveled to Belize to meet farmers and experience the environment firsthand. "We're making real connections with communities and understand what our impact is on those communities and what their impact is on us," he said.

Thaler said Cocoa Compassion gives 20 percent of every \$8 bar to Maya Mountain. She said, "Cocoa Compassion's revenue share [the 20 percent going back to farmers] is more than three times what Maya Mountain Cacao received for the beans [even at the premium price at which Raaka bought them for use in making the bar]." This empowers the farmers to make a living wage and encourages the practice of sustainable farming.

Right now, one of the challenges in developing a responsible chocolate product is trying to make it an affordable purchase. The eventual goal is to bring down the price of the bar, "to a model where everyone can participate in responsible consumption," Thaler said. "We don't want the chocolate we make to be an elitist product. We want it to be accessible to everybody."

Cocoa Compassion is busy in its proof of concept phase, a business strategy in which the feasibility of an idea is tested. Cocoa Compassion has partnered with Avenues, a New York City private school that emphasizes

social justice within its curriculum, and immerses its students in solving real world problems. Thaler said, "Cocoa Compassion is one of five new social impact companies invited to Avenues, to share its 'problems.'"

Thaler said the students there are considering Cocoa Compassion's ideas and developing strategies to change people's consumer mindsets. The school offers electives in which students create social impact startups and study a sector-by-sector case-study approach to the field. The students pitch ideas to judges, or representatives coming out of other social enterprises, corporations, foundations, and academia.

In return, the company donates to Avenues and helps fund key programming initiatives.

Cocoa Compassion consists of a 12-member board of advisers, which includes professionals who offer unique perspectives: a pastry chef, nonprofit executives, financial analysts, an attorney and a Harvard University doctoral student.

Thaler is a 10-year resident of Edgemont and has two children, ages 16 and 13. In addition to her professional experience, she served previously on the Greenburgh Nature Center's Board of Directors and is a graduate of Ecole Chocolat, a professional chocolate-making school, with a focus on bean-to-bar chocolate making and the cocoa value chain.

At the heart of Cocoa Compassion's mission, Thaler wants to "wake people up and get people to realize how one individual's actions can be so powerful. Because together, the actions add up."