

**Program Script for Tara Hopkins (Aired on 15 November 2009)**

**Category:** Civic Participation

**Location:** Ayvalik

Packaging from fried eggplant, dried bread, soup, chips, ice cream, meatballs and butter...how do you think these can be used?

We eat what’s in them and then throw out the package right? Wrong. Well, we do throw them out, but there are people who pick them up, wash them, dry them and miraculously produce handmade products out of them.

Here are the “Garbage Ladies”.

They never worked before, besides doing housework. They never received a stable income before.

They used their creative and fun ideas while cooking rice or stuffed vine leaves in the kitchen. But they are no longer worrying about why the beans are not being cooked properly.

Now they are worrying about how to produce bottle covers out of bait sacks and the design of their new handbags produced out of food packaging material, which would even make professional designers jealous.

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**Interview with a woman working for “Garbage Lady”**

**Interviewer:** What are you doing now? Can you tell us?

**Woman:** I am making a clutch handbag. I am sewing its bottom part now, so I’m almost finished.

**Interviewer:** Where do you start from?

**Woman:** Well, first you have to put the strips together. This handbag consists of 5 circles made out of these strips. Then we start sewing. Sometimes we come up with the design. For instance, I designed this handbag. I made a smaller one, which Ms. Tara liked it a lot. So now I made a larger one.

**Interviewer:** What is that in your hand? What material is it?

**Woman:** This handbag was made out of soup and ice cream packages.

**Interviewer:** Where do you get these materials from?

**Woman:** We have some materials here. But we collect chip bags from the streets. We made a deal with some schools to give us their recyclable waste. The environment stays clean this way also.

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**Interview with another woman:**

**Woman:** You have to do it like this to put them together. And then you have to add this piece. The end product will look something like this.

You have to sew these outside parts together. And then you sew the inside. Thereby, the bottom part gets shaped.

**Interviewer:** How many can you sew in one day?

**Woman:** Each one takes me around one to one and a half days.

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**Interview with of the workers’ son:**

**Boy:** I tell my friends in school that I’m collecting chips bags for my mom.

**Interviewer:** So you collect also?

**Boy:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** What do you do?

**Boy:** I take a garbage bag, walk around in the schoolyard and collect garbage. Then my mother washes and uses them.

**Interviewer:** Then they become handbags?

**Boy:** Yes.

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**Interview with a woman sewing a handbag:**

**Woman:** First, I cut this paper using a pattern. Then I cut glossy paper. I fold them and put them together. That’s how I made this handbag.

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Ayvalık is a small village by the Aegean Sea and is known for its beautiful shores shadowed by summer cottages.

Most people swim and do some sunbathing but never leave the seashore. They never wonder who resides in this village and how they live.

However, Ayvalık has many beautiful back streets that are more preserved than the seashore. Some historians say that this village was established as a shelter for smugglers, and some say that it was established by Christians trying to escape pirate ships. For whichever reason it was established, Ayvalık’s olive-smelling old streets reflect the authentic spirit of an Aegean village with their old Greek houses and coffeehouses.

People in Ayvalık make their living thanks to two gifts of nature: Olive and Fish. Like almost every community in Turkey, men are the main actors of the economy.

Most women are at home or at most, help out in the fields during olive harvest season and receive a daily wage from men.

Apart from that, they do not have many other opportunities to participate in economic and social life. Well, that was in the past.

That was until someone from a far away land came to Ayvalık.

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### **Interview with Tara Hopkins:**

**Tara Hopkins:** “There is no job here for me, there isn’t one of the others either. I have always felt very fortunate and I always saw a benefit in sharing it with others.

First we introduced a couple of sample products to get some ideas about how the product should be. Then we needed to find stores to sell our products. I am not a businesswoman however, I don’t understand these things! We talked to a couple of stores about it and they agreed to sell our merchandise. So now we needed a workshop.

These women never received a salary before. They were very talented in handcrafts but did not have the means to generate income with their talents.

And I heard some very upsetting stories. One day, one of the women living here came and told me about how she had guests over the day before. She told me that she tried really hard to please her guests and that she was successful at the end as her guests really loved her tea.

I replied: “Well, your tea is definitely better than mine. I cannot properly make Turkish tea. But is this really all you want for yourself? You make tea, you take care of your husband

and children, you clean the house but you cannot contribute to the economy of your household”. Women like her were my target group.

It is not easy to get these women to start working on something new, however. They would want to do a task which they know how to and they would want people they know as co-workers.”

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Tara Hopkins is an American who has been living in Turkey for 20 years. She is a citizen of the world who developed many projects to this day. Therefore, it is very difficult to add a specific title before her name.

She is not a woman to be bound by her age, gender, profession or nationality.

She is simply Tara. Tara Hopkins. Nor an American, nor someone from Turkey. Nor a teacher, nor a student....

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### **Interview with Tara Hopkins:**

**Tara Hopkins:** “I studied Anthropology at the undergraduate level. I did not like the field and came to Eskisehir, Turkey as an English language teacher. I liked Eskisehir very much. And at the time, Eskisehir was not even as pretty as it is now.

I got along very well with my students and colleagues. Eskisehir was very beautiful as a city. I really liked Turkey in general. There was no reason for me to leave. After that year, I thought I could stay here for another 3 years. Well, it’s been 20 years since!

For 8 years, I worked with adults and children with disabilities, mostly on a voluntary basis.”

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Tara was working as the Coordinator of the Civic Involvement Projects, a pioneering initiative by Sabancı University. And once she thought she finished her work in Istanbul, she moved to Ayvalik.

And she realized that, in Ayvalik, there were many things to be done about the conditions of women. Consequently, Tara started thinking about projects.

She decided to realize a project which she witnessed being implemented in Mexican jails many years ago. Once she saw what prisoners could do out of waste materials, Tara kept her ambition to realize this project elsewhere for years. She even visited a jail in Mexico to

witness prisoners’ talents first-hand. This was how Tara Hopkins developed the “Garbage Lady” project during her retirement.

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### **Interview with Tara Hopkins:**

**Tara Hopkins:** “I have been working against the use of plastic bags since I came to Turkey. They were not that many of them in 1989 but as years past, the use of plastic bags increased greatly.

In a store, the cashier would insist on giving me a plastic bag even if I say I don’t need one. I would try to give it back and they would insist on me keeping it.

Instead of opposing it entirely, we saw it as an opportunity. I started looking into types of merchandise we can produce from plastic bags and waste materials.”

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And she started by renting this small place shadowed by a grapevine, in one of the back streets of Ayvalik. Once a coffee shop frequented by men, this small place was transformed into a studio entirely run by women.

There is still a coffee shop right across from the studio. Nowadays, men who frequent it are watching with admiration and delight what is being achieved by Garbage Lady:

### **Interview with a man sitting in the coffee shop:**

**Man:** This woman (Tara) brought excitement to the neighbourhood. Didn’t she Murat? This neighbourhood wouldn’t attract people’s attention if it wasn’t for Garbage Lady.

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While it is a hard for a women making herself recognized and respected in an urban community, Tara achieved this in a small town as a foreigner.

Tara’s parents who came to visit her for a couple of weeks are following her work with astonishment at times, but always with pride.

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### **Interview with Tara’s parents:**

**Interviewer:** What do you think about your adventurous daughter?

**Tara’s father:** It’s typical of Tara. Ever since she was a little girl, she always used her talents to work for other people. And now she is doing it again and again. But this is the supreme, this is the top. And we are so proud of her. It’s a wonderful way to use your gifts.

**Interviewer:** What kind of a child was she?

**Tara’s mother:** She always liked handcrafts and she was always involved in helping other people out. Even as a young child, she volunteered for young people in our town. And she always did handcrafts, so that’s a natural for her.

**Interviewer:** How did you feel when she said “Mom, I’m going to Turkey”?

**Tara’s mother:** We are not Turkish. And when she said she was going, I said “Tara, we don’t even speak the language”. She said: “Mom, I have 5 hours in a plane and a dictionary”. And I said: “God bless you!”

**Interviewer:** When you see these old people, what do you think?

**Tara’s mother:** Well, I think it’s a beautiful thing to use what is around you and make something new and not just throw things away.

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There are 50 women working in this studio. These women never worked or generated income before.

Therefore, Tara’s project is a great opportunity for these women to socialize and to earn income.

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### **Interview with a woman sewing a handbag:**

**Woman:** “I started only recently, it has been 3 months. I heard about this opportunity and decided to work on my spare time. I am the oldest worker here. I want to thank Tara for this great opportunity she provided to the youth. It gives me great pleasure to see them work.

Young women work during their spare time and contribute to their household income.

There are sewers, designers...everyone’s doing something. It is an absolutely amazing project. We would like to thank Ms. Tara for it!

We are very lucky because she moved to Ayvalik. The village is getting cleaner, all garbage and waste materials are being collected...Even I collect chips bags from the streets.

I told all my friends to give me their plastic bags and packages. Cleanliness, economic opportunity and environmental protection all in the same time: What could be better than this?”

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**Interview with another woman:**

**Interviewer:** Have you ever worked before?

**Woman:** No, I have never worked before. It has been a year since I started. It’s great; we do our housework and then come here to work.

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**Interview with another woman:**

**Interviewer:** What does your husband do for living?

**Woman:** He works as a dishwasher in a restaurant.

**Interviewer:** Does he like the fact that you are working here?

**Woman:** Sometimes he likes it, but when I get too into it, he wants me to take a break.

**Interviewer:** And how about you? Do you like working here?

**Woman:** Sometimes I get too into it and work until the night. But I like it very much.

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**Interview with another woman:**

**Interviewer:** What does your husband do for living?

**Woman:** He works as a waiter in a restaurant.

**Interviewer:** He was the only one with an income before right?

**Woman:** Yes, but now there are two of us with an income.

**Interviewer:** Are you financially more secure now?

**Woman:** Yes, we could not save up before, but now we can.

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In fact, these fashionable and colourful handbags are not only helping out women from Ayvalik; they are also beneficial for the environment.

That’s because materials that will go to waste to never be used again are being utilized while children willing to help their mothers are keeping the environment clean.

Thanks to “Garbage Lady”, Ayvalik constantly stays clean. There are even people working as a family in the studio. Here is one of them, the Bulut family:

### **Interview with the Bulut family:**

**Interviewer:** Do you work here as a family?

**Mother:** Yes. My neighbor told me about it. My husband didn’t really want me to work but I told him that I’m going to do it anyway. That’s because I’m ambitious, I never worked in my life before, nor did I make any money. I experienced the pleasure of earning income and spending it after I started working here. I spend it very wisely. I contribute to the education of my two daughters. They are also helping me out here.

**Younger daughter:** Yes, I try to help my mother out as much as school allows me to. I try to cut some paper, wash waste materials and be of assistance to everyone working here on Saturdays and Sundays. My older sister cuts paper, and so do I. Sometimes I have work accidents as I cut my hand along with the paper!

**Interviewer:** Wasn’t it hard to decide on working as a mother of two?

**Mother:** Yes, of course it was. I was worried if I could be successful or if I could adapt to the working environment. The fact that Tara was a foreigner also made me uncomfortable. It was really hard for me to come here. I was a bit shy and hesitant at the beginning but the sincere friendships I established with my co-workers and the warm atmosphere got me motivated to work.

**Interviewer:** What did you use to do before working here? How would you spend your days before, and how do you spend them now?

**Mother:** I used to do housework in the morning. But we had nothing else to do in the afternoon than wandering around. We were nor productive, nor creative, so we had to spend our time wandering around and watching TV. But now, I don’t do those things anymore. I’m concentrated on my work.

**Interviewer:** Do you regret spending your days unproductively?

**Mother:** Yes, but we were never given such an opportunity before. If we were, then not a single women would have sit at home.

**Interviewer:** Do you go to school?

**Older daughter:** I am preparing to attend university. Meanwhile, I am working and contributing to my education fund. I work here. I have a different account than my mother and sometimes I even make more money than her. But I’m really happy as it feels great to receive a compensation for my work.

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At “Garbage Lady”, women’s salaries depend on their own work. The more handbags they produce the more income they earn.

But they make at least 160-250 USD in a month. That amount can sometimes go up to 730-800 USD.

Handbags start selling from 4 USD and the most expensive one costs 80 USD. While you can buy them directly from their store in Ayvalık, you can also order them online ([www.copmadam.com](http://www.copmadam.com)), or buy them from selected stores in Istanbul.

**Tara Hopkins...She came to Turkey years ago. As the time went by, she became a teacher and taught information, and also became a student and learned about Turkey.**

**She tried to make a difference in others’ lives in any type of work she did. Instead of killing time in a summer village during her retirement, she wanted to influence many women’s lives.**

**By developing and implementing the “Garbage Lady” project along with many other initiatives she realized to this day, she made a great difference in people’s lives.**