

Paper Talk Podcast
Episode 27: MATT SIMPSON
Recorded on July 28, 2018

TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE INTRODUCTION

HELEN HIEBERT: Welcome to episode 27 of Paper Talk, a monthly series of podcast interviews featuring artists and professionals who are working in the field of hand papermaking. I'm Helen Hiebert, and today I'm talking with Matt Simpson, founder of Green Banana Paper in Micronesia. We talk about how Matt ended up on this remote island as a teacher, his desire to stay there and serve, and how he put two and two together when he realized that all of his students were leaving the island to find work and that the banana fiber that had been used to make clothing in the distant past could also be made into paper. Listen to how Green Banana Paper creates jobs through sustainable practices on the tiny island of Kosrae with a population of 6,000 people and a banana tree population of 250,000. It's fascinating.

INTERVIEW

HELEN HIEBERT: Hey Matt, it's great to see you over there, over the computer.

MATT SIMPSON: Hi, good morning, good afternoon.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah, so what time is it your time, seven a.m.?

MATT SIMPSON: Seven in the morning, yup.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, and it's two p.m. my time on Saturday, that's cool. So yeah, tell me how you ended up in Micronesia, and tell me a little bit about the island as well.

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, Micronesia is in the Western Pacific. It's about halfway between Hawaii and Australia. It's over near Guam. We're actually 1,000 miles east of Guam further out into the Pacific, and I came out here basically looking for a better life. I grew up in Connecticut and went to school in Vermont, and I had trained to become a teacher, and so I looked for opportunities to teach abroad, and one popped up in Micronesia that I took. And then I taught for five years, and now I'm making paper.

HELEN HIEBERT: Cool, so what did you teach, high school or elementary...?

MATT SIMPSON: I taught secondary, I taught social studies for high school, and I did teach in elementary school for a year, but yeah, I taught US history and life skills and some English and some music and stuff, but they're allowed to come to the USA, people from Micronesia, because of a special relationship between Micronesia and the US, and so their high school education should include some similar stuff to the US

education system 'cause they can go to college in the US. So, we try to prepare them for that.

HELEN HIEBERT: Oh cool, okay, and then yeah, so how did you find out, so you're making wallets out of banana fiber and making paper first and then wallets and other products, we'll get into that, but so what sparked this idea?

MATT SIMPSON: Basically, I would see my students graduate every year, and there's no job opportunities on this island. The only real opportunities are the typical path for kids or young people between the age of let's say 20 and 40 is to either join the US military or go work in a job in Hawaii or Guam or places all over the States, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oregon, California, San Francisco, everywhere. There are little pockets of Micronesian communities, and that's because in the islands here there is really not a lot of economic growth and sustainability here. So, I was getting kind of burnt out on teaching, and also, I'm a surfer, and that's why I live out in this island way out here because I basically have this whole island to myself and all the waves here with just me and a couple of buddies. So, I wanted to stay here, and I wanted to make money and give back and not just take as a foreigner living here. So, there are very few things that are feasible economically to do a business, but banana tree, it turns out, is a great source of fiber and very abundant and a rapidly renewable resource that we have here on Kosrae. We have 6,000 people and something like 250,000 banana trees on the island. So, what we do is basically we collect the banana trees after the fruit has been harvested. When you harvest a banana tree fruit, you have to cut down the tree that produced it because it will only produce fruit that one time, and the bananas trees rapidly renew from a corm system, kind of like a spring onion. So, when you finish with that spring onion, you leave it in the ground, and it's going to grow again, and that's what banana trees do except they multiply. So, it's like having five spring onions come out of the one that you used, and that's why we like to use these banana trees.

HELEN HIEBERT: So, you can cut the part that's above the ground, but the plant will still do this multiplying underneath?

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, yeah, you have to cut that. Once it has borne fruit, it's not going to do anything again. So, you have to cut that so you can make room 'cause they're quite large.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah, yeah, and so was this fiber being used for anything else on the island?

MATT SIMPSON: Not for the last maybe 50, 100 years or 75 years since outside clothing, western clothing started coming. Back 100 years ago, they used to use this for rope and all kinds of like building and stuff. They used to weave here, but that's been gone since like the missionaries came over, 100 years probably.

HELEN HIEBERT: Okay, and so, I think you're about to get into telling me your production process, but I wanted to hear first how you got the idea to make paper?

MATT SIMPSON: I got the idea from a friend. She was the resort owner. We've got two resorts on the island, and she had been here a long time and traveled a lot more than I had, and she said that she had seen, I think it was actually a documentary in Vietnam about using banana trees to make paper, and I know that they do that with elephant poop also, which is really neat, but we don't have elephants here, of course, otherwise I think I'd be doing that. [laughs] Yeah, so paper basically, she mentioned this, and then I started doing research back in 2012, and one of the first book, funny enough, was *How to Make Paper with Plants or Plant Fiber*, sorry if I'm messing up the title of your book, but I think we have two copies now over the years, but that was a big help, your book, thank you.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah.

MATT SIMPSON: It's really an honor talking to you today. It is kind of full circle coming from how long ago, now six years ago. But that's really what sparked it and then learning everything that I could before really making a bigger investment, and we'll get into the production of it, but I definitely tried like the home kit style of will this work, but once we figured out, hey this will work very well, then we kind of invested into this thing that's now become Green Banana Paper.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, so talk a little bit about how you set up the business part and then equipment, so financing. Are you the owner? Just all that kind of stuff.

MATT SIMPSON: Sure, yeah, so, I'm all self-financed here, up until today, and that's basically because I have two other businesses that support Green Banana Paper, and I had saved a while to do this. Green Banana Paper is my passion project. It is a for-profit business because I'm putting so much effort and money into it, personal, you know, time and everything into it. So, it's my passion, but the finances come still from, we're still not profitable, but it's been four years since construction, since starting construction. So, the other two businesses I do are import computers, electronics, and things for the government, and that has helped bring technology into the island for a more cheaper price, and most of the profits from that I put into Banana Paper, and I also have a T-shirt printing business that we started after we started the Green Banana Paper. When we did the Green Banana Paper and we did our first wallets, we set up a small screen-printing shop and learned how to screen print, and then we realized oh, the island really wants T-shirts for all these events and educational campaigns or sports teams or church groups or whatnot, birthdays and funerals even. So, we started a T-shirt printing business alongside that helps support the paper business. So, basically, I'm the only owner, or I guess investor, and it's a corporation, and I'm the president of the corporation. So, our equipment came from New Zealand and India. New Zealand, Mark Lander built our equipment, and he has built for, several times now, we've requested to get another beater and another 100 screens like that from him, and right now, I've got an awesome video that he just sent me, thank you Mark if you're listening, of him building a 15-pound Hollander beater for us.

HELEN HIEBERT: Oh, wow.

MATT SIMPSON: So, we're really excited for that, and that will probably, it takes, I mean, we order from him, and we probably get the stuff a year later because of the shipping time and, you know, everything. It goes to Hong Kong, and it goes to Guam, and then it's a process. So, our planning is always six months to twelve months ahead of time before we can really get stuff done for our goals, but the fiber extraction machines came from India, and we're going to be building our own. In the next couple of months, we're going to be fabricating our own and kind of sourcing the little metal bits that we need and then welding them here, so we'll hopefully be offering fiber extractors to other people or other entrepreneurs in the Pacific or wherever they want to start using banana trees and provide the equipment.

HELEN HIEBERT: I have a question about that. Is that like a decortication machine? I went to Ecuador on a project 15 or 20 years ago and similar thing. They were working with sisal, which has a tough outer skin, but then it's like rope inside, and they had these machines that they would get, extract the fiber, so is that similar?

MATT SIMPSON: It's the same, yeah, it's called a raspador is another word for them. Yeah, they're everywhere. It's basically just a metal paddle wheel attached to an electric motor with, you know, a thin space for you to put, whether your pineapple or sisal or hemp or jute or sugarcane, bagasse, those ones. Banana fiber is not the best fiber in the world; it's just what we have. It's just cellulose, you know, but I'd love to have those other fibers in abundance here.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah.

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, that's the machine.

HELEN HIEBERT: So, you built a whole factory, is that right? And then tell me how many beaters you have, and then I want to hear a little bit about you said you order a 100 screens at a time. So, are you, because I have like two in my studio. [Laughs] Are you sun drying these papers?

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, we have two styles of papermaking. For our business cards, where the paper has to go through like a printing machine, an inkjet printer or whatever, with rollers, that you want to do like a Western-style papermaking, where you couch it on a felt, and then you press it in the press, and then you dry it under like a restraint-drying box. But that takes a long time to dry, and it takes electricity, and it takes equipment, and it is slow. You know, it's a European style. So, the majority of our papers are A1, on A1 screens that are Nepalese style, and we do, I don't know, by now it's probably a Micronesian style, we've made so many little changes. But we take the Nepalese style and then we dry them in a drying tent because our climate is very rainy, so we can't dry them outside in the sun, and also, we make pure banana paper, which means 100% banana fiber cellulose, and when you have pure banana fiber, the fibers shrink a lot more than if you're adding like a cotton or a recycled paper content in it. So, we struggle with that a lot. So, we've done a lot of stuff for our drying process that's different than just throwing it out in the sun.

HELEN HIEBERT: Because it would shrink off of the screen and curl up, is that kind of what you are saying?

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, yeah, it's got to be managed super carefully, so that as the outer edges dry before the middle of the screen dries, and also our papers are thick, so our thin papers don't have that problem, but our thick papers, which we sometimes refer to it as a banana leather, thick banana paper basically, and it's a challenge out here. We have very hot days, and then we have very high humidity, and yeah.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, and so, your beaters are all Critter beaters, right?

MATT SIMPSON: Ah yes, we have a six pound, a seven pound, and a ten pound, all made by Mark.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, and I'm curious because I think some listeners work with abaca, which is imported from the Philippines, but we've used that for many years here in the US.

MATT SIMPSON: Right.

HELEN HIEBERT: Whether you've ever, it would be interesting to try your fiber and see if it could be refined more in like a David Reina Hollander beater or something because that fiber is, the way I use it is much more refined than your paper, which I've felt and...

MATT SIMPSON: Right, right. Abaca is probably 85% comes from the Philippines, but we also have abaca here, and I've got abaca planted in my front yard here and the back yard, and we actually we love abaca. Abaca we use mostly for weaving because the fibers are about five times stronger than banana fiber, and abaca is banana, it's Musa banana family, *Musa textilis*, so those fibers we save because we don't have very much abaca, and we have a whole lot of regular banana fiber. We have 25 species of banana tree, and one of those is abaca, and 24 are the other kinds that bear fruit. So, people don't plant abaca because it doesn't bear fruit, that's why.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right.

MATT SIMPSON: It is a fiber, it's like a textile fiber.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right.

MATT SIMPSON: So, the reason why we have abaca is because 100 years ago, that's what they used to use to make clothes, and then they stopped planting them, or cultivating them.

HELEN HIEBERT: So, just tell me like if you're holding one next to the other, they're both long and stringy, is the abaca whiter or, compare those for me.

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, usually the abaca is a little bit whiter, and there's like a grading system that the Philippines uses that's incredible, it's like ten grades of color of abaca,

and they're just so far advanced in the world of abaca and banana fiber, it's crazy. But if you're holding them, the main difference is that the abaca fiber is thicker per strand and much harder to break, and the banana fiber will be a little bit more scraggly and a little bit thinner or different sizes of the petioles, and then it's, banana fiber is actually easier to make paper with, I think, probably because it's softer than abaca, and the abaca fiber that, I've never bought abaca fiber from the Philippines and I've never bought a linter or anything, I've never really made paper in the states except when I was a little boy with my mom in the blender. So, actually that's not true, I made paper at I think it's called Seastone or Sea Stone paper...

HELEN HIEBERT: in Martha's Vineyard?

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, in Martha's Vineyard, yeah, I did take one class there.

HELEN HIEBERT: Okay.

MATT SIMPSON: Is that Sandy there?

HELEN HIEBERT: Sandy Burnett, yeah, yeah.

MATT SIMPSON: Hi, Sandy. But basically, yeah, our banana fiber can be processed, I think as nice as abaca if you beat it more. We're just beating it less because we love those long fibers for the wallet paper, but we do make like very thin tissue paper, and we beat it for like four hours, and it comes out very nice. But yeah, the Philippines has massive pulp producers, and I think that's where those linters come from and giant hydropulpers that are really breaking it down.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, right. Yeah, and some of the abaca fiber goes into tea bags and other commercial products I know. So, let's talk about your product. So, what are you making with this paper?

MATT SIMPSON: Okay, we've tried everything. Basically, our focus is high-value product for the least amount of paper, or the least amount of work, and the reason for that is that our business is not about making products and making wallets, we're not in business to make wallets, we're really not even in business to make paper, if you really look at it that way. We're in business to create jobs, and do it sustainably without hurting the environment and without causing harm to anything or anyone or any animal or anything. So, our products revolve around that first and foremost. And then second, is we want to make it a useful product and something that tells the story and something that people will cherish. So, making copy paper is not where our business is. So, our products basically now boil down to wallets and sewn items, so fancy envelopes and things that not many people are doing. They're not really sewing paper too much in the world surprisingly. I have researched everything I can on who sews paper and different... making journals, even sewing, making sewn journals, like, isn't even done in the handmade paper world with a machine. It's done by hand in a completely different way, but with the machine and industrial...yeah, go ahead.

HELEN HIEBERT: This is really interesting because I'm not making and selling products on the scale that you are, but I also sew paper with a machine, for artwork.

MATT SIMPSON: Oh, nice.

HELEN HIEBERT: And I've always wondered, yeah, it's so much faster than sewing by hand, like why aren't people doing it? But there are none. So cool.

MATT SIMPSON: Paper is difficult to sew, actually. Yeah, you need a really good machine, so we have these walking foot Consew industrial machines, we have five of them right now, and I've got a vision to have 30 of them if we can, you know, sell that many products, but that's what we're waiting for. We're waiting for our sales to pick up and working on that a lot. We also sell a lot of business cards, and business cards are an amazing product for us because a lot of people from the entire region of Micronesia here, that includes different states and international organizations, nonprofits, schools, and regional, like the European Union or the United Nations or the US embassies, the Bank of Guam or Bank of Hawaii, so these kind of corporate or large government entities or nongovernment entities, they have huge budgets to accomplish their mission, massive budgets, and they all want to see the private sector strengthen the economy, and they want to support the private sector out here, and they kind of see that as a way to support the private sector is ordering business cards from us. What can we offer them? They're all having lots of conferences talking about all these issues, and they all need business cards, and it's a wonderful product because they're walking the walk. So, they're talking about sustainability, they give a card that's made from handmade paper in Micronesia, and they let us put our name on the back, not so much our name, but more like our own recycle symbol that says, "This card was sustainably made from recycled banana trees in Kosrae, Micronesia by Green Banana Paper." And, so that gets us in these rooms with presidents and leaders of different organizations and gets us in their hands and in their pocket, and people love it 'cause they can't put it down, and it's a lot more special than a regular business card. So, all you papermakers out there, if you're doing any paper business cards, it's a good one. And they're willing to pay, you know, as long as you can do it somewhat efficiently, but that's a great product that we've done alongside the wallets.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah, and do you print those also...?

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, we just got a big Epson printer that has a solvent ink to it, and we'd love to do like eco inks and soy-based dyes or natural dyes, but that's really difficult to do professionally, so we just got that. Yeah, we tend to digitally print them because we do a whole process where we send the digital design proof, and then once we get it back, we just print it out, cut it, and send it off.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right. Matt, I just have to say I'm so impressed. There are like so many things you're saying here that I can't even like think of which direction to go. So, everybody listening just check out Green Banana Paper. You have done so many things, and you're just addressing, like every issue you're passionate about.

INTERVIEW PAUSE for BREAK MESSAGE

INTERVIEW RESUMES

HELEN HIEBERT: So, one thing I want to ask, I want to ask one-hundred-million things, but because you stressed at the beginning that you're for profit, so I think this is probably something people have asked you before, because your mission seems like a nonprofit mission, so why are you for profit? What was that decision making or...?

MATT SIMPSON: Sure, well I put all my own money into this and all my own time, and this is really my creation and my baby, kind of, and I have to like learn, you know, when to give up control to my team with that kind of thing. So, I'm getting there, but basically, this has cost so much money, way more than I could have predicted in the first place, and it's kind of just the cost of happiness and knowing that, hey, like, you know, you're trying to help our your community or doing something good. So, I'm still happy about that, but yeah, I definitely want all this hard work to pay off someday, or at least be, like, I think sustainability is not like recycling and stuff, sustainability is environmental, but it's also financial, and that's one of the biggest problems with every solution out here in Micronesia is how can we find financial sustainability? You can't have a kind of like; I think that their profits should be built in and involved, and incentive should be involved built in to economic development, but it does need to be responsible economic development, you know. So, that's kind of what we're doing...

HELEN HIEBERT: Okay, let's jump back to the papermaking side for a moment. Describe a day in the, do you call it a factory?

MATT SIMPSON: Um-hum.

HELEN HIEBERT: How many people are working there and what happens like in an eight-hour shift or whatever?

MATT SIMPSON: We have somewhere, on a daily basis, we have between like 32 and 35 people usually working. I have 40 employees total, but everybody's got their thing going on and there are three businesses, but 35 of those people are for Green Banana Paper. We've got a very beautiful location on the northeast corner of our island, and we've got a design studio here. We've got a gift shop. We've got a fiber extraction house. We've got two drying tents, we've got a finished product floor with sewing machines and big area for prepping and stuff like that and finishing. We've got the paper factory side, and we've got a screen print shop and paper storage. So, among all that, basically, we have a whole lot of people filtering in. It should be around eight o'clock in the morning, Monday through Friday, and the beaters get turned on right away, and everybody, it's kind of a big family, and the staff is really my family out here, and I tell them that because on an island, you rely on people in your family, and I don't have either of that out here as a foreigner, so that's also a big reason why I've done Green Banana Paper is to make people [laughs] to make people kind of take me in, and they will help me if I need it, you know.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah.

MATT SIMPSON: That's life on an island. So anyways, all these guys come in you say good morning and whatnot, and they get right to work. Basically, the paper process, it crosses probably 20 people's hands by design, and that's the biggest reason for the cost of our products. I know, like when I first came out, I thought I was going to have to charge like \$50.00 to \$75.00 a wallet because of the labor cost, but now, we've brought that down a lot. But that is the biggest cost that we have is our labor force, and that's on purpose 'cause that's our mission is to create jobs, not to have a machine do everything.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right.

MATT SIMPSON: So, yeah, so these guys they get the trees. We probably get two or three trucks of trees a week, and we get those from different farmers, over 100 different farmers. We usually go pick it up ourselves, and a lot of times, our own guys provide trees 'cause they all have farms too. Everybody's a farmer. Everybody has banana trees here. They're just in everybody's yards and maybe in their jungle farms and stuff. So, we go get those trees, and we use our extractor machine, and usually two or three guys are processing fiber. The banana trees can sit for like a week before they go bad.

HELEN HIEBERT: Okay.

MATT SIMPSON: They pile up if we don't get to them. So, we get the fibers, and then from there, it's really your standard papermaking process with fiber, with natural fiber. It's exactly as everybody does it. You chop up the fibers, then you boil them in a soda ash solution, and then you wash them back down to a pH balance neutral, so all the guys kind of know some science there, some chemistry, and we have a lot of tours there. So, we have a few school groups that come throughout the year and then a lot of tourists come, and we talk to them about that for science classes, and then we pulp, and we prepare that pulp according to the product, and then that pulp goes to a couple of vats, A1-size vats or we have the business card. The business cards come from, we have two screens, two Mark Lander screens, that are really beautiful, so we use those ones. Otherwise, we use the Nepalese screens and dry them off. Usually, it takes two or three or four days to dry for the wallet paper and probably 12 to 24 hours to dry for thin paper.

HELEN HIEBERT: Let me just ask you how many sheets a day are you making? Does that really depend? Do you make them based on orders or do you have like a set number that you always have in stock?

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, it depends on the different products that we're trying to make that day, but generally speaking, we're making about 40 or 50 A1-size papers a day between two guys.

HELEN HIEBERT: Okay.

MATT SIMPSON: It's pretty slow because the water drains very slowly out of the screen when the papers are really thick, and also we vacuum press every single sheet for like 45 seconds before we put it on the rack, and that helps remove a lot of the water too

and kind of, you know, making the paper compress the fibers together. So, yeah, we do do that, but its low production. It's like at this point, we need to sell every single piece of paper that we make to really make this sustainable. So, it's low production, but that's why we're getting another beater and another 100 screens soon, a couple new products, hopefully, we'll be dropping by the end of the year or early next year. And, yeah, so the papers get dry, and then they go through the design process, and that's a whole other conversation.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right, and I know you do some silk screening on your wallets. Let's go back to, I never got an answer about why wallets? I know you said because of the yield, small amount of paper per product.

MATT SIMPSON: Right.

HELEN HIEBERT: Just talk a little bit about the process of how you came up with that idea of making wallets.

MATT SIMPSON: Right. Well, everybody makes cards, and everybody makes journals, and they do that very, very well, and we can't compete because we don't have skilled labor, actually. Everybody out here is trained from zero to do what they know. So, if we were in the Philippines, where people there have amazing skills at crafts, we'd probably be doing some of these notebooks and cards, but so wallets is something that I identified as a high-value product for a little amount of paper, but also that everybody needs usually, like almost everybody has a wallet, and they carry it with them all the time, and that means that it's kind of a part of your identity, and it says something about you. And what you keep in your wallet says a lot about you. You know, that's where you keep what you're going to carry with you on a day-to-day basis, so that just seemed like a great way to tell a story, to tell our story because when you pull out your wallet, you're going to pull it out to pay for something, and the cashier more often than not will say, "Hey nice wallet where'd you get that?", and then you've got to start telling the story, and that happens all the time. And I made a wallet for myself, and that happened, and I saw that. So, it seemed like a great way to attach our story to the paper and attach a high value to the paper, and that's kind of the two things that we need to be a successful business in the sales world. So, our story is really what we're selling as well, and how we have to justify our price by telling our story and showing how it's made, and who made your wallet? Probably if your wallet is made from leather, you're got the whole vegan and animal argument with that dead animal skin in your pocket kind of thing, and I do this. I'm a vegetarian, and I'm big into that, into animal cruelty and stuff, but I don't try to judge anybody else, but I don't want to carry around leather, I want to carry around a dead tree basically. [Laughs]

HELEN HIEBERT: Right.

MATT SIMPSON: So, there's that, yeah.

HELEN HIEBERT: I want to touch on that, but I want to go back to, oh I want to tell you that this morning, I went to, I knit, and I went to a knitting group, just at a local yarn shop, and I'm always talking about paper 'cause that's what I do. So, someone asked

me what do you do, and I said, “Oh I make paper”, and then there was a woman there from New Zealand and one from England. So, I was thinking of my paper stories from those two countries. Anyways we came on to, maybe I said I was going to interview you later, I can’t remember, but I have your little slim wallet, which I love and I’ve had it for, I don’t know, over a year, maybe two years, and it looks as good as new. I mean these products are, some might think, paper wallet, that’s not going to last, but this does last. I use it every single day. And the women there asked me where do I get one of these? So yeah, it’s a great story. So, I want to segue then into marketing. You’ve got an excellent marketing, is it you, do you have people? I want to know that, and I want to know where can people, answer her question. I told her on Amazon, and I’m actually going to sell one of your products in an upcoming paper sale, but tell a little bit about the marketing and where you sell your product.

MATT SIMPSON: Okay.

HELEN HIEBERT: And you talked about you get orders for business cards and things, but now we’re talking about the wallets more.

MATT SIMPSON: Sure, we sell on greenbananapaper.com. We can ship anywhere in the world, and we have sometimes free shipping or coupon code, definitely, if you sign up for our newsletter, and then we also sell on Amazon, but if you’re in, that’s pretty much only if you’re in the States and if you like the wallet that we have in stock at Amazon. So, if you don’t see the new design or something then that’s something on our website and not on Amazon yet. And then where else do we sell? We sell at some festivals, and we’d love to be invited to participate in any of those, if you guys have some awesome festivals going on, and we also sell wholesale to retailers, and we have a wholesale portal on our website, and if you own a store or business or want to resell our wallets, you can send us an e-mail. We have an application for that on our site, and you can gain access to our wholesale store.

HELEN HIEBERT: And since a lot of my listeners are in the United States, do you have a list of retailers? Do you have retailers in the US?

MATT SIMPSON: We only have a few, so we’re still working on that, yeah, yeah.

HELEN HIEBERT: Okay.

MATT SIMPSON: Mostly in Hawaii.

HELEN HIEBERT: Mostly ordering online then, which is pretty common these days. And so...

MATT SIMPSON: Yeah, but we have to do some.... If you guys want to e-mail us any suggestions, we’d love it.

HELEN HIEBERT: Awesome, and I think you’d probably agree with me that this business might not be possible without the Internet.

MATT SIMPSON: Oh, definitely I never would have started it without Internet, and that's kind of as equally as important as the banana trees themselves. The Internet is our lifeline out here. It's kind of a, it levels the playing field for us, even though we're literally, if you find Kosrae, Micronesia on the globe, you will not believe where we are, and we're just a speck. We're too small to even be on most maps. We're literally a pencil dot in the middle of the ocean. So, the fact that we have Internet, you and I are talking like this, this is actually a video chat, which is incredible too, and yeah, the fact that we're able to talk, and the fact that we can join the first-world economy is absolutely incredible. I never would have tried to do this without that. Because I grew up in the States. I grew up in the 90s and 2000s and watching TV a lot. The advertisements I was subjected to per day probably should have been illegal, you know, but we're just, marketing is ingrained in us as Americans to a very deep level. So, we understand it, and out here in Kosrae, they don't. I mean they just got cable TV like ten years ago, and they didn't grow up like that. They didn't grow up subjected to advertisements left and right, and so that can pose some problems in itself, but we use it to our advantage here. We have a whole team. I have two other American guys that also came to Kosrae as teachers, fell in love with the island, and then I offered them an opportunity to kind of take on some responsibility here, and now they are really helping out with that. So, we've got an online sales and marketing team that's like full-time focused on wholesale and direct-to-consumer, like both sides, as well as like social media, and yeah, it's four full-time jobs. It's crazy.

HELEN HIEBERT: Yeah, and you do a really good job about it. So, let's bring back in what you were talking about with the vegan, and you have all these twists that you use, and you guys listening, you have to go follow Green Banana Paper on Instagram. They have beautiful shots of a wallet with the ocean behind it, and it is inspiring just to see those pictures.

MATT SIMPSON: Thank you, yeah, we're trying, and we've got a great story to tell. People make paper, nice paper, beautiful paper, and beautiful products anywhere in the world, but Kosrae, there's no other Kosraes in the world, so we've got a great story to tell, so that's what we're trying to do on social media as well. But yeah, we're trying to remove the questions, and answer as many questions as we can, as well as be professional and fit in on that retail shelf, and we're still working. Our packaging, we've discovered that we can make beautiful paper, sewn paper, reusable zippered sleeves that are absolutely wonderful, and people love, but if you put that on a retail shelf, it's not even going to stand up on its own, and it's not going to look good. You can't see what's inside, so we've got to change that. We discovered that we have to mass-produce packaging in order to compete, too. Our packaging costs us \$3.00. You are going to only be able to charge \$3.00 to the customer, you're not going to gain anything from having such beautiful packaging. You need your packaging to cost like fifty cents, and unfortunately, that's just the name of the game. So, we're learning stuff like that.

HELEN HIEBERT: I'm so glad you brought that up because, another thing, you're like a leader in this field of paper products, I think, handmade paper products. There are very few people that even try to sell handmade paper products because of the cost, and I remember years ago, I was selling lanterns and lamps, and I would lose fifty percent of sales right off the bat because of the fear of paper and fire. So, there are these things

you learn from getting out there and trying to sell something, and oh, it doesn't stand up on the shelf, so nobody's going to see it or yeah, so that's valuable information. Hm.

MATT SIMPSON: There are very few companies out there. There are a lot of, there are successful companies in the Philippines and in India that make incredible handmade paper products out of lokta and abaca, and they might employ 200 people, but you just don't ever hear about those guys because, you know, they've probably got five clients from the 1980s or something that they use still, and they are not marketing. They're not on Instagram, and they're not on Facebook. They don't have their own website, and they're not sharing how, you know, what does their factory look like or they're not producing any videos. I understand that's probably how business is really done, but we, I don't know, we're excited to be one of the only ones kind of using today's marketing strategies for handmade paper, and we hope more people kind of join and show us some new ideas and make handmade paper again.

HELEN HIEBERT: Right. Okay, well, I want to wrap up with, I want you to tell us about your volunteer program 'cause I'm guessing some will be interested in that.

MATT SIMPSON: Wonderful, yes, yes. This is a great audience to talk to about that. So, we've got fun jobs to do and interesting things, and my cousin, she just took a gap year between high school and attending the University of Vermont this fall, and she came out last October and is a very self-motivated young lady, and I had never actually gotten to know her yet, and it worked out amazingly well, and she took over public-relations issues, and she took over like some factory management things, like labeling all bins and staff bios on our website. So, she got to interview all of our staff, took their photos, and then put that on the website, and a bunch of other projects, like so many. So that was really fun to have, and I wanted to continue having young people come out here, that were looking for an experience and also like a cultural experience as well, like, you know, to get to know people and not just go on a holiday. So, we built a new two-bedroom apartment in the back for interns, and we're accepting applications. We got our first intern coming, his name is Evan. I forget what school it was, but it was like a papermaking or book arts type of degree that he got. So, he's got experience with that, and he's coming out next month, and that's our first intern coming out. So, if you'd like to be an intern and come out and stay at the factory in a nice private place in the back, like private bedroom and shared bathroom and shared kitchen, we're offering that and we're paying even 300 bucks a month, and you've got to get the plane ticket, so that's kind of expensive. But if you have United, United is the only airline that flies to Micronesia, and if you have miles on their rewards program, then it's affordable, but if you have to pay, because they're the only airline, it's quite an expensive ticket. From Hawaii, it is round trip like \$1,500.00 from Hawaii, maybe more than that, so it can be sometime \$2,000.00 from Hawaii. So, that's not included, but \$300.00 a month and housing and a fun experience. You can apply right on our website on the page that says Opportunities, greenbananapaper.com/opportunities.

HELEN HIEBERT: Awesome. That sounds like a really great experience. So, where else can we find you? So greenbananapaper.com is your main, you're on Instagram, Facebook, Amazon.

MATT SIMPSON: Everywhere, that's it. Yeah, we'd love to see some new friends on there, and please, anybody that wants to reach out, you can e-mail me at matt@greenbananapaper.com or info@greenbananapaper.com, and we'd love to talk with you or help you out in some way, and we would love to get closer to our fellow papermakers and the whole community. It has really been an honor to talk to you, Helen. Thank you.

HELEN HIEBERT: You're welcome, Matt, and thank you for all you're doing.

END of INTERVIEW

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With editorial input by Mina Takahashi.

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Episode 27 aired on August 12, 2018. This episode and all episodes of Helen Hiebert's Paper Talk podcast are available for listening on Hiebert's website, <http://helenhiebertstudio.com/podcast/>. While the interviews are best experienced as audio recordings, Hand Papermaking and Helen Hiebert collaborated on this transcription project to serve as a research aid.

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Hand Papermaking, Inc. is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing traditional and contemporary ideas in the art of hand papermaking through its print and online publications. (www.handpapermaking.org)

Helen Hiebert is a Colorado artist who constructs installations, sculptures, films, artist books, and works in paper using handmade paper as her primary medium. She teaches, lectures, and exhibits her work internationally and online, and is the author of several how-to books about papermaking and paper crafts. Hiebert writes a weekly blog called *The Sunday Paper*, interviews papermakers and paper artists on her podcast *Paper Talk*, and holds an annual paper retreat and papermaking master classes in her Red Cliff studio. (helenhiebertstudio.com)