'Don't be glum, chew Glee Gum' - and support Fair Trade worldwide

By MEGHAN KAVANAUGH, Valley Breeze Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE - Don't let the smile fool you.

Sure, it's worn by a two-toned cartoon fellow jumping excitedly on the package under a name synonymous for happy, but for Glee Gum founder Deborah Schimberg, selling candy isn't just about being sugary sweet.

One pack at a time, she is trying to change the world.

In March, the Providence-based company, under the umbrella of Schimberg's Verve, Inc., became the first of its kind to be Fair Trade certified, meaning ingredients come from a country where trade of commodities is regulated to ensure ethical treatment and fair pay to workers.

"It establishes a bottom price below which it won't go," Schimberg explained, with a premium paid to help clinics, schools or other organizations within the production communities.

Fair Trade has been in operation since the 1940s, but they never had a gum company until this year.

By applying and proving it is a regular consumer of Fair Trade certified cane sugar from Latin America, Glee Gum joined the ranks of hundreds of companies selling items like food products to hand-crafted goods, including Autocrat in Lincoln, Coastal Roasters in Tiverton, and Excellent Coffee Company and New Harvest Coffee Roasters in Pawtucket.

"We continually try to improve our product, and bring all the ingredients in line as much as possible with our commitment to community," Schimberg said. "We had just been using U.S. cane sugar, but we decided we wanted to do this. It felt important."

Using Fair Trade cane sugar, the company produces all-natural products free of preservatives, and artificial flavors and colors.

Flavors include tangerine, cinnamon, spearmint, peppermint, triple berry and bubble gum.


Sweetened with cane sugar and rice syrup, the gum base is chicle, which is the sap of the Sapodilla tree found in Central America.
Because the trees are the livelihood of the workers, and are also valuable as lumber, being a part of Fair Trade "provides an ongoing source of money and value to the trees to keep them standing."

The Cincinnati, Ohio, native moved to Providence to attend Brown University in the 1980s.

On a W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant-funded trip to Guatemala for independent study on sustainable development, Schimberg discovered the chicle, which all chewing gum was made from at one time.

The "green" gluten-free and vegetarian gum is harvested every four to five years, Schimberg said, like maple syrup.

Schimberg started out manufacturing make-your-own chewing gum and chocolate kits for children, and then moved on to making gum in 1998. It is manufactured in upstate New York.

"Don't be glum, chew Glee Gum," is the motto behind the name.

While the former comparative literature student has an academic, and not a cooking, background, Schimberg said she considers herself a social entrepreneur.

She is on the board of directors of the South Side Community Land Trust in Providence, and she is the founder and former director of the International Charter School in Pawtucket.

"I'm interested," she said, "in trying to use business in such a way to accomplish a social good."

Schimberg said while the Fair Trade efforts are not necessary - "the gum was fine before" - she said she believes the consumers also think it's important.

It's a way they can make a difference, she said, just by opening their wallets.

"As consumers, our political power is fairly limited, and our ability to affect the environment," she said. "In this modern age, one of the most important tools we have in affecting those things is consumer power. They can vote with their dollars."

Visit www.gleegum.com for more information.