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Alumni Profile

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An entrepreneurial spirit

Brilliant fabrics, red carpet runways and internationally known fashion designers are an integral part of the work of Agung Soetamin '99.

But even in his role as country director of U.S. and Canada for Sonna African Textiles, you won't see Soetamin in front of the cameras. He is far more comfortable behind the scenes.

Under Soetamin's direction, the Belgium-based Sonna successfully opened Holland Textiles in New York City last summer, its first retail outlet in the U.S. and Canada to showcase the company's exquisite fabrics. Even before the store opened, Soetamin was already making plans for the next location.

"Our growth has been tremendous this year and we are expanding our operations," said Soetamin, explaining that part of the strategy involves increased marketing efforts. That means TV advertisements and sponsorships at high profile events such as New York Fashion Week, the African Diaspora Awards and the Ankara Festival. Since he joined the international textile company in 2013, the company has grown 20 percent.

From humble beginnings, Soetamin has found success in the corporate world. He credits his Linfield degree through the Division of Continuing Education, in part, for his achievement. Born and raised in Indonesia, Soetamin came to Longview, Wash., as an American Field Service exchange student in 1992 and returned two years later to attend college.

"I wanted to go to school in the U.S. so I could decide what my future would be," said Soetamin, whose family earned \$30 per month.

To pay for his education, Soetamin's entrepreneurial spirit took hold, and by age 17, he had launched three businesses – he sold Levi's jeans on Indonesian college campuses, started a jewelry venture and opened a translating service employing his AFS friends of different nationalities.

For each business, he recognized an opportunity and worked with people around him to prosper. Two decades later, his keen business sense, coupled with humility and optimism, continues to propel his work. He has swiftly advanced in his career, and in each move, Soetamin has applied lessons he learned at Linfield. His first job, assistant manager at K-Mart, was the result of a Linfield job fair and he worked there while getting his master's degree. He worked for Pilot Travel Centers before joining the Hudson Group, where he managed the book stores in the Portland Airport and later stores at SeaTac and overseas.

"Linfield forced me to learn and write, taught me work ethic and time management," said Soetamin, who appreciated the liberal arts focus on critical thinking. "When I took my master's degree, I felt like I already knew the material from Linfield."

One piece of advice he learned from a mentor and shares with his colleagues – always begin an answer with "yes" or "no" first, then explain your reasoning.



DCE graduate Agung Soetamin '99 oversees newly opened Holland Textiles in New York City. The store features brightly colored fabrics precut into 6- and 12-yard pieces, the amount typically needed for a woman's dress and a man's suit, respectively.

"If you can answer wholeheartedly 'yes' or 'no,' you are on the right path," he said. "If not, you need further information. I took that to heart and use it often in my career."

He set career goals for himself, simple at first. "I wanted to have my own business card," he said. "Then a company-paid cell phone and laptop. My next goal will be to set foot in the company jet."

Soetamin regularly commutes to work at Sonna in Virginia from his home in Longview, where he lives with wife, Onuma, and three children. He spends a good portion of his day on the phone and computer, and values working with people the most.

"I like challenging colleagues, training the team and interacting with customers and clients," he said. "I am a people person."

—Laura Davis