

Artful, cut above the rest

BETH STOLS

Lexi Stavrides draws inspiration for her artisanal leather products from her environment.

Her business and home base is deep in the Lebombo mountain range in northern Zululand.

The rich and natural landscape textures are evident in the travel bags, handbags, iPad covers and custom-made pieces Stavrides and her skilled team craft from her small studio.

Each item is painstakingly hand-cut, glued and manually stitched with a wax thread with two needles.

The only machine process is the buffing of the hide to create an even patina.

Stavrides is gifted with an easy and natural creative flair and her work is an extension of this. Her bespoke pieces of art take two to three days to complete.

The task is labour-intensive, but she's niched her brand Alex and Thatch into a small, but exclusive market where there is just a handful of competition. And clients are happy to wait for a

Lexi Stavrides runs an artisanal leather business in northern KZN, producing hand-crafted products that are selling abroad



Lexi Stavrides and Nozipho Mngomezulu

special hand-crafted product.

The concept was initiated in 2012. Stavrides was living in Durban and had been in the skin-care industry for 12 years including working for Dermalogica and then in a more clinical, corrective skin-care position.

The move to Zululand was due

to her fiancé's relocation into his family business and it was then that she realised the need for a creative outlet to keep herself stimulated.

Inspired by the Zululand vegetation and climate, she looked for a product that would be organic, enviro-conscious and tactile, but marketable.

"I took six months to set up the business side of Alex and Thatch. I experienced the usual trials and tribulations related to a small enterprise, but it's been well worth the effort and the business is showing good growth."

The raw materials – full-grain hides, sheep, nappa and pig suede – are sourced from suppliers in South Africa and India.

The product is natural and because she is a perfectionist with a clear vision of where she wants her product in the marketplace and how she wants it interpreted, she constantly checks the consistency and quality.

The business has its roots in the I Heart Market in Durban, where Stavrides tested her brand and learnt about consumer demand and expectations.

Three full-time women staff from the community are employed and together, the team turns out an average of 20 bags and various

related accessories a month.

The two in-house studio employees Sibongile Khumalo and Nozipho Mngomezulu are in their mid-thirties and previously held positions in the domestic market in Durban and Gauteng.

Both had to return to their rural roots to look after extended families. The third employee Albertina Sibiyi weaves a range of basket goods called Lala baskets, to which Stavrides adds her touch with leather handles.

The product has representation in boutiques in KZN and Gauteng and the label is also sold abroad to clients in New York, London, Germany and Australia.

"I've loved empowering my staff by teaching them the intricate skills of hand craft and as a progression of this, they are earning an income, learning how to manage a budget and are being exposed to and developing sound business skills.

"It has been encouraging to see their growth and management of time and finances. They are happy to come to work every day and as the business gathers momentum, so does their confidence."



Sarah Collins, founder of Natural Balance with the Wonderbag.

Wonderbags transform waste, empower women

SHIRLEY LE GUERN

"I SUPPOSE you could call me an entrepreneur," says Sarah Collins, the passionate founder of Natural Balance and the Wonderbag Foundation.

Her whistlestop visit to Durban – her former home town where the idea for this heat-retention cooker began – is to not only catch up with the local operation in uMhlanga but to check on the opening of a factory to produce this globally successful product in Tongaat.

The starting point for the Wonderbag story is that Collins doesn't believe in charity – but she is passionate about social development and empowering women.

She grew up on a farm within an entrepreneurial family and remembers her father teaching her to never say no to a request but rather to say "I'll make a plan."

"I love puzzles, putting bits and pieces together," she says. The problem she set out to solve was a complex one – the health and economic problems associated with women in rural communities spending hours bent over cooking fires with babies strapped to their backs.

Small children suffer as a result of respiratory problems and burns while older children – usually girls – spend valuable learning time or are even taken out of school altogether to do household chores and forage further afield for firewood.

Her insight into the hardships experienced by women in rural settings not only stems from her childhood

on the family farm but also from a career in community based eco-tourism in Botswana.

"In reality, it was not just about cooking. It was about entrepreneurial development and giving women choices. You cannot have the development world and the business world," she says.

She moved to Durban in August 2008 at about the time where South African cities were struggling with load shedding and realising the need to lessen power usage.

She remembers waking one night and recalling how her grandmother slow cooked meals using cushions to retain heat. The concept of boil, bag and slow cook was born.

How the bag itself followed is one of her most quirky stories. While flying to Joburg, Collins noticed a woman wearing a beautiful dress made out of local shweshwe fabric.

On complimenting her on her dress, the two got talking and she says her well turned out fellow commuter was the head of an NGO called Youth for Survival which focused on women's empowerment.

She shared her bag idea and, on parting ways, thought nothing of it. That was until the same woman showed up on her doorstep the next day with the first Wonderbag.

Initially, she says, Wonderbags were made using recycled polystyrene, something that they got for nothing as no-one wanted it.

"As we started to turn out hundreds of bags, people started to charge us. We were

creating a demand for this stuff," she recalls.

The response was an about-turn and sourcing another unwanted waste material that had thermal and insulating properties.

To date, she says, they have repurposed enough foam to fill Moses Mabhida Stadium.

Sales-wise, Wonderbag only "went mainstream" in 2011. Although this started with South Africa, Britain and Europe are now firmly entrenched markets and Collins began selling in the US via Amazon this year.

About 700 000 bags have been sold – no small feat for what started as a one-woman band.

She has developed what she refers to as a hybrid business model to support the distribution of Wonderbags for humanitarian relief. This is a buy one, give one free system that distributes one to a worthy recipient for every bag sold in the US.

This is one of her strong beliefs – humanitarian projects and corporate social investment initiatives need to have commercial foundations to be sustainable.

On the environmental side, Wonderbag has the potential to reduce the fuel used by 3 billion people who cook using fossil fuels by about 30 percent.

Natural Balance, Collins's company, is now accredited under the UN's Clean Development Mechanism which allows them to earn and trade carbon credits, thereby subsidising the price of Wonderbags.

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