

Finding the Good in Sisterhood

A political refugee from Colombia is diving headfirst into the social enterprise scene as she seeks to help refugee and asylum seeker women move past language barriers and isolation in their new lives in Australia, writes Nadia Boyce in this week's Spotlight on Social Enterprise.

Wednesday, 11th February 2015

at 10:08 am

[Lina Caneva](#), Editor

Luz Restrepo, a determined woman with a thick accent and an sunny disposition, speaks from the heart as she recounts how she has been able to help her peers through [SisterWorks](#), the social enterprise she has worked towards since her arrival in Australia four and a half years ago.

The organisation is fledgling, having started as an informal social gathering before its formalisation as an incorporated association in 2013.

SisterWorks acts as an intermediary, providing refugee and asylum seeker women with support in



developing their own micro-businesses. The wares of these businesses are handcrafts, which are crafted at SisterWorks-run sessions, then sold at markets around Victoria. When the “sisters” sell more than a certain benchmark per day, they give 10 per cent to SisterWorks.

With a mixture of generated income and philanthropic contributions, the organisation aims to ultimately move to the other end of the sliding scale – from charity to social enterprise.

As Sister Works quietly gathers high-profile partners and supporters, including the Brotherhood of St Lawrence and NAB, Pro Bono Australia spoke to Luz Restrepo about her ongoing hunt for permanent premises, the impact she is seeing on the lives of her peers, and her plans for the organisation's future.

New Life, New Goals



Luz Restrepo (L) is the the unique position of having had the same plight as her newfound “sisters”, and has been able to tailor the SisterWorks program to address their unique and often unseen struggles as they come to terms with a new life in Australia.

“I left all my things in Colombia. I was a professional woman there. I had a house, my job, my family, my contacts,” Restrepo says. “I put some things in a

box and we spent our savings to find a place that was safer, and that was Australia.

“We didn’t know anyone, we didn’t know how Australia worked.”

Amongst the biggest challenges for Restrepo was her lack of English – making her feel as if the independence she had previously was gone.

“The challenge for new migrants, it doesn’t matter what kind of Visa, is how to protect our self-esteem...we start to feel that if we can’t communicate our ideas, we are nobodies,” she says.

“In English classes, I started to meet women in the same condition as me – a lack of confidence. These women had been in Australia a long time, but still they had a lot of issues.

“I thought the only way for us to find solutions for our new lives was to empower ourselves. Because I thought, nobody is going to empower myself [but me]. I need to take control of my life. I am a lucky person because I have a professional and academic background, and this can help me encourage other women to work with me.”

“We started to make crafts for markets in Melbourne. I was getting my confidence back. I was starting to talk to people about our challenges – as mothers, as wives, and with our English in this country. And people started to support us.”

Restrepo had the fortune of meeting a group of Australian women who offered the help Restrepo needed to formalise what she had started.

“I met a couple of Australian professional women who said I had a great idea, and that they would support me. I didn’t know about Australian business, about the social sector and how it worked!

“In May 2013 with the support of this group of women, we set up SisterWorks as an association, and started to develop the idea of social enterprise,” she says.

“On the way, I took on the role of the leader. I had to learn about how to be a public benefit institution, how to buy insurance, how to write a grant, how to look for donations.

“When we started to get more of a structure, more people started to get involved.”

A Social Start

SisterWorks currently has 66 women participating in its programs, each with their own personal goals. Fundamentally, Restrepo hopes the program will provide a base social network for those experiencing loneliness and isolation. That, she says, is the business of SisterWorks.



“The craft is the business of the women, not SisterWorks. The business of SisterWorks is to empower vulnerable women,” she says.

“We want to give practical tools to the women. It’s not easy to get friends and contacts and do social networking. They are alone.”

Some 89 per cent of “sisters” are mothers and 70 per cent are wives.

Restrepo says mothers are often disadvantaged in that they are the carers for their families. Their children learn English at school, and the fathers through job opportunities, while women remain at home.

The organisation has been gifted the use of community centre halls for two half days per week, enabling them to hold their social gatherings, known as Design Labs. The organisation invites experts with craft and business skills to improve the quality of the products they develop.

“There are some who come here just for a social space while they try to find their pathway, there are some who are long term unemployed who need to find something, there are those who already have marketable products but they don’t have selling skills, and there are others with good products, selling skills but don’t know how to set up their business. We need to start to find mentors at all levels.

“We do have sisters who are already earning \$400-\$2000 per month. One has set up an ABN, opened up a website, and has got a credit card facility for her customers.”

Restrepo says the act of selling their wares at markets has proven an invaluable social tool in itself, assisting them to move out of their comfort zone by managing public transport for themselves and interacting with the public.

“We are looking for market opportunities so the sisters can go there and sell their crafts. While doing that they are learning about price, colour, design, they are speaking in English, they are

feeling confident, and they are learning by doing. They can see what the customer likes and doesn't like. And they can go back to the Design Lab and make changes."

Finding A Home

The generosity of SisterWorks' partners, including NAB, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and the Brotherhood of St Laurence has helped the organisation immensely, and it is now at the point of finding its own permanent home.

"Sometimes, running a social enterprise like ours, you don't need to have money, you need to have friends! Our friends have given us a start and we need to develop our own initiative to sell our products," Restrepo says.

NAB has provided SisterWorks with a workspace and has allowed the organisation to set up its own market stall at its Melbourne Docklands office twice per week.

"We are at the moment looking at how to encourage NAB employees to be business mentors," Restrepo says. "It's about how we can have a win-win with our different partners."

It is with one partner, The City of Yarra, that SisterWorks is now looking for permanent premises.

"We spend a lot of time setting up and packing up the equipment, so now the idea is to have a permanent space where the women can have a place to go to work. We can have a place where they can come to work, Monday to Friday, to work on the design of their products."

"Many of them have a good product but they don't know about Australian business. So now we are going to start business labs. They can learn how to set up an ABN, how to make a brand, how to price and cost, and how to use social media. They can start to be a little more confident about the whole business – this is the idea for our new home."

Among Restrepo's other hopes are to take on three paid staff instead of the two contractors they have currently and to work on how to be sustainable in the short-term and improve the business model.

"The idea is to be more of a social enterprise and not a charity, because at the moment we are 95 per cent charity! Five per cent of the income is from the sisters' sales," Restrepo says.

Yet finding permanent premises remains the top goal.

"My first challenge is to have a home. A home is not a house. You buy a house, this does not make it a home. A home means people."

A "home" would build on SisterWorks' legacy and impact, which "is through the stories of the women," Restrepo says.

"There are many beautiful stories."

Find out more about SisterWorks [here](#).



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Lina Caneva has been a journalist for more than 35 years, and Editor of Pro Bono Australia News since it was founded in 2000.