

Multicultural centre seeks crowd-sourced funding for permanent home

By Lily Partland

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When Luz Restrepo fled her native Colombia as a political refugee, she didn't only lose her home. She also lost her identity.

The successful businesswoman and university lecturer arrived in Australia in 2010 with no English and no connections.



Tsering Wangmo, Petronia Nzirubusa, Luz Restrepo and Lhakpa Chodon at their stall at St Kilda market.
Photo: Chris Hopkins

"I lost all the things that I was in my country and started to think that I was nobody," she said.

When Ms Restrepo began taking free English classes, she found not only her voice but her *raison d'etre*.

The women she was studying alongside were "full of fear", lacked confidence, often suffered from depression, were often isolated and sometimes victims of domestic violence.

"I understood that I can try to work to improve my own situation, and at the same time try to support them."

The Multicultural Connection Centre was born. It gave women a chance to connect with others and improve their English.

But Ms Restrepo soon found learning English wasn't enough.

Last year, she decided to form SisterWorks, to help migrant, refugee and asylum seeker women achieve financial independence through entrepreneurship.

"Women need to feel useful. Through work we empower ourselves to move on in Australia," she said.

Fifty women from 23 different countries now participate in weekly Design Lab sessions in Elwood and Collingwood, where they make handicrafts and learn business skills.

They sell their wares at two weekly markets – at St Kilda and Mornington – and at pop-up shops, and three other shops sell their products.

Ms Restrepo said most of the women were dependent on welfare, but now three are on their way to becoming financially independent.

She now wants to expand SisterWorks so it can provide the women with a dedicated space from which to work from Monday to Friday.

The not-for-profit social enterprise has secured a \$15,000 grant from the City of Yarra and raised \$25,000 through a crowdfunding campaign.

SisterWorks needs to raise another \$25,000 by early February to allow it to operate full-time in its new home.

As for Luz, the experience has been "life-changing" and she once again feels like her old self.

"At the beginning, I couldn't express why I am a valuable person. Now I understand I have other skills that support me to feel useful in my new home."

She hopes to hand over the SisterWorks reins in five years and return to lecturing, to share what she has learned about social enterprises.

To donate, visit: sisterworks.org.au.