

Crafting a new life in Australia

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SisterWorks – Luz Restrepo, Richmond

Starting a business is always a challenge, but it can seem next to impossible for those new to Australia; particularly for those who are still trying to find their footing.

Founder of SisterWorks, Luz Restrepo, understands this problem all too well. When she came to Australia seven years ago from Colombia, as a political asylum seeker, she had no friends here and spoke no English.

“As a political refugee, with my life in tatters, I felt like a nobody: frightened, isolated and disempowered. I soon discovered that I was not alone.”

In 2011, along with a group of 25 women experiencing similar challenges, Luz began to make and sell crafts around Melbourne. The women in this circle understood that to support each other was also to strengthen each other.

“Our thinking was the same: Don’t give us fish. Teach us how to fish and we will fish for our own food in Australia,” says Luz.

In 2013, with the support from a committee of legal, fundraising and marketing volunteers, Luz formalised the business and SisterWorks was born.

Today, the not-for-profit social enterprise supports women with migrant, asylum seeker or refugee backgrounds to become financially independent, while also helping them to become happily settled in Australia.

“When you grow up in Australia, you know how Australia works, and you have friends and family that give you capacity,” Luz says.

“For people who are new here, with few connections and no money, it’s harder. We need business opportunities. If people give us those opportunities to work and build a business, we can learn how to support ourselves.”

SisterWorks provides women with the tools and support they need to start their own micro-businesses, selling handcrafted goods they make themselves out of recycled and ethically produced materials. Goods including jewellery, toys, bowls, candles and cards, are sold at SisterWorks' Richmond store and online. The majority of profits (50-75 per cent) go to SisterWorks' 'Entrepreneurs' with the rest reinvested back into the business.

SisterWorks is about to branch out into foods, adding conserves and pickles to the items being produced.

"Why craft and food? Because they are activities that connect us together with the mainstream community," says Luz.

"We want everyone to become entrepreneurs, but we also want them to engage and build their networks within the Australian community."

SisterWorks continues to grow with the assistance of government, trusts and donors, and strives towards sustainability every year.

"City of Yarra has been an amazing, ongoing supporter of ours, giving grants and providing marketing opportunities," says Luz.

In only four years of operation, more than 88 women have been involved in SisterWorks, the majority of whom had never worked before, and lacked knowledge about Australian business practices like tax. The enterprise has helped these women to reduce their dependence on welfare and become entrepreneurs in their own right.

Today, 37 women from all corners of the globe, from Congo to Syria, Tibet and Pakistan, are proudly creating and selling the products they love to make. They also help each other improve language skills – some even teaching each other how to drive.

It's evident that SisterWorks is more than just a business.

"We really are one big family, I feel very proud of the things we have achieved together, because it is the result of the work of all of us," says Luz.

"I love my work. It is my passion. If anything I am working too much."

Australia, Luz says, is a country of opportunity.

"If you work hard and communicate a good idea, people will support you. I give thanks to the people in this community," she says.

"You should never start a business just to employ yourself, or as a Plan B while looking for something else. At the same time a business will not always give you the money you expect. But if you're working on something you're passionate about with like-minded people, if you work with passion and purpose then you will succeed."

This article is part of Faces of Small Business, a digital exhibition that has been launched alongside the Small Business Festival Victoria (1 August-7 September 2017).



Small Business Festival Victoria

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