

SisterWorks Sets Up Shop

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[Wendy Williams, Editor](#)

A social enterprise that helps migrant women become entrepreneurs has set up shop in a bid to help some of Melbourne's most vulnerable women sell crafts and gain financial independence.



A team of local designers, project managers, builders and consultants have donated their talents and time to refurbish SisterWorks' new home in Richmond.

The new space, which incorporates a retail area, business lab and design lab, will showcase a range of handcrafted products made by local women with asylum seeker, refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Behind the scenes, sewing machines, screen printers and weaving looms sit alongside a coworking area, drop-in desks and informal meeting booths.

SisterWorks founder and chief executive officer Luz Restrepo told Pro Bono Australia News the new home was vital to help these women become entrepreneurs.

“We are very excited to see our new home come together and have a permanent space for our Sisters to share ideas, knowledge and cultures. It will enable so many women to learn new skills, market their products and develop their own business ventures,” Restrepo said.

“This space is vital for SisterWorks, because the majority of the women that we work with, they are mums and carers, they make their crafts at home and sometimes, when you are a mum, you have no time to work in your new business while you look after your home. The women need a space to come and work in their businesses, the Sister’s home was created with the idea that they have a business space, that they can come on a regular basis to work to develop their business.

“We used to be homeless...we were selling in different markets, all of us with a lot of our market stuff in our homes and then now we have a place where we centralise all of our resources and... now that we have a permanent space we can support more and more women in their dreams to become financially independent, while at the same time SisterWorks, works to be sustainable.

“Now we are making and selling crafts, many of the women are importing good from their countries as well, but now with this space and with the business hub and workshop we are trying to explore other business ideas, not just crafts. This Sister-home gives us the possibility to start to dream how to do a proper business model, how to support women, differently from making crafts, and how to keep supporting the women that are already entrepreneurs.”

Restrepo, a political refugee from Colombia who arrived in Australia in 2010 speaking no English, said that work empowers women.

“Our mission is to enable some of Melbourne’s most vulnerable women who are seeking asylum, or have a refugee and migrant background to become entrepreneurs,” Restrepo said.

“I think all humans need to feel useful, we as new migrants... need to feel like we can give back to our new society, we don’t want to depend on the welfare system, we want to move on and the majority of us we start from scratch... In the beginning we need opportunities. But we are useful and skilled people who want to give back to society, to provide and put the money on our tables and provide for our families and our children, and give back to Australia.

“People with western education have the opportunity to engage quicker than women with no education, or women who never worked before because they used to be housewives, or women who came from non-western culture, or women who have a lot of social and domestic violence, when they feel like nobody from the beginning, with low self-esteem, they have no confidence and they depend on others. For these people it is very, very difficult to engage in society, it is not just learning english, it is how to manoeuvre in the new society.

“There are societies where they don’t put pressure on the women to work outside the home, they put pressure on the women to be inside the home, when we change the culture and come here and think ok, my child is older than 5 years old, you must go outside to work and they don’t know how.

“We help women with skills, how to understand what their skills are and how to support them to move into work, in Australia, in the Australian way. This is SisterWorks.”

The latest project was a collaboration between consulting firm Calder Consultants and a team from global design firm Unispace.

Restrepo said they needed someone to make the shop more eye catching and they were introduced to Unispace.

“Unispace came here and they are making magic in this space,” she said.

“We first opened the shop in April.

“One of our neighbours on Swan Street lent us furniture and we opened the shop, but the shop was not a beautiful shop.

“It felt like a soft opening to learn how to be in retail, because it is my first time, I am learning about retail as well, we are all learning by doing, how to have a shop.

“So we started in April, but now with the support of Unispace we are dreaming to have a big, proper shop opening for spring where everything looks amazing.”

Unispace global design director Simon Pole said it was great to support the sisters to create their new home.

“We love working with organisations such as SisterWorks and getting our clients and collaborators involved to create positive social impact,” Pole said.

“Our Unispace team also gets enormous value in supporting community-focused initiatives through pro bono work, volunteering and partnerships. It’s been great fun to support Luz and the Sisters to create their new home.”

Unispace project manager Victoria Simmons, who worked closely with the SisterWorks team to find local builders, electricians and suppliers to volunteer their services and help bring the design to life, said the furniture was reused from one of Unispace’s current clients.

“It’s been a privilege to work with such a passionate and talented group of women,” said Simmons.

“Our team designed the space to be as flexible as possible to help support the potential of SisterWorks. It can be reconfigured for workshops, training, events and there is even a coworking zone where women can drop in to share and develop business ideas.”

The new shop, located at 393 Swan Street Richmond, is open 10am to 4pm, Tuesday to Friday, and 10am to 1pm Saturday.



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Wendy Williams is a journalist specialising in the Not for Profit sector.