



# SEWING THE SEEDS OF EMPOWERMENT



The ancient art of hand embroidery has been the catalyst for a social enterprise that has trained and empowered more than 180 township women over the past 17 years.



Bronweyn Craig



Training at Refilwe, Lanseria.



Sophie training.

Alexandra, or Alex as it is widely known, is a township of some 470 000 people situated close to the wealthy suburb of Sandton in Johannesburg. This eight square kilometre concentration of houses, monuments, shacks and shebeens has been home to many notable and talented South Africans over the decades, including trumpeter Hugh Masekela, poet Wally Serote and renowned penny-whistle maestro Jack Lerole.

It is also the birthplace and spiritual home of the Out of Alex embroidery project, a collection of slightly less famous but undeniably talented women from Alex and the nearby settlements of Diepsloot, Ivory Park and Lanseria.

Out of Alex was started in 1993 by Jennifer Dunn, in a bid to address the poverty and lack of opportunities she had witnessed while running a factory close to the township. Her vision was to develop a business model which would allow participants to work from home, earning an income while caring for their children, grandchildren and extended families in this impoverished, HIV-ravaged community.

Blessed with sewing and embroidery skills, Jennifer was convinced that the natural creative abilities of these women could be harnessed to produce work that could compete with the imported embroidery from Madagascar and other parts of Africa she had seen appearing in markets and shops around Gauteng, and so Out of Alex was born.

A period of learning and growth followed. Trainees from the community were taught 15 different embroidery stitches and given exposure to the history, techniques and traditions of hand embroidery, opening their eyes and minds to the potential of this ancient art form. From there they were given free rein to interpret the designs in their own unique, South African way. A highlight was having the range accepted into the upmarket Bryanston Organic Market, where the goods are sold to this day.

### A New Era

The project faced many challenges during the initial years, chief among these a lack of resources to promote and market the work effectively. By 2005, with only two regular embroiderers still active and her family planning to relocate to remote Calitzdorp, Jennifer seriously considered closing the project down.

She approached Bronweyn Craig, a kindred spirit and social entrepreneur she had met at the Bryanston Market, and asked if she was interested in taking over the project. After much soul-searching, Bronweyn bought the business and set about turning the ailing project into a true social enterprise. By December of 2005, there were seven embroiderers producing work and several more in training – Out of Alex was back in business.

Today the organisation supports 30 women from the townships of Alex, Diepsloot and the Greater Johannesburg area, their hand-

embroidered ranges of tableware, clothing, art pieces and other items finding an appreciative and steadily growing audience locally and internationally. The Out of Alex design signature features bright, charming depictions of township life – recent commissions include 16 framed art pieces for food chain Nandos, as well as a 2.2 m masterpiece for flagship craft retail outlet Msanzi.

A mother herself, Bronweyn is firmly committed to the ideal of generating income-producing opportunities for home-based township women.

Says Bronweyn, "Encouraging people is in my blood, so when the chance of taking over Out of Alex came along I grabbed it! I have always wanted to be home with my children and I know that moms and grannies in the townships feel the same way. That's where Out of Alex comes in, we offer an opportunity to learn new skills and work from home."

Success stories abound within this dynamic project, like that of Jackie Kolobe, who overcame an abusive ■■■



relationship and the death of her partner to become one of the organisation's most productive and talented artists. Having used her earnings to support her extended family for many years, Jackie still managed to build up a nest egg and recently became the proud owner of her very own townhouse in Bramley.

When Sophie Mashaba joined the group a decade ago, she was a struggling single mother with three children and no self-confidence. With encouragement and a newfound belief in her abilities, Sophie completed a course in hospitality and catering and now works as an assistant in a restaurant.

She uses her embroidery earnings to pay school fees and for other essentials for her family. "When I joined I was despondent, but all that has changed. I have met many new friends and learnt that I can earn by using the two hands God has given me. I now have a full-time job and recently married my first love!" says Sophie proudly.

### The Business of Business

Like any small business, Out of Alex still faces numerous challenges. The project operates out of a converted cottage on the side of Bronweyn's house, and resources are few. As the driving force behind the project, Bronweyn often finds herself working late into the night as she attempts to juggle the roles of wife, mother, entrepreneur and honorary guardian angel to many of her employees. There is often simply not enough time to give due focus to critical

areas like business systems and sales and marketing.

Fortunately, Out of Alex was recently selected as one of only 10 businesses countrywide to participate in the ETU Programme, a Finnish government-sponsored business development initiative aimed at providing the support and tools necessary to allow promising businesses to flourish and grow.

Designed and implemented by the Fetola Foundation, the programme has had a major impact on Bronweyn's approach to "the business of business". "The ETU Programme is equipping me with skills to take my business to the next level. Knowing that I have a knowledgeable support system at the end of the phone has given me the confidence to take bigger and bolder steps; no mistake is wasted as there is always a lesson attached to it!" she says with a smile.

The sewing machines hum and whirr as resident seamstress Anna Nyamukora puts the finishing touches to a beautiful tablecloth, tastefully adorned with brightly coloured motifs of bustling taxis and women carrying bundles on their heads and babies on their backs – vintage Out of Alex.

A fashion design school graduate, Anna pauses for thought as she attempts to sum up what the project means to those involved. "You know, we have almost no rejects in the work we get from the ladies. That kind of pride in your work, it takes more than just money to make people feel like that."

I couldn't have said it better myself. 🐘



## STOCKISTS

Bryanston Organic Market – Johannesburg  
 Mzansi Collection – Nelson Mandela Square, Johannesburg  
 Art Africa – Parkview, Johannesburg  
 African Queen – Rosebank  
 Montebello Design Centre – Newlands, Cape Town  
 Marie B – Riebeek Kasteel, Western Cape  
 Art Africa – Montagu, Western Cape  
 Nelson Mandela Metro Museum – Port Elizabeth  
 La Petit Margeurite – Ceres  
 Kingfisher Gifts – Die Wilgers, Pretoria  
 Bella Rosa – Kyalami  
 Envy Interiors – The Yard, Franschhoek



Jackie and Sophie

### Out of Alex

PO Box 1311  
 Ferndale  
 Gauteng  
 2160  
 South Africa  
 Fax: +27 (0)11 462 6432  
 Cell: +27 (0)83 294 4443  
 Email: outofalex@mweb.co.za  
 www.outofalex.co.za