

Social enterprise has nannas in stitches

MARCELLA BIDINOST August 3, 2010



Biddie Bags founder Samantha Jockel (middle), with her nanna Ivy Turner and business patron Sarah Blasko.

In 2007, when Samantha Jockel had an idea for a knitted bag she couldn't quite pull off herself, she turned to her grandmother and an elderly neighbour for help.

Without knowing it, she was about to stumble on the idea for [Biddy Bags](#), a boutique social enterprise where seniors who knit, crochet and sew could be commissioned to create contemporary designs dreamed up by younger women.

Today, Biddy Bags is a flourishing not-for-profit, crafting – as the business name suggests – handbags, 'iPouches', tea cosies and wash cloths to satisfy an Australian resurgence of 'nanna chic'.

The Biddy Bags collection

Jockel has brought together a network of socially isolated women who share a love of craft (and a good yarn) in Redcliffe, north of Brisbane – a place where one in five residents are over 65.



The 'Cupcake' tea cosy.

Each Bidy Bags design comes with the story of its maker and each 'biddy' – there are currently seven on Jockel's books – shares in the company profits.

“Even if they're earning \$50 a week from the sale of an \$80 bag, it's significant for the women,” Jockel says.

Before inviting the women on board, she researched how having an income beyond the pension would affect them.

“All the women have ABNs and invoice me and some are allowed to earn about \$140 a fortnight before Centrelink takes 50 cents out of every dollar they earn,” she says.

Bidy Bags' market is mostly women aged between 25 and 50, of which Jockel says there are two different types: those who think Bidy Bags' products are “fun, silly and funky” and those who want to support its ethos of connecting and compensating older women for their time-honoured skills.

While Jockel is yet to draw a wage from the business – “any money I make is reinvested back into the business”, she was recently named a top-three finalist in Channel 7's Sunrise Business Builder of the Year awards, which lauds unsung heroes of small business.

Other woollen strings to her bow have come via recent commissions from the Queensland, New South Wales and South Australian state galleries for her team of 'nannas' to create merchandise for the touring Rupert Bunny exhibition and an American impressionism exhibition from New York's Met. The rest of the time, Bidy Bags sell at the Bidy Bags website, local markets and expo stalls.

“Initially I didn't want to make things like tea cosies because I thought they were (ironically) way too nanna, but then I started getting emails from people asking for them. I did the research, found not one business on the internet exclusively selling tea cosies, so figured there must be a gap in the market.” Now, the tea cosies are Bidy Bags' second-biggest seller.

Bidy Bags officially started when Jockel, a 27-year-old former community development worker who'd completed a double-degree in theology and social services, landed a \$5000 regional arts grant to build the Bidy Bags website.

“When I found out I had that funding, it meant I really had to do something with my idea,” Jockel says.

Through Youth Arts Queensland, Jockel secured further seed funding for her start-up and a business mentor in Aleem Ali, CEO of social change agency Speak Out. One month into that mentorship, she fell pregnant with her first child.



“I questioned whether I should keep going but Aleem, who has six children, encouraged me to stick with it.”

Ali also encouraged Jockel to find a business patron, which is how ARIA award-winner Sarah Blasko, known for her own vintage fashion style, came on board. Soon to come is the signature Sarah Blasko Bidy Bag.

Today, Jockel spends 10-30 hours a week on the business.

“There's lots of running around collecting stock, visiting the nannas, working on the website and our team of ladies has also started doing workshops for kids, refugee women, aged care facilities and at the Brisbane Festival,” Jockel says.

Now a mother of two girls under three, Jockel also works a day a week for the Body Shop's not-for-profit Business Babes program, which supports women starting up micro-businesses from home.

Jockel's entrepreneurial ways were partly inspired by her dad, a former small business owner. Family gatherings often involved conversations about business and finance.

“I was always an ideas person but, early on, but I wasn't interested in going into business because I had this ethical side. When I realised social enterprise existed, and that there was a structure for it, I started exploring the possibility of blending social work with business.

“For the most part, you still need to run a social enterprise like any other business: you still need a great product or service, and you still need to be competitive. People may like that you're ethical, but if your product or service isn't up to scratch, they'll turn away.”

Source: theage.com.au

Sydney Morning Herald, <http://www.smh.com.au/small-business/entrepreneur/social-enterprise-has-nannas-in-stitches-20100803-113yq.html>

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