Lexi Stavrides runs an artisanal leather business in northern KZN, producing hand-crafted products that are selling abroad.

“I took six months to set up the business side of Alex and Thatch. I experienced the usual trials and tribulations related to a small enterprise, but it’s been worth the effort and the business is showing good growth.

The raw materials – full-grain hides, sheep, nappa and pig suede - are sourced from suppliers in South Africa and India. The product is natural and because she is a perfectionist with a clear vision of where she wants her product in the marketplace and how she wants it interpreted, she constantly checks the consistency and quality.

The business has its roots in the I Heart Market in Durban, where Stavrides tested her brand and learnt about consumer demand and expectations. Three full-time women staff from the community are employed together, the team turns out an average of 20 bags and various related accessories a month.

The product has representation in boutiques in KZN and Gauteng and the label is also sold abroad to clients in New York, London, Germany and Australia.

"I’ve loved empowering my staff by teaching them the intricate skills of hand craft and as a progression of this, they are earning an income, learning how to manage a budget and are being exposed to and developing sound business skills.

It has been encouraging to see their growth and management of time and finances. They are happy to come to work every day and as the business gathers momentum, so does their confidence.”

Lexi Stavrides and Nozipho Mngomezulu

Wonderbags transform waste, empower women

SHIRLEY LE GUERN

"I SUPPOSE you could call me an entrepreneur," says Sarah Collins, the passionate founder of Natural Balance and the Wonderbag Foundation.

Her whistlestop visit to Durban – her former home town where the idea for this heat-retention cooker began – is to not only catch up with the local operation in uMlanzane but to check on the opening of a factory to produce this globally successful product in Tongaat.

The starting point for the Wonderbag story is that Collins doesn’t believe in charity – but she is passionate about social development and empowering women.

She grew up on a farm within an entrepreneurial family and remembers her father teaching her to never say no to a request but rather to say “I’ll make a plan.”

“I love puzzles, putting bits and pieces together,” she says. The problem she set out to solve was a complex one – the health and economic problems associated with women in rural communities spending hours bent over cooking fires with babies strapped to their backs.

Small children suffer as a result of respiratory problems and burns while older children – usually girls - spend valuable learning time or are even taken out of school altogether to do household chores and forage further afield for firewood.

Her insight into the hardships experienced by women in rural settings not only stems from her childhood on the family farm but also from a career in community based eco-tourism in Botswana.

"In reality, it was not just about cooking. It was about entrepreneurial development and giving women choices. You cannot have the development world and the business world,” she says.

She moved to Durban in August 2008 at about the time where South African cities were struggling with load shedding and realising the need to lessen power usage.

She remembers waking one night and recalling how her grandmother slow cooked meals using cushions to retain heat. The concept of boil, bag and slow cook was born.

“How the bag itself followed is one of her most quirky stories. While flying to Johannesburg, Collins noticed a woman wearing a beautiful dress made out of local shwe-shwe fabric.

On complimenting her on her dress, the two got talking and she learned that the lady was the head of an NGO called Youth for Survival which focused on women’s empowerment.

She shared her bag idea and, on parting ways, thought nothing of it. That was until the same woman showed up on her doorstep the next day with nothing of it. That was until she experienced the usual trials and tribulations related to a small enterprise, but it’s been worth the effort and the business is showing good growth.

Wonderbags were made using Wonderbag has the potential to reduce the fuel used by 3 billion South African families a year.

"Went mainstream" in 2011. Although this started in South Africa, Britain and Europe are now firmly on the Wonderbag map and Collins and Collins began selling in the US via Amazon this year. About 700 000 bags have been sold – no small feat for what started as a one-woman band.

She has developed what she refers to as a hybrid business model to support the distribution of Wonderbags for the social arena. This is a buy one, give one free system that distributes one to a worthy recipient for every bag sold in the US.

This is one of her strong beliefs – that corporate projects and corporate social investment initiatives need to be sustainable.

On the environmental side, Wonderbag has the potential to reduce the fuel used by 3 billion people who use one small fuel. The product has representation in boutiques in KZN and Gauteng and the label is also sold abroad to clients in New York, London, Germany and Australia.

Both had to return to their rural roots to look after extended families. The third employee Albertina Stell is a lady who runs a range of basket goods called Lala baskets, to which Stavrides adds her touch with leather handles.

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Sarah Collins, founder of Natural Balance with the Wonderbag.