



# Spinning a yarn

A recent crochet revival has hit the world by storm, and Mpumalanga community-based project Ukuthunga Handmade is an excellent example of just why this resurgence in the ancient art of by hook or by crook is, in fact, a rather fortuitous thing.



32 Get It • Lowveld May 2019

**T**heir knots of love, as Ukuthunga call them, are weaving into the hearts of lovers of all things cool and handmade in South Africa as well as abroad.

This ancient skill has even hit the international scene with the likes of Oscar de la Renta, Valentino and Carolina Herrera sporting stunning crochet outfits as part of their repertoire.

Ukuthunga came about four years ago through a serendipitous encounter between co-founder Juliana Walters who was working through a church outreach programme in an orphanage in Msholozhi. She met two ladies, Prudence and Caroline, who also did community work at the orphanage and felt (for whatever reason at the time) to ask whether they could crochet, which they can. They've not looked back since.

From planter baskets to storage solutions, rugs and blankets to doorstops and teddies, these beautiful artisanal products are a prime example of what happens when a helping hand is extended and talent meets dedication. "We are in a frighteningly exciting place. The organisation is evolving in a way we never imagined. Each day brings a new opportunity and hope as we continue to grow," says co-founder Tana van Schalkwyk.

From thread to thread, the original group of five has bloomed over the past two years to around 100 women (unemployed and mostly single mothers) from the Msholozhi, Backdoor, Sabie and Mphakeni communities. Forty are fully trained and make beautiful artisanal crochet creations, while the rest are in training. Their recent recognition at the Mpumalanga Arts and Culture Awards enabled upfront purchase of three

months' stock.

Leah Mavimbela is in charge of training. This innovative woman has pioneered some of the most memorable pieces, including giraffe, warthog, hippo, lion, and llama soft toys. "We are a community with dignity and hope that puts food on the table, and the work we do has far surpassed expectation. It gives all of us a sense of belonging and achievement.

"We take immense pride in what we do. Our vision is to generate a R1 000 supplement income for each person. Our dream is to secure a single order of 1 000 pieces!" smiles Leah.

Apart from supporting such a worthy cause, when you purchase something from these ladies you are procuring a one-off handcrafted piece. The women are put through a rigorous training programme and



Leah Mavimbela

These beautiful artisanal products are a prime example of what happens when a helping hand is extended and talent meets dedication

quality control process to ensure that only the best is sent out into the world.

Inspiration is twofold: both from the perspective of enriching lives through building a sense of community, meaning and purpose, and in their artistic creations, use of colour and designs. Crochet is a revival of long-held skills within these communities.

Their product lines include safari animals, soft pots and place mats, as well as a baby range which includes blankets, teddies and safari animals. Earnings are worked out according to product type and category.

Should someone revolutionise an item, the remuneration received is individual, whereas profit is split equally for custom creations. Employment is on a flexible, purely entrepreneurial basis.

Ukuthunga items are currently available through their Facebook page, Graskop Gorge Lift Company, Mopani Pharmacy, Alzu, Amber Africa at Bagdad Centre, Africa Joy at Casterbridge and The Branch at KMI Airport. Their website is in progress and will soon be up and running. Ukuthunga is NPO registered and makes bespoke to order corporate and wedding guest gifts, and they also accept custom orders.



May 2019 Get It • Lowveld 33

Text: Melissa Bushby. Photographer: Ludwig Sevenster

**GET IN TOUCH**

Annela on 071-163-8719