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French connection

Bagging the best of township vibe

IMAGES OF POVERTY in South Africa's townships are often used to shock the privileged inhabitants of developed countries. Stories of giant rats and poor living conditions abound. Nicole-Marie Iresch visited townships in the Western Cape during a holiday to SA in 1987 and discovered a different story. "In the township I found life, vibe and love and I was very attracted to that," says Iresch – a finalist in the Ernst&Young World Entrepreneur Awards 2010 social category.

Her company – Township Patterns, which markets and distributes fabric bags – was inspired by the unique decor Iresch saw in shacks. Walls were covered with paper printed with household brand names such as Lux, Cadbury and Knorr. "I wanted to capture the vibe found in the shacks on textiles," she says.

At the time Iresch was working in management at Air France's head-office in Paris. While on holiday in SA she advised a group of township women to set up a sewing co-operative to be housed under a non-profit organisation she set up when she returned to France. Over the next 10 years she commuted to SA on an almost monthly basis and nurtured the company.

When she took the plunge and emigrated here in 1998 her first objective was to find a big corporate client for the sewing co-operatives' products. Iresch approached major food and

household goods retailer Pick n Pay in 1998 with a proposal to sell fabric carrier bags produced by the women in its stores. Township Patterns' bags were stocked in a few Pick n Pay outlets around Cape Town. Demand for the product picked up and soon it was receiving requests to produce carrier bags for the conferencing industry.

Over the past 10 years the business has grown into one employing 14 people, whose job is to market and distribute the products manufactured by the co-operatives, which are wholly owned by 70 previously disadvantaged women spread across three townships: Khayelitsha, Manenberg and Westlake.

Iresch says a recent study by a university in the area reported each member of the co-operatives positively affects seven to 10 people through her employment. "Our company is the co-ops' biggest client but – through our non-profit group – we conduct training and support in the hope the co-ops can find other buyers as well," says Christophe Labesse, Iresch's husband, who is also fully involved in the company. His forte is financial management and he acts as Township Patterns' GM.

The plan is for the marketing side of the group to capture more retail and conferencing clients to grow its existing co-operatives and establish new ones. Over the past year Township Patterns has expanded into fashion and decor – a long-time dream of Iresch's. She's worked with a design school in Paris to produce a range of fabrics that capture the energy of township culture. "I brought them videos, pictures and wallpapers. I wanted to get that township vibe," she says.

Township Patterns plans to market the fabrics through its website and through local retailers in SA, the United States, Europe and Asia.

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