



Bead and wire chandeliers in the entrance to Umcebo Trust's integrated retail outlet and workshop at uShaka Marine World.

A community-focused Non Profit Organisation that empowers young crafters and people with special needs to generate income through creativity is proving that when passion and focus come together, the sky is truly the limit.

Unearthing hidden treasure

THE UMCEBO TRUST EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

The Umcebo Trust, a dynamic craft and design collective based in the Ushaka shopping complex in Durban, is rapidly developing a reputation as a trendsetter in the craft sector through a willingness to push boundaries and challenge perceptions of what is possible in terms of handmade craft.

Their outside chandeliers and sculptural masterpieces adorn the homes of Zulu monarch King Goodwill Zwelithini, Rita Marley (widow of reggae icon Bob Marley), Richard Branson and Oprah Winfrey among others, while local and international retailers are also starting to sit up and take notice.

The creative genius behind this success comes from an unexpected source. Founder Robin Opperman is a maths teacher by profession, whose creative journey sprang from a desire to create sustainable and empowering solutions for the disabled using art, craft and creativity as a unifying thread. While volunteering at the Ningizimu School for the Severely Mentally Handicapped in Montclair near Durban in 2001, he developed an innovative art programme aimed at bringing together learners and the community around creative projects.

Robin noticed how his programme transformed the lives of the mentally challenged children by allowing them to

truly express themselves through creative channels. "On an intellectual and physical level many of these kids have huge challenges, but creatively they can more than hold their own," he explains. The successes he witnessed felt to him as if he was unearthing hidden treasure, and gave a glimpse into the wealth of natural talent in these communities. This in turn led to the idea of an organisation that changed lives through creative work, and thus the seeds of Umcebo (which means "Treasure" in isiZulu) were planted.

Seven years on, Umcebo Trust is a thriving organisation that bridges the worlds of trend-setting innovative design, social empowerment and job creation in communities that need it most. The team of crafters at Umcebo include both able-bodied and handicapped artisans, with Robin handling all sales and marketing functions and fundraising activities. Working primarily with wire, beads and recycled materials, the organisation is renowned for its vibrant creations that

combine a love of colour with a flair for the dramatic – in the words of Robin, the Umcebo signature style celebrates "bling" on a grand scale. "While we will make anything our clients require, our own designs definitely lean towards the bolder side of things. We are certainly no shrinking violets!" he says with his trademark humour.

A visit to their retail outlet-cum-working studio in Ushaka is a veritable visual feast. Brightly beaded fish and other sea creatures adorn the walls, huge chandeliers dripping with crystals, outside beads and recycled materials hang from the ceiling while a life-sized 3D cheetah (in bright blue beads, of course) greets visitors at the entrance. Combined with the happy banter of the crafters at their workstations, the overriding impression is one of vibrancy and fun, a collective of like-minded individuals who genuinely love what they do, and perhaps therein lies the secret of their success. ■■■

STOCKISTS

Umcebo products are available direct from their retail outlet at Ushaka, via their trade show attendance at Design Indaba and to order through their website at www.umcebotrust.co.za

They may also be purchased at select Weylandt's stores, visit www.weylandts.co.za to find out more.



"Umcebo is my home, I want to grow in the future with Umcebo. I learn something new every day, and I love my work!" Siyakudumisa Mavume (Umcebo crafter and ex street child)



Umcebo staff proudly display some of the latest table chandeliers.

Kim Smith, Director and buyer for Weylandts, a retailer who recently ordered some Umcebo creations for their stores, echoes this thought. "We saw Umcebo's work at the Design Indaba and were blown away by their original, handmade chandeliers, which are like a volcano of millions of beads in bursts of colour! In particular, I loved the fact that their products are fun, proudly South African in design but devoid of any clichéd 'curio' element."

Local buyers are not the only ones coveting the unique creations coming out of the Umcebo studio. Past international clients include high-end New York craft outlet Tucker Robbins as well as Anthropologie, a huge US-based retailer with 135 stores across Canada, the US and the UK. These export orders, as well as the learning curve of supplying large retailers in general, are not without their challenges, but Robin is quick to acknowledge the valuable input and assistance of several long-time supporters of the Trust and its work.

"When dealing with customers at this level you have to ensure that you not only take care of the creative work, but that you liaise properly with the client, complete all the paperwork on time, and communicate clearly. Fortunately, since 2008 we have been a participant in the Legends Programme, an Old Mutual-funded business development initiative, and have learned so much about the 'business of business' as a result. Ushaka have also been great, giving us a lot of support and advice on the retail side of things. On a personal level, I have realised that even a not-for-profit organisation needs to be run like a business if it is to be successful and sustainable in the long term."

2011 has seen Umcebo's first foray into Europe in the form of a large international trade show in Germany, while their stand at the Design Indaba will no doubt also turn heads – in 2010 they exhibited the Eco Tree, a massive four metre high sculpture made from wrought iron, wire and thousands of recycled corks, bottle tops and plastic



The trees are made from glass beads and wire and the baskets from scrap plastic.

"My work at Umcebo has allowed me to become a better manager, develop new skills and provide a good life for myself and my family."
Mluleki Madlala (shop manager and crafter)

bottles, which towered over anything else at the Indaba and generated huge amounts of interest and media coverage. True to form, Robin made sure that his team shared in the experience and accolades, and was joined at the Indaba by Umcebo shop manager Mluleki Madlala and crafters Bongani Luthuli and Siyakudumisa Mavume.

"My experience at the Design Indaba was too fantastic," says Siyakudumisa, a shy but immensely talented young crafter who used to live on the streets of Durban. "It was my first time on an aeroplane, but more than that it was incredible to see all the other designs and to get new ideas and inspiration. Also, the great response to our work from visitors to the show made me feel so proud of what we do!" he adds.

Based on the journey so far, the crafters of Umcebo should get used to the limelight and accolades. Their work is not just sought after and celebrated, but also provides young people from difficult backgrounds with income, pride and a sense of purpose – and surely that is the greatest treasure of all. 🇿🇦



"The Afro Lamp"

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