



PAYING IT FORWARD

THE HEARTFELT EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

The Heartfelt project

When we think of Corporate Social Investment (CSI), we tend to think of huge multinationals with budgets in the millions giving back to the communities in which they operate. We do not expect to find a tiny company that should be the beneficiary of CSI funding implementing its very own brand of social investment – but then Heartfelt is not your average business.

From tragedy to triumph

The story of Heartfelt has a sad beginning. Based in the small community of Makapanstad in the North West Province of South Africa, the project came about following the death in prison of co-founder Martha Letsoalo's 26-year-old son Emanuel. Convinced of his innocence, Martha used up all her savings trying to clear his name, but her efforts were in vain and she ended up jobless and alone.

A tiny social enterprise is rewriting the rule book for empowerment by following a very simple philosophy – make each product with love, then send it out with the belief that someone will find it and send that love back.

With few prospects but an enduring entrepreneurial spirit, she began sewing small fabric hearts to sell, to generate an income. The hearts sparked an idea in her friend Julie Hadley, whose parents had employed Martha for many years and with whom she had a very strong bond.

A copywriter and marketing executive with experience in handcrafts and product development, Julie immediately recognised the potential for a venture that could not only provide a steady income for Martha, but also create change and opportunities in the impoverished rural community in which Martha lived. With little more than the passion and skills of the two founders, the Heartfelt project was born.

That was in 2006, and today the project employs two managers and 12 women in Makapanstad and has recently started a second project in Rosendal in the Free State. The ultimate mission is to provide hope, employment and a sense of purpose for hundreds of rural women in communities across southern Africa.

Paying it forward

Julie and Martha feel that the success of Heartfelt lies in its philosophy of constantly giving back to the communities in which it operates. A percentage of all product sales is donated to community development initiatives in both Makapanstad and Rosendal, spreading the impact of the project beyond just the people directly involved. “We really believe that every positive action can make a tiny difference, and that lots of tiny differences can mean a lot of action,” says Julie.

This concept of paying it forward is not only empowering to the women involved in the project, who feel proud to be able to make a positive contribution, but also ensures that Heartfelt has the full support of the communities where the workshops are situated.

The Heartland

The Heartland is Julie’s grand vision for Heartfelt, a national rural network of self-sustaining workshops and community centres where ladies can work, bring their children to crèche, have access to training and healthcare facilities and learn how to grow subsistence crops to ensure sustainable food security for themselves and the community.

With two Heartfelt centres already in operation despite no funding support and very limited resources, it would be foolish to bet against these two dynamic women realising their dream sooner rather than later.

Made with love

The essence of the Heartfelt project can be summed up in the range of hand-sewn felt products produced by the organisation. One look at the attention to detail and exquisite care that goes into every piece and it is instantly apparent that these are much more than just keyrings, Christmas decorations or brooches to the ladies who make them.

They are an expression of their desire for a better life for themselves and their families, a vehicle through which they can not only earn an income but also rediscover their pride and sense of place in the world.

“People can tell if you have put your heart and soul into something. We do not dictate to our ladies much in terms of the colours they choose or the general design of the products, but we do insist that they make each and every piece with love!” says Martha with a smile.

This simple philosophy seems to be working. Heartfelt currently supplies retail outlets nationally and has also started exporting successfully, with a large Scandinavian distributor very interested in marketing the products across the region. The project has also supplied a number of large corporates with custom-made corporate gifts and promotional items, a market both founders believe holds much promise and potential for the future.

The business of business

In 2010 the potential and unique business philosophy of Heartfelt captured the attention of the Legends Programme, an Old Mutual-funded business development initiative that aims to assist community-based and social enterprises to become sustainable. Implemented by enterprise development agency Fetola, the programme provides mentorship, training and market access opportunities to Heartfelt as it seeks to extend its reach and expand into other communities. ■■■





Johanna Mmatsatsi is all smiles showing off her beautiful handiwork.

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“We don’t believe in handouts, people need to learn to be self-sufficient and empower their own lives. This will only happen if they believe they have a future.” Martha Letsoalo, Heartfelt co-founder.

“One thing I have learned through being a part of Legends is that even if your business has a social mission, it is so important to run things in a professional, strategic and businesslike way. All our future plans and dreams will be realised through the success of our project in its current form, and this means having great products, fantastic service and strong systems on which to build and grow,” says Julie.

With February being the month in which we express our love for each other on Valentine’s Day, how fitting that the Heartfelt message of hope, dignity and a better future for the rural women of South Africa is spreading slowly but surely across the globe.



Hard at work.

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Martha taking Mina Maluleka, one of Heartfelt’s cutters, under her wing.