

RETHAKA

Co-owner: Thato Kgathanye
Start-up costs: R100 000.
The capital was mainly for sewing machines and the raw material is waste.
Profit (per month):
R50 000–R100 000

Banks don't exactly like giving kids money,' Thato Kgathanye tells me. So when she and some schoolfriends started their business, Rethaka, at the age of 18, they had to be creative about raising capital. 'The only way we could think to get start-up money was by entering entrepreneurial contests. We raised all our capital that way,' she says.

'We noticed that in our Rustenberg community there wasn't much the youth would want to get involved in, so we asked ourselves, "How do we become the next generation of leaders that will build a legacy here? How do we showcase Rustenberg as an innovative city, creating world-class products?"' A quote on the Repurpose Schoolbags (a Rethaka brand) website sums up their thinking: 'The world is waiting for the leaders we are becoming.' And Thato and friends certainly didn't intend keeping the world waiting.

Thato conceptualised her product during a university assignment where she made bags out of recycled plastic. She then began looking into several communities in her area and saw that many schoolchildren didn't even have their own schoolbag. 'It dawned on us that we should push the envelope. We wondered how we could do more with less, and started asking exactly what it takes to educate a

child in South Africa,' she explains.

Thato realised access to light was a huge barrier for young learners. How could they study once the sun went down? 'Integrating a solar panel into the bag had to be done,' she says. These solar panels charge in the sun while children walk the often long distances to school. The panels form a light-bearing lid for the self-contained Consol light, which can be used for hours on a single charge. 'We also put reflective strips on the bags. There's no scholar patrol in rural Eastern Cape, you know!'

Besides being a for-profit social enterprise that sources funding from corporates, Rethaka is also concerned with being a leader in what is called the 'circular economy' in South Africa (turning waste into new products by remanufacturing). Her company has 20 employees, consisting of waste collection and management and production staff. They also service the conference industry with messenger and laptop bags, and are working on a luxury brand called Kiama ('magic' in Swahili) that will make stylish clutch and tote bags. Through that brand, Thato would like to give consumers the chance to gift schoolbags to kids. 'We'll work on a one-for-one model: for each bag we sell, we'll donate a schoolbag. This makes asking the question, "Which handbag will I wear today?" more meaningful.'

The best thing about running her own business, she says, is seeing her vision manifest itself every day, even in the smallest ways. 'Just moving from a small factory to a 200m² location was amazing to watch. It was so great for the team to see the power of the idea; they feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves,' she says. 'I see the company being operational in all countries on the African continent. We may have only 20 employees now, but we'll get there!' ❀

