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Written by Kim Poldner - Wednesday, 27 May 2009



Last week I received an email from my friend Sharlene in Johannesburg. She found an amazing eco fashion company and I would love to share her story with you!

It was on a hot Sunday, while visiting a little gallery called Spaza Art Gallery in Troyeville, Johannesburg, that a friend of mine discovered a striking purse. It was made out of woven strips of paper which seemed laminated, made by [Ollymolly Designs](#) and sold for just R40 (about 6 dollars). I was taken by both the price and quality of the product and copied the website address off the inside of the purse. While checking the brand online I was seriously impressed by the range of Ollymolly products, their affordability and production philosophy. Getting in touch with them was easy and Gemma Coll graciously answered my questions about their products.

But be warned, before I tempt you with such delights as The Carrie Handbag (ladies of leisure, some attention please...), that even though Ollymolly may not follow a strictly eco-friendly route, they deserve a mention for recycling efforts, their hands-on local production and their

generous donation to local communities.

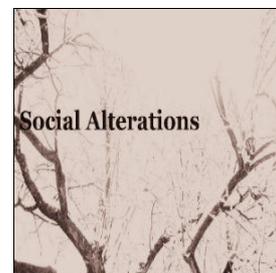
Beginnings... In September 1999, Lindsay McFarlane, from Scotland, and Gemma Coll, from Northern Ireland, met at a trade show in Belgium. Gemma, a textile designer in the UK, was looking for work while Lindsay was exhibiting at the fair with Court Fabrics, the South African textile company she then worked for. Propitiously, Gemma was offered Lindsay's job in South Africa, as she was returning to Scotland. A year later, Gemma found herself in Paarl but her friendship with Lindsay continued as they met at various European trade fairs. As fortune would have it, in 2002, Lindsay was offered her job back at Court Fabrics and returned to South Africa in April 2004 but by the end of December 2004, Court Fabrics – after 30 years of textile manufacturing - closed shop. It was in these extreme circumstances, both of them unemployed, that Gemma and Lindsay decided not to give up on South Africa just yet, but instead to set up their own business, employing their extensive textile and weaving knowledge with more experimental materials.

Says Gemma of the birth of Ollymolly, "We were both weavers and the idea came from wanting to use that skill and incorporating a recycling factor into it. The factory we worked at was situated next door to a paper recycling plant which gave us the idea of recycling paper. Weaving is an age old tradition and many materials have been used in this ancient craft, but we thought of bringing in a contemporary twist to it by weaving strips of paper that would normally have been thrown away as waste." Since starting their training in April 2005, Ollymolly has worked with various community and women's groups. As with any community/new business initiative, keeping logistics and overheads at a minimum is a difficult process, and Ollymolly found that to do so, they would take the work to their 'employees' homes. Thus delivering the recycled material and picking up products did away with rents and daily transportation costs, allowing the weavers greater flexibility of time by working out of their homes. Weavers are provided with the recycled material and wages are determined by how many bags individual persons make.

And the name Ollymolly? A combination of Lindsay's nephew's name, Oliver, and Gemma's niece, Molly. In fact, many of their products' names are inspired by their relatives and yes, the Carrie Bag was inspired by Sex and the City's Carrie Bradshaw!

Process, processing, processed... So how do they use recycled paper to make such cool gear? Gemma explains: "To begin each bag we first have to prepare the paper that is generously donated misprints from printing firms or bought by the kilo from a paper recycling plant. The paper is then cut into strips. The strips are then rolled individually in a sticky plastic and not laminated, as many people believe, making each one water resistant and more durable. After which the strips are then hand woven into the bag. When the bag is tensioned and shaped, the tops are finished off and the handles and clasps are attached." And the difference between rolling each strip individually in plastic and not laminating them is...? "If each strip was laminated, the edges would be exposed and we wanted to create a fully water resistant product that would not wear and tear so easily. By rolling each strip individually, they are completely protected from the elements, making each product much more robust and durable."

This of course means that the entire process is handmade and labour intensive, but Gemma swears that machines just couldn't produce the same aesthetic as one finds in their products. Gemma works closely with the individual weavers on ideas, designs and colour schemes. but



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Gemma works closely with the manufacturer, working on ideas, designs and colour schemes, but confesses to still being surprised on occasion by what they come up with. When I asked Gemma if she would consider Ollymolly an eco-conscious brand she did point out that because of the plastic coating they have to use, they can't be considered 100% eco-friendly, but that their use of recycling spreads a level of eco-consciousness to every customer that buys a Ollymolly product. Also, working with local communities and, to top it all, giving a percentage of the profits from their products towards Bowy House, a care home for HIV/Aids infected orphans in Paarl, spreads the ethos even further.

So what's cooler than giving... sometimes surviving in order to give. In November 2007, Lindsay returned with her family back to the UK. At present, Ollymolly, like so many ventures in the turbulent economic climate that rely on sales in order to survive, is going through a rough patch, with Gemma confessing that they have recorded their lowest sales in four years. But instead of giving up, Gemma is adding a household range of items to their brand. Says Gemma of the times ahead, "I am not ready to give up on Ollymolly just yet, so I hope that we can count on it being around for quite some time." So do I, Gemma. So do I...

This article was written by [Sharlene Khan](#).

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