



Crafting Dreams, Stitching Lives

Around 30 years ago, in a village nestled amidst Kenya's rolling hills, Patricia Nightingale's vision led to the foundation of Kenana Knitters.



What began as a way to use local wool has evolved into a thriving enterprise that empowers more than 300 women. Through their handcrafted toys and garments, this heartwarming journey funds vital projects, high-protein meals, literacy, and health clinics; touching lives, one stitch at a time.

And the good news is that these special cuddly toys are now available in New Zealand. Verve sat down with Melinda of Kenya Kiwi Connection to find out more.

Kenana Knitters is known for its unique handcrafted toys. Could you tell us about the creative process that goes into making these toys?

Every toy is the brainchild of our founder and are based on the wants and needs of our customers. We create lots of little goodies representing African wildlife, farm animals, and since the growth into the Australian and New Zealand markets, lots of critters from down under.



How does the local Kenyan culture influence the design and production of these toys?

The beauty of the work that we offer the ladies is that it can be done from home, while walking, supervising children, and so on. It's flexible work so our ladies are able to continue with their daily lives and not having to find outside childcare or stop their subsistence farms. Having animals is a key part of Kenyan culture, and the wool was often found to be a waste byproduct so now we have an additional income generating opportunity for local farmers who have sheep.

Kenana Knitters' products are now available in New Zealand because of your association with Kenana Down Under. Could you share your story and how these beautiful handmade toys made their way to our part of the world?

In 2011, Di Stitt, a Brisbane creative was in Kenya and visited Paddy and the ladies at Kenana Knitters. There was an opening for a distributor in Australia and New Zealand, and from, this Kenana Down Under was hatched. Through exhibiting at trade fairs in both Sydney and Melbourne, a few NZ stockists were gained along the way.

In 2021 Kenana Down Under was sold to Tanya Branch. Melinda moved to New Zealand from Kenya in early 2021, and KenyaKiwi Connection was born, with a view to showcasing some of Kenya's wonderful, creative and sustainable art and craft. Melinda has a personal connection with Kenana with her sister Kerry having

worked there for many years, and now with her cousin's daughter Melissa holding the reins, so it made sense to start there. Melinda works with KDU as the representative in NZ.

Sustainability and ethical practices are becoming increasingly important. How does Kenana Knitters prioritise these aspects in its production and distribution processes?

Absolutely. All our products are made from locally sourced natural fibres - our wool is bought directly from the local farmers in our area. Our organic cotton is bought directly from the ginny in Tanzania (as organic cotton is not available in Kenya). Throughout the production process, we use eco-friendly, non-toxic chemicals and dyes, the wool dyed using plant dyes which are kind on the planet. Our ladies are paid per piece and the pricing is based on a fair wage, directly related to the amount of time it takes them to knit the items, and we provide them with the materials. Not only, do we provide them with fair and sustainable income, but this is a profit share business, so at the end of the calendar year the ladies earn extra income depending on the amount of time and work they have put in for the year. We provide our ladies with other benefits that would be otherwise inaccessible such as free health and wellbeing clinics, high protein meals, adult literacy education and so on.

Looking ahead, what are the aspirations and future plans for Kenya Kiwi Connection? How can people in New Zealand support and connect with this heart-warming initiative?

With covid largely behind us, we hope that by working with organisations dedicated to empowering women in rural Kenya through sustainable income, like Kenana Knitters we can bring more products to the New Zealand market. We already have a few stockists here but we are always on the lookout for like-minded entrepreneurs to join us.

What has been your favourite product thus far?

Being a lover of all things Christmas, there is no going past the homespun wool spider reindeer and the organic cotton Christmas ornament range. These pieces never fail to bring a smile to my face, mind you none, of the critters ever fail in this regard! The Safari Zebra range is also a huge favourite of mine.

Any new and exciting products in the pipeline?

Kenana Down Under recently exhibited at Life InStyle in Melbourne where some new products due to hit our shores in early 2024 were on display. In the homespun wool range, a delightful dinosaur family is joining the crew and we just saw a new sample from Kenana that may just lead to a very sweet panda in the organic cotton collection.