



“You can do what you want,
If you don't think you can't,
So don't think you can't,
Think you can.”

Charles Inge (1886-1957)

MOTHERS Matter

Sew some love



Meet Angeline*, Jenny* and Olivia*, who are now becoming financially independent – thanks to nothing more than a needle, some thread and oodles of “Anna”.

“...She [Anna] can understand me, and what I’m going through. I like what I’m sewing now – bags.”

Angeline

ANGELINE

Having undergone an arranged marriage even in these days and times, Angeline had to live and put up with an unreasonable mother-in-law and sister-in-law. While pregnant with her first child almost immediately after marriage, she was diagnosed with high blood pressure and was told by her doctor to avoid salt. She informed her mother-in-law accordingly and her mother-in-law reacted by preparing cups of tea with salt and putting them before her. Angeline’s legs began to swell. It was a tough time, as she had to keep working in a factory, and then run home to cook and care for her extended family.

Eventually it got to a stage where she had to stay out late in the evenings, just to avoid conflict with her mother-in-law. Her husband did not stand up for her. Although her mother-in-law left her house after

Angeline’s first child was born, her relationship with her husband did not improve. Her second child was stillborn.

By the time her third child arrived, her household was not a happy one. She had to stop work, as she fell ill. Her husband filed for divorce. Alone, in poor health, with two young children, and on antidepressant medication, it seemed like the end of the road.

JENNY

For medical reasons too, Jenny could not work. It was tough making ends meet. Although her two sons were grown-up, they could barely make enough to support her husband and herself, let alone themselves. Her husband still had to keep on working, albeit on a part-time basis.

OLIVIA

What would you do if your child was handicapped, and you were hopelessly in debt because your husband’s business collapsed? And on top of that, you had a husband who was hostile to your attempts to go out to work to keep afloat? Meet Olivia who was in that very sticky situation.

Hounded by business creditors (including banks), depressed and suicidal, there seemed to be no way out. She could not even count on her family’s support, as she came from a broken home.



“I love art and handicraft. When I was depressed, I didn’t feel creative. Now, working with Anna makes me think. She throws me an item – I have to go figure what to do with it. What matters to her is to take care of the mothers. My hope is that my creations sell, so Anna and the mothers will be blessed...”

Olivia

*Names have been changed to protect individual identities

ENTER ANNA...

Petite and sassy, Anna would certainly give the “Duracell bunny” some competition as she zips around making a difference to women’s lives. And she does exactly that in her Mother and Child Project, a social enterprise that began life as her application for the Community Enterprise Fund, a start-up fund for social enterprises from the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports in Singapore.

Community service was not foreign to Hong Kong-born Anna. In 1998, she ran a chain of secondhand shops at the East Coast Care Centre and later, at St. George’s Place. It struck her then that there were single mothers who, for various reasons, were unable to work. In most cases they had neither skills nor training. She realised that these women could become financially independent if they were taught to sew, which they could do from home. And with that concept in mind, she embarked on the Mother and Child Project.



THE TALE OF ANNA

“As a child I was abused and tried to commit suicide many times. Afterwards, I could not remember what had happened before. At the age of 21, I was diagnosed as “schizophrenic” and started on medication. That interfered with my work as a fashion designer.

After meeting my husband in Hong Kong, I came to Singapore. Here, I met a lady who had a gift for healing and she prayed for me. As we were praying, the image of my father’s mistress appeared. I mentioned that I couldn’t forgive her, and needed God’s help to do so if that was what He wanted. After that, I felt a burden lifted off me. I have not been on medication since. That’s my miracle, I suppose. Even so, I still need to get out of a negative rut occasionally. While undergoing treatment, I told myself that I’d work at changing the lot of women who weren’t able to change it themselves.”

And so, she did.

Deciding what to sew was not a problem for Anna. Migrating to the US as a child, she eventually trained at and graduated from a fashion design school in Los Angeles. She then returned to Hong Kong to work and thereafter met her Singaporean husband.

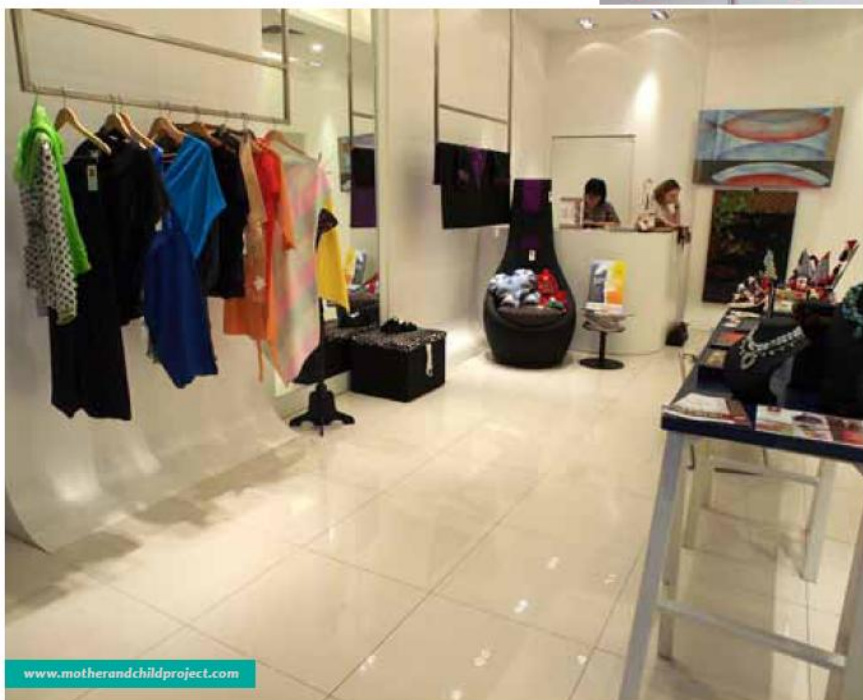
Having stumbled upon Anna’s designs in a most unlikely place – a major theatre venue in Singapore – it would be fair to surmise that Anna’s ideas deserve a second look. Her designs always incorporate a utilitarian element. Her babies’ blankets double as bags. Her Peranakan “dolls” are not dolls; they are doorstoppers. Or, if you prefer, good massagers for tired feet! You get the drift.

What’s important to note is that the creators of these products are paid in cash and sale proceeds are continually reinvested in the project, which is under the Singapore Anglican Community Services. “We pay forward,” says Anna. “We pay for the finished product, whether or not it has been sold.” And, in case of difficulties, Anna steps in to do the job when needed. “In the event the mothers cannot finish the jobs, I fulfil the orders.”

The cost of fabrics forms the major expense of the items. The project has no control over what is being donated but tries to use up all donations. There is often a hint of regional influence in the products, whether in the use of batik material or reflected in the design itself. For example: a wrapper for carrying lunchboxes, a fairly common sight across Asia.

This project has gone beyond reaching out to single mothers, to include the elderly, the mentally ill and women from low-income families. In short, those people who are really in need.

“I am inspired by the fact that the [single] mothers are so determined to make a difference in their children’s lives,” notes Anna. Equally inspiring is Anna’s own account of the circumstances that led her to establish the project. **TR**



www.motherandchildproject.com