

# verve

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**GET THE GIRL:  
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ON WINNING YOUR  
VALENTINE'S HEART**

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OF DUBLIN:  
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# Changing the World

## One Accessory at a Time

Emily MacLeod

At first glance, the handmade purses may not seem overly different from other unique accessories, but so much more goes into these bags than meets the eye.

During the recent Christmas shopping season, Le Flair Boutique, a women's clothing store in Old Dublin, hosted a trunk show featuring an assortment of beautifully woven purses, clutches, and bags being sold by a locally owned company called Jishike.

Jishike is Swahili for "hold on to your strength," and was created solely for the purpose of helping women in Tanzania support their families while producing a fashionable product that consumers will buy.

"My goal for Jishike is three-fold," said Ms. Sinead Fyda, a Powell resident and founder of Jishike. "One, to facilitate the growth and development of the women in the group by providing an opportunity for them to learn, earn an income, and care for their families; two, to provide a stylish, high-quality fashion accessory that consumers can enjoy; and three, to raise awareness between cultures to help people better understand the world we all share."

After graduating from Boston University, Fyda went into the fashion industry for eight years, working for luxury companies such as Neiman Marcus, Christian Dior, and finally ending up at Ralph Lauren as the Accessories Buyer.

"Ralph Lauren is where I really grew in my career," said Fyda. "The experience of working as a buyer helped me become a better business person because in effect, you're managing your own business. I didn't know it at the time but it was all preparing me for what I'm doing now."

Although she was working for one of the most prestigious fashion companies in the world with a stable job, she still felt something was missing from her life.

"I knew I'd reached a crossroads in my career. I hadn't been fulfilled with my work for sometime but didn't really know what to do about it. I felt like I should have been happy--I had a great position with some seemingly glamorous perks for a world renowned company."

She was soon approached by a luxury company in Hong Kong. She considered it for a while because the international experience was appealing, but decided that it wasn't in her best interests.

"At that point I remember sitting in my office at Ralph Lauren, thinking, 'Ok, if I'm not going to take that, what am I going to do? Because that was what I've been working towards... if I don't want that, I can't continue doing what I'm doing now.'"

Two days later, Fyda decided that she needed to reevaluate her

direction and do something that did not have to do with her job. This led her to volunteer work. She wanted to go somewhere new, which landed her a job as a kindergarten teacher in Kilimanjaro, Tanzania.

When she arrived in Tanzania for the first time, she was shocked at how prevalent poverty was in the community.

"You see poverty on TV but it's not real, it doesn't affect your life, and it seems like

something you can't directly affect or change. Let me tell you, after seeing it firsthand it was like having a cold bucket of water dumped over my head," said Fyda.

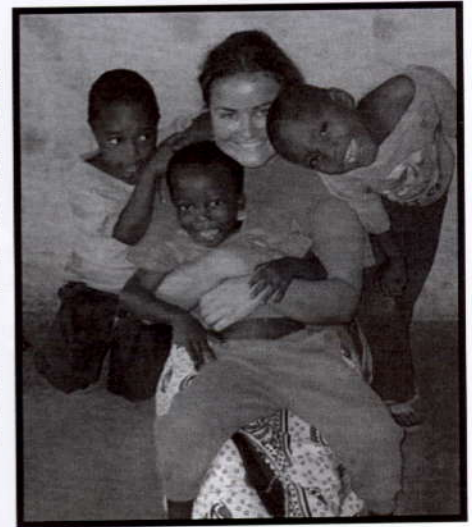
She wasn't kidding. She saw a little boy who had missed an entire year of school because his family did not have the \$2.50 bus fare to go get his birth certificate for school registration. Fyda also encountered a girl who walked with a piece of glass in her foot for a week because she did not have access to health care.

"After spending three months living in a rural village in Tanzania I couldn't come back and go about life as I had known it. It changed me. I felt moved - but even more than that, I felt obligated," said Fyda.

The class that Fyda would be teaching had 80 kids ages two through eight. Upon arriving at the classroom, she did not find what she had hoped. The school had no electricity, water, glass in the windows, books or supplies, and a grand total of six desks with dirty cement floors. Despite all these setbacks, the kids were still delighted to be there.

"The children all had smiles on their faces and every one of them sang at the top of their lungs when we led them in songs. They loved school--they were grateful for school and excited to be there. I had never seen anything like it," said Fyda.

During her time teaching, there was a project in which she asked what the kids wanted to be when they grew up. One might guess that they would say things like you hear in any American classroom,



Sinead Fyda with some of her students in Tanzania



such as being an astronaut. The answers she received, however, were quite different.

"I was struck by how humble their aspirations were. They said things like, 'I want to wash dishes' and 'I want to feed cows,'" said Fyda.

She was pleasantly surprised when a boy named Juma said that he wanted to be a pilot.

"About a week later, I went to Juma's home to meet his family and I complimented his dad on raising such a sweet son. I said, 'Did you know he wants to be a pilot someday?' His dad started laughing and ruffled his hair and said, 'Yeah, maybe in the US.' As if saying, maybe in another lifetime. I was immediately deflated... maybe it was somewhat unrealistic to believe in this dream given this little boy's current lifestyle. However, the reality of his father's jaded attitude and how quickly he discounted and laughed at his son's dream made me sad for the kids," said Fyda.

This was a crucial moment in her trip because this served as an inspiration. If she couldn't help the kids, why not help them by helping their families?

"Ultimately, the reason I got involved in the first place with the women I work with was to indirectly impact the future of their children's lives. Their children were all my kindergarten students."

She started to read about starting a business, and quickly found that the way she would run her business would be much different than many businesses. She wanted to make fighting poverty part of the core of her business and to "measure the success not only on profits but also on the social impact the company would make."

Also unlike other organizations, she wanted the business to be able to sustain itself, and not be reliant on donations.

After deciding what her goal was, she conducted interviews to learn more about the lifestyles the women led and how she would be able to help them.

One important thing that Fyda learned from these was that they needed a flexible job that would fit into their lives, which are filled to the brim with chores. In Tanzania chores are done to simply keep the family alive. Laundry is done by hand, food is cooked from scratch over an open fire, and for some families, they have to walk miles to get water.

On top of that, while American families spend more than 100 dollars at the grocery store, the women lived on a comfortable 6 - 10 dollars a week for the entire family.

After learning more about the women, Fyda then had to figure out where to start their work. For a while she considered farming, but none of the women had the resources or land. The inspiration came to her when she was over at a friend's house and saw a doily that his mother had crocheted.

"I asked her if she'd come and teach a small group of women in the village how to crochet. She agreed. We started out with nine women. I wasn't sure if this would work but I thought it'd be a good first project to see how they took to it, what their learning curves were, what kind of work ethics they had," said Fyda.

Their first project was baby booties, and when those went well and she knew they were serious about their work, Fyda had them each agree to use their wages on education, healthcare, rent, food, and the basic well-being of their family, and not on drugs or alcohol.

When she went back to Tanzania after the second project, which was making handbags, all the women had enough money to open bank accounts.

"Two of them put electricity into their homes with money they'd earned from the baby booties and the first collection of handbags. All of their children were in school and they all had roofs over their heads," said Fyda.

There are now 22 women in the group and it's growing. Some weeks there are English classes, and sometimes there are contests



Fyda with the women of Jishike

where they can win prizes. The other four days of the week the women crochet at home.

"The great thing about crocheting is that it's portable work for them," said Fyda, "They can do it at home, on their own time, at their own pace."

Not only has Jishike had an impact on their lives financially, but also emotionally and psychologically. They used to mumble, never make eye contact, and always take direction without giving their own input. Now, they smile more often, and give input on color choices.

"They love color. There are times when I'll pick a yarn/bead combination and they look at me and scrunch their faces and shake their heads because they don't like it," said Fyda, "I actually like this because they are voicing their opinions--they never used to do that before."

At the moment, the bags are sold at trunk shows in the US, and can also be bought online at [www.jishikesocialcouture.com](http://www.jishikesocialcouture.com). Within each purchase, there is a card containing the picture, name, and biography of the woman who made it.

The bags are all hand crocheted and everything down to the gift bag they are placed in at purchase is made in Africa. Since they are all handmade, your purchase will be one-of-a-kind and help women live a better life in Tanzania.

"Since I've been doing this, it has far surpassed my expectations," said Fyda, "Not so much the business itself as much as the women. I am so proud of them. Often times I am at trunk shows and I just wish people could see these women at work."

Future plans for Jishike may include spreading the concept to other communities within Tanzania, East Africa, and possibly even the US. There is also a possibility of starting a program that would make people more culturally aware.

But that is all down the road. Right now, Jishike is still in the early stages, but is well on its way to changing the world, one handbag at a time.

"I want to create a fashion company that will fight poverty and empower women while creating a beautifully made, artistic product. I don't feel like we've even hit the tip of the iceberg as to what is possible."

*Get the latest Jishike styles at  
Temptations, 35 South High St.  
Old Dublin*