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HD **Crafting a business**
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The global craft movement has hit Singapore but makers here face challenges

When Mr Colin Chen first started making and selling his line of laptop bags, Fabrix, eight years ago, he did not emphasise the fact that it was a handmade-in-Singapore product.

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"There was slight negativity about a label being locally made," he says.

Then, two years ago, he noticed a change.

"All the big brands and online retailers became available in Singapore. Everyone from H&M to Zara to ASOS," he recalls. "Suddenly, there were too many mass-produced products on the market.

"At the same time, people were also starting to explore their individualism. They didn't want to go to a party where everyone was wearing the same Topshop dress. So they started to source for handmade, unique products with stories," says the DIY entrepreneur, 31, who has since expanded his range and co-founded Tyrwhitt General **Company**, a shop selling items from local crafters, makers and artisans. It is in Tyrwhitt Road.

Like Mr Chen, Singaporeans are devoting themselves to craftsmanship as handmade-in-Singapore goods gain more credibility and cachet.

Local crafters are serious about making wares - from hand-bound books to home-poured candles - with such finesse that they fully dispel the myth that DIY products are cheap and shoddy.

Some Singapore crafters have even quit their jobs to turn what started as hobbies into small businesses, while others soldier on with their passion in their backyards or kitchens after work. More are also enrolling in craft classes to hone their skills and marketing their goods by collaborating with indie stores and online craft marketplaces.

Singapore craft-makers report that interest in their products has grown over the last year, even if prices for their handmade goods are sometimes higher than those of store-bought items. High costs are often attributed to expensive materials and labour, which often lead companies that make furniture and fashion, for example, to outsource to other countries.

Ms Mandy Leena Tan started her chemical-free skincare label Mandy T last June in her home kitchen and charges between \$39 for bath salt and \$59 for body cream. She declines to reveal sales figures.

"There will always be a **group** of consumers who prefer to pay for cheaper mass-produced products that hide behind international labels," says Ms Tan, who is in her late 30s. "But I have seen a growing trend of niche consumers in Singapore, both local and expatriate, who appreciate well-designed handmade products. They are also prepared to pay a little more for the quality."

Account executive Genevieve Yeo bought three hand-bound journals from book-binding business dddots last year for \$80 each. She was willing to pay what some might consider a high price for what are essentially blank notebooks because she wanted to own and use a unique item.

"It is one of a kind because each page is woven together by hand. I think this is meaningful work and I'm not just paying for the item, but for the time and effort invested in the craft," says Ms Yeo, 34.

The increase in people making their own products mirrors a worldwide trend, dubbed "the maker movement", which has been gathering steam in the past couple of years. This is where crafters from America to Indonesia have come together in their own countries to form a community selling self-made products.

Etsy, a global e-commerce website for handmade or vintage items, has been credited with kick-starting the maker movement when it started in 2005. It now has more than one million artisan sellers. The **site**, which is used by many Singaporean crafters, made US\$1.3 billion (S\$1.6 billion) in revenue last year.

While there are no official figures on how many crafters are in Singapore, Crafty Singapore Team - The Original Singapore Handmade Team, a **group** which organises Etsy makers here, has 460 members. This figure includes non-crafters, who can join the **group** as well.

A local version of Etsy has sprouted too.

In 2012, Mr Joel Leong and Mr Melvin Tiong, both 28, co-founded Haystakt, an online marketplace for crafters to sell their products. Every maker gets his own page, which he manages by listing products and uploading pictures of new items. Haystakt also has a related Tumblr page, which has interviews with the makers of brands it carries.

Haystakt now carries about 70 local brands, such as theKANG, which makes handcrafted adornments and accessories, and Wheniwasfour, which sells notebooks and bags with a Singaporean twist. Apart from local designs, the website also has 80 overseas labels from cities such as San Francisco and **Hong Kong**.

The website recently launched "crowd-determined" pricing for project prototypes, in which an item becomes cheaper as more people pre-order it. Those who order earlier get an "early-bird bonus": For every person who buys the item after you do, you get a rebate.

The owners take a 5 per cent cut from crafters for every item **sold** through its shop or crowdpriced.

One successful project was Skinny Wallet by local **company** Shiok, which **sold** 100 of its ultra-thin wallet for \$52.27 each - down from the initial price of \$63.99 - over 28 days in March.

Mr Leong, who quit working for his family's textile business to set up Haystakt, says he started the venture after seeing many of his crafter friends trying to sell their products. "The traffic on the **site** picked up organically as more people shared about it online and through word of mouth. Singaporean consumers often ask why they have to pay so much for a label that they don't know about. But increasingly, we see people who want to **buy**, not only because it's handmade, but also because there's a story behind it."

Mr Leong says the **site** tracks buyers browsing and notice that they scroll all the way down a page to read about the people, inspiration and process behind a product. Skinny Wallet, for example, is the brainchild of two Singapore architecture-trained craftsmen who lovingly describe the concept for their minimalist wallet on their Haystakt page.

Besides a marketplace to sell their stuff on, Singapore craftsmen and makers have other support groups. These include Makers Of Singapore, a non-profit initiative started earlier this year by four university students to raise awareness of the local crafts scene, and Singapore Makers, which was launched in July last year by creative events **company** owner William Hooi to bring together crafters through events and talks.

One crafter, who was looking for like-minded people, decided to set up her Singapore version of an Etsy Craft Party, which happens every June 6 around the world.

Last Friday, Ms Salinah Zailani, who runs a home-based craft business, Simply-4-Love, selling bespoke felt accessories and bouquets, threw a party for fellow Etsy sellers at the Goodman Arts Centre. Participants paid \$10 to take part in craft work, which included embroidery floss and rubber stamps. About 45 people turned up - double the number who attended her first party last year.

Ms Salinah, who started her business in 2011 and runs it with her sister, says: "When you do your own craft business, you are always alone and you don't really know who else is doing it out there. When people signed up for the first party, I was surprised. I couldn't believe there were so many other crafters too.

"I think that it's good to meet up because we can learn techniques from one another, if we are willing to share."

But the road to becoming a full-fledged maker is often a bumpy one for those who have tried to turn their passion into a business. After two years of running menswear accessories brand Oldman Handmade, which specialises in brightly coloured and patterned bow ties, suspenders and ties, designer Maureen Koh, 24, is considering closing shop.

Ms Koh, who received a diploma in fashion merchandising from The Academy of Fashion Professions in 2011, says: "Everything in my business is handmade in Singapore, so the cost is very high, and bow ties are not a high-profit business. It is a struggle to find that perfect ratio between passion and profits. I need to make a profit to keep my passion going. The cost of doing business in Singapore is simply too high."

She cannot afford a storefront, so her accessories, which cost \$69 for a bow tie to \$129 for a pair of suspenders, are **sold** on a consignment basis in multi-label concept stores such as Tyrwhitt General **Company** and The Corner Shop in Far East Plaza. Consignment means the stores take 40 per cent of her profits.

The three seamstresses she hires to help her make her thrice-yearly collections have to be paid, which takes another 25 per cent of her profits. And then there are the material and packaging costs.

While the maker movement is gaining much buzz in Singapore, it could also prove to be the crafters' undoing. Ms Koh says: "The word 'handmade' has been exploited and has become a marketing gimmick. It's not exclusive or appreciated by customers any more. I have not given up yet, but I will have to see how my current collection sells and then decide what to do."

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GSH CONSERVES

Mr Joey Gan quit his job as a conservation officer at the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve last September to start GSH Conserves, a food label selling jams and spreads. From making the seven items to marketing the food label, the 31-year-old does it all himself.

His journey to make jam was sparked when he watched videos by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which show the cruel conditions under which animals are reared before they are slaughtered for the dining table.

He says: "It got me thinking about the ethics of getting food to our table, be it plant or animal, and how to make it better. I appreciate the food process and I wanted to show that I could change the way we impact the environment around us."

He says: "I had wanted to start a cafe, which uses sustainably sourced coffee, but the scene is so saturated, so I decided to put that on hold. Making jam was something I could start small."

He and his wife Priscilla, a 30-year-old dentist, decided to make jam their business as it was a "niche, untouched market in Singapore".

GSH Conserves uses the initials of his dialect name, Gan Soon Hock. He makes jam using fruit which are available from the region, such as passionfruit, dragonfruit and lychee. "There are so many tasty fruit in the region which people might not think to use in jam. It was just a matter of applying a Western technique to Asian fruit."

For the environmentally conscious man, getting fruit from the region also cut down his carbon footprint as they did not have to be imported from far.

He used \$10,000 of his savings to get started. The amount goes into renting a small kitchen in MacPherson, which he works out of three times a week, and buying produce from Pasir Panjang wholesale market and jam bottles from Malaysia.

Mr Gan has **sold** more than 1,800 bottles since he started last October. A 50ml jar costs \$4, while a bigger version, at 180ml, costs \$10. Six local cafes, restaurants and retailers, such as Overdoughs in Middle Road and The Gardens Shop in Singapore Botanic Gardens, stock his spreads. He has also

paired up with two online stores, Naiise (www.naiise.com) and HipVan (www.hipvan.com), to sell his jams there.

He has some "battle scars" which he collected along the way, including splatters and burns from stirring hot jam and a finger tip which was sliced off during food preparation.

His plan for the rest of the his financial year is to grow the business by getting more local bakeries and cafes to carry his jams and improve the brand's presence. He is also looking to hire staff to help beef up operations.

He admits that he is not drawing a steady salary now and his wife is the breadwinner. The couple, who have no children, are adjusting to their changed financial situation. "We eat out a lot less now and cook more at home, and we think twice about eating at fancy places. We're just more careful with money. I really want to do this and it's something I believe in."

He adds: "If it's not looking up, I'll probably take it part-time. I started the business, giving it my full concentration. Now that I know what goes into making the jams, I think I can concurrently run it with a full-time job."

Natasha Ann Zachariah

THE FINGERSMITH LETTERPRESS

Capturing local flavour is key to Ms Jacqueline Goh's work.

Her hand-printed postcards, for example, come with boxes to be checked off for each uniquely Singaporean experience: speaking Singlish, reserving a table with a tissue packet and shopping at a pasar malam (night market in Malay).

Ms Goh, 25, says of her Things... In Singapore design series: "I love sending postcards when I travel and local postcards often have symbols such as the Merlion, but I didn't want something so predictable."

She started her craft business, The Fingersmith Letterpress (www.thefingersmithletterpress.com), last November, using the art of relief printing on paper.

The tools of her trade are massive: a one-tonne Heidelberg press dating back to the 1950s, which she bought from a family friend for about \$6,000 and had to crane-lift into her home; and a \$3,000 second-hand "guillotine" which cuts paper and weighs about 200kg.

Her equipment takes pride of place in a 40 sq m backyard studio - which cost \$50,000 to construct, a loan from her parents - in her family's semidetached home. Her father, 51, is a managing director in a refinery processing **company**, while her mother, 55, is a housewife.

Other start-up costs such as materials, machinery and training - Ms Goh went to Sydney and Melbourne for letterpress printing classes in 2012, paying A\$2,000 (S\$2,337) - hit around \$30,000 in total.

She paid for it with her takings from waitressing and teaching art while reading a business diploma at Ngee Ann Polytechnic and, later, a design communication degree at Lasalle College of the Arts.

She was introduced to letterpress printing while at Lasalle, when a video was shown in class of a letterpress machine and what it could do.

"I am an old soul and don't like staring at the computer screen, but I like the touch, smell and feel of paper. I love working with my hands," explains Ms Goh, who is single and graduated from Lasalle two years ago.

The craft also appeals to her because it blends modern technology and old-style illustrations.

She sells her postcards on online craft marketplace Etsy and stores such as Naiise and Cat Socrates, making about \$2,000 a month in sales.

Takings are still low, she says, after factoring in the cost for paper and ink.

Starting out in the craft industry has also taught her about being more business savvy.

She charged a business \$300 to design its logo last year, not realising the market rate is close to \$2,000.

Still, she says: "This craft is something I would do for free because I love it, so it is difficult to place a price tag on my work."

There are other business concerns.

Renting a studio outside is not an option, she says. "If I paid about \$3,000 a month in rent, I would be logging to push out my work to pay that.

"Crafters who do this would slog but find that they cannot afford the rent, and might lose their passion."

Kezia Toh

PRINTING A LOGO ON A POSTCARD

Step 1: Ms Goh mixes white and dark blue ink on a glass tile to produce a sky blue colour.

Step 2: She scrapes the blended ink off the tile and coats it on the ink machine roller on her Heidelberg press. A lever is pulled to spread the ink evenly on the roller.

Step 3: An etching of a design is done on a polymer plate and pasted on the base of the machine. A stack of paper goes into the machine. When Ms Goh starts up the press, ink coats the etched polymer plate and the design is pressed onto paper. After each use, she cleans the press by wiping the roller with kerosene.

COOKIE CUTTER

The death of her grandmother in 2009 made Ms Sandy Ng realise that she "didn't want to live with a big 'what if'". So she quit her corporate communications job in 2009 to become a full-time crafter.

She had enjoyed making things with her hands as a child, but had lost that passion when she began studying and pursuing her career.

A trip to Japan in 2005 revived her interest. "Meeting people who appreciated arts and culture, and having time to slow down and understand myself reminded me there's more to life than the five Cs," she says.

When she returned to Singapore, she began following craft blogs and crafting in her spare time. But it was not till 2009 that she took the plunge.

"When my grandmother died, I realised life is short. I was in my late 20s and I thought if I was going to fail, it would be best to fail young," says Ms Ng, now 34.

She spent six months after quitting her job just experimenting, making everything from cards to notebooks to bags in various styles, before realising she liked creating plush toys most.

It took another six months of choosing fabrics, making patterns and sewing before the self-taught crafter refined her techniques and developed the distinctive shifty-eyed look of her toy characters.

"I try to give them a child-like look. I want my pieces to celebrate and encourage a child-like imagination and playfulness," says the married mother of a 10-month-old son. She works from a spare room in the East Coast condominium she owns with her private banker husband.

Ms Ng spends hours doodling cartoons and designs. Once she decides on a design, pattern and fabric, sewing takes up to two days.

Her toys, pillows and tote bags sell from \$30 to \$75. She also exhibits at fairs, conventions and solo shows in Singapore, **Hong Kong** and Japan. A series of superhero plush toys she recently exhibited in Japan **sold** for \$230 each.

"It's just me doing everything and I can't produce fast enough, which means I have to sell at a high price, which people may not be ready to pay," she admits.

Finding time to craft and market her goods has become more challenging since the birth of her son, Olly.

About half of her nine-hour work days are spent on administrative tasks: answering e-mail inquiries and updating her Etsy online store (www.etsy.com/sg-en/shop/CookieCutterEtsy), her Facebook page (www.facebook.com/thecookiecutter) and Instagram account (@cookiecutter).

Despite her efforts, online sales have been erratic. Demand spikes during flea markets, trade fairs and exhibitions, where people can see her goods in person, she says.

Her husband has supported her - both emotionally and financially. "He encouraged me and kept me going even when I doubted myself," she says.

"Supporting myself on my craft would be tough. I'm still trying every day to make it work."

But she cannot see herself going back to the corporate world.

"When you handmade something, you put a little bit of yourself into it," she says. "I get a great sense of satisfaction when I see the final product. I also enjoy the process. When I am sewing, doodling or designing, I forget about everything around me."

Lydia Vasko

DDDOTS

The sight of a cast-iron book press left out overnight in the rain pained Ms Adelene Koh so much, she rushed to cart the 30kg press home.

It belonged to a vintage shop at her condominium complex and she returned the following day and offered to **buy** it.

"The owner thought someone had stolen it, but I did not want it to rust and spoil," says Ms Koh, 31, who paid \$200 for the press.

The salvaged press flattens paper and is among Ms Koh's arsenal of bookbinding equipment such as laying presses, which hold pages together while the spine of the book is being worked on, and a plough, which trims the book's edges.

Her equipment, which costs about \$4,000, goes towards her craft business, dddots, which she started in 2011. She also invested about \$20,000 on training classes in London and Tokyo.

Ms Koh, who graduated from Lasalle College of the Arts with a diploma in communication design in 2006, spent three years in advertising as a graphic designer before joining Singapore Airlines as its cabin crew.

On a holiday to New York City, she visited a bookfair in Brooklyn, where she discovered the possibilities of bookbinding. She later left the airline to focus on her business.

Books are now "produced en masse", says Ms Koh, unlike older versions, with cut paper lovingly sewn into book covers by hand.

"I like to do things by hand and see what I can produce," she says.

Much of her work involves refashioning books that have sentimental value to customers and friends, she says.

For example, she has rebound a 1935 sixth edition version of Winnie The Pooh and a Bible, and produced a handmade book for a German couple, filled with WhatsApp messages from their courting days.

But her most significant bookbinding project was a gift made from the wedding dress of her best friend. The long dress was to be transformed into a shorter cocktail outfit, so Ms Koh took the cut fabric and used it to form a book cover.

"Instead of clothes sitting there as just clothes, they get a new life," she explains.

Ms Koh gets about two projects a month and spends about 1 1/2 months on a book. Her fee varies depending on the size and complexity of each book. For example, an A5 leather journal with 80 pages will cost about \$100 to \$180, depending on paper stock, quality of leather and finishing.

While consignments to local shops might help business - she currently uses just her website, www.dddots.com, and Facebook to advertise her services - she says it might not be feasible for handmade work such as books.

Consignments would require her to supply at least 20 pieces, which take at least a month's work, and not all pieces may be **sold**. Shops also take a sizeable cut of sales.

But Ms Koh is sticking to her guns, crafting books lovingly, even if it costs her time and money. The bookbinder, who is single, supports herself with her savings and the takings from the business.

She says: "The most common question I get about bookbinding is: can you make money?"

"My answer is 'no'. But I am happy and I think I earn more happiness than money."

Kezia Toh

MANDY T SKINCARE

The plight of a friend with extremely sensitive skin - rashes erupt when she touches anything synthetic - struck a chord six years ago with Ms Mandy Leena Tan.

"If she sits while wearing shorts, she gets rashes on the backs of her thighs," explains Ms Tan, who is single and in her late 30s.

However, the friend still wanted to pamper herself with grooming lotions and scrubs. So she became Ms Tan's "best guinea pig".

Ms Tan chops and blends skincare products in her kitchen at home, using raw organic ingredients suitable for sensitive skin.

She uses sugar - rather than the more conventional salt - in a homemade scrub she made for her friend, as it melts on contact with warm skin and exfoliates more gently. Happily, her friend was able to use the product without any adverse reactions.

The desire to go all-natural in terms of skincare products has intensified for Ms Tan over the years, as she realises her expensive store-bought lotions and cleansers are not as organic as they claim to be.

"Many skincare products claim to be natural but use synthetic dyes, parabens or petrochemicals, or are tested on animals," she says. "I could not even pronounce some of the ingredients on the list. More (ingredients) does not mean it is better."

Thus, six years ago, she turned her kitchen in her three-bedroom house in Sydney - where she was based then, while working in public relations - into a "big beauty laboratory". In it, she experimented with ingredients such as mint, olive oil, lemon, green tea and brown rice - which have distinctive scents or textures and have various benefits for the skin - to create body scrubs, salt, soaps and lotions. She stores the products in her fridge: made of unprocessed ingredients, they have a shorter shelf life than over-the-counter ones. Her scrubs and salts last a year, while the lotions last two years.

In 2008, she returned to Singapore. And in 2012, she quit her public relations job to focus on her beauty craft, before launching her Mandy T Skincare line last June.

To prepare for the launch, she spent a year travelling to countries such as the United States, Australia, Thailand, Japan and South Korea.

There, she scoured trade shows and factories to find suppliers of raw ingredients for her beauty products. She also acquired the technical know-how to formulate beauty products without formal training.

As a final touch, she designed the website and packaging for her products. Mandy T's 28 varieties are available online from www.mandytskincare.com, as well as from shops such as Tyrwhitt General **Company** on Tyrwhitt Road. Prices are between \$39 for bath salts and \$59 for body creams.

Each batch of about 50 items takes two hours on average to produce. Customers do not have to refrigerate the products, but are advised to keep them at room temperature under 30 deg C and out of direct sunlight.

Her holidays abroad have since become opportunities to explore new ingredients for her wares. Recent shopping hauls include a mango plant from Australia and a luggage full of raw tea leaves from Sri Lanka.

She has also consigned her favourite beverage, Arabic coffee, to the beauty drawing **board**, combining it with coconut as a body scrub.

But each ingredient comes with limitations. Coffee beans, for example, have a rough and coarse texture and do not make smooth lotions.

Turning a hobby into a viable business has been a "dream come true", says Ms Tan, who declines to reveal sales figures but says she broke even in three months, starting with a "low five-figure sum".

"When I make my products, my mindset is that I am creating it for myself - just on a slightly larger scale," she says.

"I am a bit of a craft cavewoman: I love making and using handmade things such as pottery, and now beauty products."

Kezia Toh

A DOSE OF SOMETHING GOOD

Looking for a scented candle for his wife a few years ago, freelance creative advertising director Robert Upton went home from stores here empty-handed.

Tired of not finding any with a fragrance that was special, Mr Upton, 42, decided he would make his own - despite not knowing how to. It was the birth of A Dose Of Something Good, his 18-month-old candle business.

The Australian-born, Singapore permanent resident studied perfumery online and read books on how to make scents. The first candle he made, a rose-scented one, received the stamp of approval from his wife, Ms Goh Ling Ling, 39, bag designer and owner of home-grown label Ling Wu. They have three children - two girls and a boy - aged between three and 10 years old.

He also drew good reviews from friends and family whom he made candles for. He tinkered with scents and wax for initial prototypes for about two years before he was ready to sell them.

Today, he has four ready-to-sell scents: Rose Your Bottega, a sweet scented candle made with a combination of roses and lychee; Orange Flower Tattoo, a mix of jasmine and orange flowers; the more masculine scented The Violent Woods, made with violet leaf, cedarwood and oakmoss; and Verbena Round The World, made with verbena, lemon and vanilla. He will launch two new ones in September.

He buys a high-quality paraffin-vegetable blend wax from Canada - he orders 10 27kg blocks at one go, which he keeps in a storage facility - lead-free wicks from Germany and hand-cast porcelain containers from **China**.

After "sketching" the scent he wants by mixing essential oils, he works with a local perfumery to get the right scent and to produce it in larger batches. He bought a machine from America which can melt 22kg of wax at one go.

Mr Upton, a graduate of Swinburne School of Design in Melbourne, put in about \$10,000 of his savings to fund the start-up.

He sells the \$68 candles on www.dose.sg and other online platforms such as Haystakt, a marketplace for independent sellers. They are also available in stores such as menswear shop Benjamin Barker and furniture label Grafunkt in **Park** Mall. He takes orders for about 10 to 20 candles every week.

While he still has a day job - he now works on a project basis at an international advertising agency with a Singapore office, Mr Upton turns his open-concept kitchen in his 1,600 sq ft condominium unit into an assembly line a few nights a week to handpour the candles. He makes about 50 a week and takes about three hours each night.

His big break came last Christmas when Robinsons Orchard commissioned him to produce 600 candles for its cardmembers. He created lemongrass and ginger, and gardenia and citrus candles specially for the store.

The highlight of the project: His logo shared the space on the porcelain cup with the Robinsons Orchard one. The words A Dose Of Something Good encased in a circle make up his brand's symbol.

"I didn't think my logo would be on it," he says. "But for a big **company** to be supportive of a small, local business like mine... that's really encouraging that it's not just the well-known names which can collaborate with them. It's good marketing for me too."

For now, home doubles as a workspace for the business, he says, as "rent for a place outside is just too expensive". It is also part of the reason he is not looking at opening a brick-and-mortar store just yet.

He adds: "There are still bills to pay and I have kids to feed. The candles aren't making me that kind of money to allow me to quit my job. There are also more considerations like finding the right location and being able to produce enough candles to meet demand. Right now, it's quite manageable and I see it more of something that I do in my free time, and it's quite enjoyable.

"I don't want the move to a brick-and-mortar store to be premature. I could end up hating the candle-making business if I don't plan it right."

Natasha Ann Zachariah

CARRIE K.

One ring convinced Carolyn Kan that she had found her calling.

The burnt-out advertising executive had quit her job at M&C Saatchi in 2008, leaving a 12-year career to embark on a year-long sabbatical. She travelled through Britain, France and Italy, where she began a month-long apprenticeship at a silversmith's shop in Florence.

As her sabbatical wound towards its end, she faced the decision on what to do with her life.

The answer came to her in July 2009. Rain was falling outside the silversmith's shop while she was inside, meticulously polishing the first silver ring she made.

"Suddenly, the sun shone through the window, lit up my ring and I just knew," recalls Ms Kan, 42.

"I realised I wanted to spend the rest of my life as a silversmith. It was a real epiphany, like something out of a Hollywood movie."

She returned to Singapore and enrolled in a two-year silversmithing programme at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa). A year later, in 2010, her jewellery label Carrie K. won Elle Magazine's award for Jewellery Designer of the Year.

Four years on, she now has a 80 sq m studio and showroom in Bukit Timah Road - a far cry from the early days of crafting on the kitchen table in her East Coast flat.

Her designs are **sold** in nine stores here, such as Strangelets in Yong Siak Street and Front Row in the Raffles **Hotel** Arcade; in eight countries, spanning Saudi Arabia, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Italy, the United States and **China**; and online on her website (www.carriekrocks.com).

Last year, she **sold** almost 2,000 pieces worldwide.

She designs and makes the prototypes for four collections a year herself. Demand is so high for her pieces that, since 2011, she has been flying to Turkey, Italy and Thailand four or five times a year to teach artisans how to make her designs by hand to cope with the orders she receives.

Her designs reveal her cheeky sense of humour: These include a diamond-encrusted safety pin ring (\$2,230) and diamond safety pin earrings (\$3,960) from her Reborn collection.

"I like my jewellery to challenge traditional ideas of what is desirable by finding beauty in everyday objects, like a paper clip or a safety pin, which people normally overlook," she says. "I want to encourage society to look a little deeper, inspire them to think playfully about beauty."

She will also launch a wedding collection, to be made in Singapore and **Hong Kong**, later this year.

It takes five days to nine months for the designer to create a piece of jewellery. Her creations are priced from \$100 for a single paperclip earring to \$600 for a razor bracelet. Bespoke fine jewellery items, which she comes up with according to a client's preferences, start at \$2,500 and can cost upwards of \$45,000, for, say, a two-carat diamond engagement ring.

Still, she favours silver for her jewellery, because its patina and colour changes with the wearer and time.

"I want to bring people back to making and using things which will last and grow," she says. "I receive instant gratification when I see people's positive reactions to my work and know it is something they will keep and pass down in their family."

Her husband, photographer Chiew Huan Chong, 48, also enrolled in Nafa's silversmith programme last year. He now works as Carrie K.'s head of production and photography, helping his wife to prototype her designs and with overseas quality control. The couple have no children.

She still finds it tough to get the tools and materials she needs in Singapore, ordering them from Italy, **Hong Kong** and the US.

And while there is a growing, supportive community in Singapore who understands how much work goes into a handcrafted item, Ms Kan says that it is small, despite Singapore's affluence.

"We still need to make craftsmanship more accessible here," she says. "In Florence, being a craftsman is an appreciated way of life. They and their goods are valued."

Lydia Vasko

MAKING THE LONG SILVER WORD NECKLACE

Step 1: Ms Kan uses a thin saw, called a piercing saw, to cut her desired shape of the necklace from a thinly hammered sheet of silver.

Step 2: A file is used to smooth the rough edges of the cut silver and give the silver added depth and dimension.

Step 3: Using a small hammer and letter stamps, Ms Kan hammers the chosen word or phrase into the silver.

Step 4: Ms Kan likes her silver pieces to have an antique look, so she dips the silver into a sulphur solution, which oxidises the silver and helps its details stand out.

FABRIX AND MILLER GOODS

In 2004, at the start of his studies at the National University of Singapore, Mr Colin Chen, 31, hunted for a stylish case for his new Apple laptop. He wanted an alternative to the clunky black briefcase-like carriers on the market at the time.

He found none.

So, with \$50 worth of supplies from Spotlight craft store, the son of a seamstress made his first fabric laptop case on his mother's sewing machine.

Friends and classmates complimented him on the case, which encouraged him to turn his case-making talent into a business.

While other students partied after classes, he spent the next three years sewing cases in his dormitory room when not studying for his business degree.

He also learnt basic computer programming and set up a website to sell his products online, as well as at university fairs, for \$30 to \$40 a pop.

In 2006, he registered his **company**, Fabrix. When he graduated in 2007, he was making a few hundred dollars to \$1,000 a month selling his fabric carrier cases, which are recognised for their stripped-down design and fun-yet-functional fabrics.

Worried about Fabrix's ability to sustain him full time, he took a job in public relations, but quit after a couple months.

"The level of satisfaction wasn't the same. I wanted to be in control of the product and the brand I was invested in," he says.

Fabrix goods are hand- or machine-sewn in Singapore by a team of more than 10 local tailors and seamstresses to keep up with demand, while he focuses on product design.

The bachelor sells about 100 units a month through online sales and about 10 local stores, such as Cumulus and Tyrwhitt General **Company** store in Tyrwhitt Road, which Mr Chen co-owns with two friends: Mr Irwin Lim, 34, who works in retail distribution, and Mr Wong Ying Ming, 31, a sports marketer.

He has also expanded his range from simple laptop and iPhone cases to tote bags and clutches.

To these, he has also added leather details, a skill he picked up in 2010 by attending workshops in **Hong Kong** and Japan.

His interest in leather work has grown into another label. Miller Goods, formed in 2012, features a small selection of leather accessories such as card holders and phone cases he cuts and hand-sews.

"Miller is an exploratory project I use to push myself in my level of craft," he says. "It teaches me to be detail-oriented and meticulous and I enjoy designing the pieces."

"I like to be the guy who solves problems or fills gaps in the market, creates designs and make products which will be useful to people."

Lydia Vasko

BAMBOOBEE BICYCLE AND GREENCHAMP BIKES

Move over, BMX. A made-in-Singapore bamboo bike is making inroads with cyclists - and their kids.

After launching the Bamboobee Bicycle range made from the sustainable material last year, Mr Sunny Chuah has teamed up with Dutchman Daniel Heerkens to move into the children's market with the GreenChamp Bike, a balance bike for tykes aged 18 months to five years.

It will be launched on crowdfunding portal Kickstarter on Friday to raise €20,000 (S\$34,228) to fund the project. Their Kickstarter project will end after 30 days and those who pledge \$190 will secure themselves a bicycle.

Mr Chuah and Mr Heerkens will be able to make between 300 and 500 bicycles once the project is launched, though the price for the bicycle after the Kickstarter project has yet to be determined.

"There aren't a lot of toys that are made sustainably, so it was an area we wanted to explore," says Mr Heerkens, 28, who is head of marketing and sales of GreenChamp Bikes and engaged to a Singaporean. "It doesn't take away the joy of riding just because it's made of bamboo."

Already, there is buzz about it. Design portals such as Inhabitat, Designboom and Trendhunter have lauded the concept for being sustainable, with Trendhunter calling it the "ideal bike" for parents looking to teach children about being environmentally friendly.

GreenChamp Bike's grown-up sibling, the Bamboobee Bicycle, was given a resounding thumbs up from netizens last year, when 120 people from around the world pledged US\$63,879 (S\$80,027) to the project - US\$20,000 more than what was needed to get it off the ground.

Bamboobee Bicycle (www.bamboobee.net) has three different options, ranging in price from US\$600 for a Green Warrior, which will launch in the next couple of weeks, to US\$3,399 for a Flight bike. The **company** has **sold** 300 bicycles since they were launched online.

Mr Chuah says the excitement online over these bicycles is part of the growing endorsement of handmade products.

The Singapore Management University business graduate, 28, says: "It's happening internationally and not just with bicycles, but also other products, such as leather goods. People want something that's crafted by hand. There's a transition in the market, where buyers want something that's not mass-produced."

Mr Chuah, who is single, tested his first Bamboobee bicycle prototype in 2011 by riding it 6,103km through Central Asia over nine months.

He says: "If you compare our bicycles' prices with those of the same standard, they are very similar to what's in the market, so I think they are value for money."

All the Bamboobee models and the GreenChamp Bike are designed, tested and assembled by a team of five in a studio space in Eunos. There, a team of five assembles the bicycles. Each GreenChamp Bike takes between 30 minutes and an hour to assemble, while the adult versions can take almost three hours.

The rides are made of bamboo harvested in a village in the mountainous region of Hunan province. The material is shipped to a village in Guangzhou, where each part of the bicycle is crafted by hand before being sent to Singapore.

Initially, Mr Chuah had bought the bamboo from a supplier in Singapore for local assembly, but it was expensive and increased his overheads.

By chance, he met a furniture craftsman from a village in Cao He, who specialised in wood furniture in Guangzhou. Mr Chuah was there to check out workshops to find which ones could get his bicycles made well - and cheaper - in **China** when he met the craftsman, who was unemployed then.

The craftsman, confident of his skill, proposed that they work together to make the bamboo parts. So Mr Chuah employed him to work on Bamboobee bicycles. Once the parts are crafted, they are shipped to Singapore, where Mr Chuah and his team assemble them into bikes.

He says: "I went straight to the source of the bamboo and it cut my price by about 40 per cent. I could cut the price even more by going to cheaper sources, but I want the parts to be of a certain standard.

"It's a labour-intensive process, but we believe we have a good product," he says.

Natasha Ann Zachariah

BRICKSBEN

When Mr Jeffrey Kong topped his primary school cohort at age seven, his parents offered him a choice of reward: a remote-controlled car or Lego bricks.

"It was an obvious choice," says Mr Kong, who made a beeline for the plastic toy blocks. He says: "It was not just a bunch of bricks, but a tool with which I could build all sorts of things."

This included a windmill and a van, which he toggled with for the next six years, before entering what Lego enthusiasts dub the "dark ages".

This refers to one's teenage years, when one has little spare cash to **buy** Lego bricks, emerging into the light only when one begins to draw a salary, explains Mr Kong, now 34 and a lifestyle magazine editor, with a grin.

When he started work in 2003 as an army regular, he built up his Lego collection, constructing creations such as a camera and telephone.

He met Mr Benjamin Cheh, 31, at a previous job in 2008 and the pair bonded over Lego. They decided to pool their strengths: Mr Kong prefers to build small creations reminiscent of yesteryear, such as a mini cassette tape and typewriter, while Mr Cheh likes larger pieces such as warriors and robots.

Mr Cheh, a senior graphic designer who is single, says he got hooked on Lego while watching anime as a child. He particularly enjoys building robots of his childhood, with "hidden parts with mysterious functions", he says.

His robots, for example, come with detachable hinges that open to reveal their Lego "skeleton".

He and Mr Kong started their online business, Bricksben (www.bricksben.com), in 2012 to sell these pieces, take on commissions as well as conduct workshops.

Says Mr Kong: "I love to spread the joy of the brick, because it brought me comfort and joy when I was depressed."

Working on Lego creations helped keep him strong while his father, a former shipyard storekeeper, battled terminal lung cancer for three months before he died in 2012, says Mr Kong. He is married to a 34-year-old housewife. They have a pair of six-month-old twins, a boy and girl.

He now keeps 11 containers jammed with about 100,000 Lego bricks at home, which he uses for creations such as a red "balloon" dog and a white "paper" crane.

"Playing with Lego bricks opens up many possibilities: placing bricks upside down or turning things around can create the illusion of a piece being inflated," he explains.

His pieces cost between \$20 and \$300, though recent large pieces such as a dragon playground model - based on the iconic Toa Payoh play area - go for \$1,000, although it has yet to find a buyer. Mr Cheh's creations cost between \$300 and \$2,000.

The pair make about 10 to 20 sales a month. There have also been commissions: an industrial building **company** got them to supply 200 namecard holders in the shape of its building, for \$30 a piece, last year.

But sales are not sufficient for the pair to give up their day jobs, due to the cost of pricey Lego bricks, they say. Their creations often use custom-order bricks shipped from overseas, rather than off-the-shelf ones. It is also difficult to put a price tag on their craft.

Mr Kong says he charged a customer \$50 for a 200-piece Santa sled beneath an ERP gantry last year. After comparing prices with others who make their own Lego creations, he thinks he should have charged about \$90.

He adds: "But it depends on the buyer: some are genuinely interested in my craft and ask lots of questions, and perhaps I can charge a little less."

Kezia Toh

ART After two years running menswear accessories brand Oldman Handmade, which specialises in brightly coloured and patterned bow ties, suspenders and ties, designer Maureen Koh, 24, is considering closing shop as her costs are too high. -- ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

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