

# A stitch in time

Fair, flexible and sustainable employment for people living in marginalised communities is a significant concern. Here, **Jemma Galvin** speaks to the woman behind social enterprise Cambodia Knits, and hears how she's working toward bettering this situation – one cute little monster at a time

**H**ER vacant eyes stare off into the distance, while her wild teeth are enough to make any dentist rub their hands together in anticipation of how much work is needed. Her multi-coloured skin is bumpy from head to toe and her limbs are so disproportionate to her body it's surprising she can even function. Not that she needs to. Her name is Penelope and, despite her unconventional looks, she is one of the hottest new products to come out of Cambodia.

Penelope is a Monster Doll. Hand-stitched and made of top quality materials – not to mention a lot of love – she is a product of Cambodia Knits, a social enterprise aiming to create fair, flexible and sustainable employment and income for people living in marginalised, specifically relocated, communities surrounding Phnom Penh.

Monika Nowaczyk, 36, is the founder and managing director of Cambodia Knits. Born in Poland, she and her family fled the communist country when she was a child in the hope of finding a better life.

After spending her childhood in Canada, Nowaczyk's following years took in a number of other places, but since landing in the Kingdom five years ago she has become yet another expat who initially came for a short trip but ended up staying much, much longer.

A friendly, wide-eyed brunette, Nowaczyk says she was first inspired to establish the social enterprise after coming across an article written about Samantha Morshed and the socially responsible, knitting-based organisation she founded in Bangladesh. Morshed began with an initial investment of only \$500 back in 2005, and today employs over 3000



Monika Nowaczyk is the founder of Cambodia Knits, a social enterprise helping relocated communities break the cycle of poverty. WESLEY MONTS

women and exports more than 30,000 children's products and clothing items to international buyers each month.

Although Morshed's initiative encompasses only women, Nowaczyk employs men, too.

"It's not just women who find it difficult to find work in cities when they're living in relocated communities," says Nowaczyk. "In fact, two of our best knitters are men," she adds, pointing out that

it is often easy to train a man in Cambodia Knits' practices because more men than women are literate.

But the fact that literacy rates in Cambodia's rural and disadvantaged communities are low hasn't stopped Cambodia Knits from including these people in their program.

"Some of our female workers are illiterate so we devised a pictorial method for them to learn our patterns. Rather than words, we have numbers that correlate to the two stitches that

apply to knitting," she explains.

Nowaczyk adds that many are extremely fast learners – it takes less than four weeks to train a new employee – citing in particular two sisters from the Cham community affected by last year's devastating fire in Phnom Penh's Russey Keo district. She says they have excelled not only in working with yarn, but are now skilled in working with delicate lace and designing their own products as well. She says she's shown their work to international contacts and the feedback has been nothing but positive.

Before founding Cambodia Knits, Nowaczyk worked in Ratanakiri province for CARE Cambodia and also met her husband, Sok Yeng, who she says is the business brain behind the whole Cambodia Knits operation.

"I never wanted to have my own business," she confesses. "I just wanted to work towards training people and giving them the skills they need to generate a sustainable income. If it weren't for Yeng, there's no way we'd be where we are today."

And it seems the two make for a dynamic business duo. The organisation has stockists not only in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville, but also in Australia, the US, Singapore and Switzerland, with plans to expand further throughout Europe.

Currently, the Cambodia Knits product selection consists of two ranges: the Monster Dolls and Animals and a range of cute finger puppets, also known as Bunny Nuggets. The latter are loved even by celebrities – the Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation purchased a couple of sets for its Samlot Millennium Village in Battambang province.

It's clear from talking to Nowaczyk that her enterprise has gone from strength to strength, not least due to her obvious passion for knitting and the opportunities it's provided to some of Cambodia's most vulnerable.

According to Nowaczyk, 2011 will see a streamlined range of dolls, animals and finger puppets, as well as a new design – one that is made of good material and also reflects the community which made it. "We want it to tell a story. The interesting back-story behind the Monster will be the most important part," says Nowaczyk.

For more information on Cambodia Knits, log on to [www.cambodiaknits.com](http://www.cambodiaknits.com) or visit a store that stocks their products such as Chilli Kids (inside the Subtyl boutique) at #43Eo Street 240, Phnom Penh; Circle Boutique, Pub Street, Siem Reap; or at XIA Gifts and Souvenirs in Sihanoukville. Also, if you'd like to sponsor a knitter, email [info@cambodiaknits.com](mailto:info@cambodiaknits.com) 

## Recent openings in Phnom Penh

### Monsoon-Gifts from Southeast Asia

Clueless as to what to send your friends and family from Cambodia? Then check-out the recently opened souvenir and gift shop Monsoon-Gifts from Southeast Asia. With its classy ambience and a wide range of high-quality Asian products, the shop differs from the many mediocre tourist shops around town. While inexpensive scarves priced from \$1.50 to \$4.50, candles for \$5 and jewellery for up to \$20 can be purchased, the Buddhist and Hindu statues sell for several hundred dollars, and some of the paintings cross the \$1000 mark.

Monsoon-Gifts from Southeast Asia is located at #10 Street 278, Phnom Penh. Open daily from 8:30am to 9pm.

### Elsewhere

A second branch of the Elsewhere shop enriches the boutique row of Street 240. "Our new shop is more modern and stylish than the Elsewhere shop which accompanies Elsewhere lounge and pool on street 278, and focuses on women only," 22-year-old shop assistant Mouirath explains. Prices depend on the material used by the boutique's skilled tailor, with all clothes being made of silk, cotton or linen. The tops which go for \$20-\$35 and the dresses for \$30-\$40 can be combined with scarves which cost about \$20, shoes for \$45 and necklaces for up to \$160.

Elsewhere is located at #52D Street 240. Open daily from 10am to 9pm.

### Khmer Royal Boutique

Breezy summer dresses and shirts can be found in the recently opened Khmer Royal Boutique. "While so far our clothes are designed for middle-aged and elderly women, we plan to extend our offer to men and younger women," says Solak Thay, the owner, who employs her own tailor. Besides the clothes, which are priced between \$19-\$39, cotton scarves can be bought for \$9 and hand-made jewellery is offered from \$10-\$39. "Oh, and the furniture we are sitting on can be ordered as well," Solak explains, pointing out a catalogue with baskets and furniture made from water hyacinth with prices ranging from \$5 for a small basket to \$400 for a set of furniture.

Khmer Royal Boutique is located at #6A Street 57, Phnom Penh, next to the Khmer Royal Gifts and Home Decoration shop. Open daily from 8am to 9pm.



A Penelope Monster Doll and some friends hang out at the Chilli Kids store on Street 240. WESLEY MONTS