

## Aptly Immortalizing a Cultural Heritage

De Lara Agsam Novelties

*Forest products extracted and processed by the indigenous groups in the South are being worn by people in high places, not only as a fashion statement, but also as an expression of support for nature and culture.*



**JEWEL OF THE NORTH**  
Norma de Lara, proprietor of De Lara Agsam Novelties, smiles as she shows off her elegant necklace that exhibits the ingenuity of Surigao del Sur's indigenous people.



**CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**  
The fashionable neckpieces are made from *agsam* fiber, which are traditionally woven as anklets or bracelets by members of the indigenous Mamanwa tribe. De Lara has transformed its designs by adding beads and gems, enhancing the beauty of the native craft to compete with the growing market of modern fashion accessories.



**MAMANWA'S CENTURIES-OLD ART**  
The *agsam* strips from the fern's long stem are the materials used for making the accessories that the Mamanwa tribe has been using in weaving and crafting for several centuries.



**DID YOU KNOW?**  
*Agsam* vine is a plant endemic in Surigao del Sur. To create a black shade of *Agsam* piece, the *Agsam* material must be buried in mud for three to five days.

Unusual products from a forest material are now finding their way into the international lifestyle market and the wardrobes of the rich and famous. Thanks to a woman entrepreneur and the *Lumads* of Surigao del Sur.

Those bracelets, anklets, necklaces, belts, hair clips, headbands, and earrings of ethno-modern designs are showcased by Norma de Lara in her novelty shop at her residence in Barangay Nurcia in the coastal Lanuza town, with around 12,000 various indigenous tribal residents.

Many of them are Norma's fashion accessory makers—mostly stay-at-home mothers working in their spare time.

They work on the *agsam* vine (*Lygodium circinnatum*), an invasive evergreen climbing fern that is able to crawl up to the top of trees, smother forest plants, prevent the growth of other species, and feed wild fires.

As such, Norma's business helps keep a potential forest problem in check while producing exotic lifestyle products.

Norma uses gems and beads made of wood and crystals as accents to her

products. The most famous of which are the "Wet and Wear" bracelets, that seem too small to fit an average-size wrist.

Soaking the bracelet in water, though, loosens it enough for the hand to slip through and have it hug the wrist comfortably upon drying. The bracelet is retailed at only Php 10 each, making it a big hit locally and abroad.

Nonetheless, it had taken quite a while before Norma and her husband got into their own business. Norma used to be a member of the Lanuza Agham Crafts Development Cooperative, an association of mostly wives of fishermen and construction workers in the town.

While she learned from her mother how to weave *agsam* vines since she was a kid, it was only in 1996 when she took over the cooperative's helm that she fully learned about its business aspect and operations, especially from the many seminars sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) for micro, small, and medium enterprises.

The DTI seminars included production costing and product pricing, online marketing, customer engagement and



**HELPING PEOPLE**  
The people in Barangay Nurcia, Lanuza earn extra income for their families by hand weaving *agsam* fibers into necklaces and bracelets. The woven products have become a sustainable source of livelihood for the community and other women from nearby villages and towns in Surigao del Sur.

retention, negotiation skills, maximization of trade fair participation, and brand and market development, among others.

DTI's help has expanded the cooperative's client base and enabled Norma to participate in trade fairs in Manila, where she met her own future customers, including those from overseas, before she and her husband started their own business in 2003.

Now, some 60 people regularly weave *agsam* for her business. Daily, each weaver can make an average of 20 bracelets, which Norma buys by piece and sells mostly in bulk. Paying in cash for both the raw materials and the finished products ensures an adequately stable stock position.

Norma buys her *agsam* vines from only the Mamanwa tribe because of their expertise in sourcing the right ones from the right spots in the forest. "Since I began buying in cash all that the tribesmen could deliver, they stopped looking for any other client to sell their *agsam* vines," Norma says in Filipino.

She also used to make bags made of *agsam*, but production ceased two years ago when her husband, who was the expert in the craft, died of an illness. His death stopped neither her business operations nor DTI's assistance.

"The DTI seminars also taught us to adopt division of labor to develop skills specialization, standardize quality at every phase of production, and speed up the work process," she explains.

No wonder her products are visibly worn by entertainment and political celebrities, aptly immortalizing a cultural heritage and bringing it to the next level.

## SUCCESS TIPS

- 1 Don't be shy to seek help.
- 2 Be firm in your pursuits.
- 3 Get ready for hard work.
- 4 Don't promise what you can't deliver.

## HOW DTI HELPED

Norma de Lara was a participant of DTI-sponsored seminars such as production costing, product pricing, online marketing, customer engagement and retention, negotiation skills. Participation in DTI-sponsored trade fairs such as *SIKAP: Pinoy* enabled her business, De Lara *Agsam* Novelties, to expand its client base.



## Treating Agsam Fibers

- 1 Soak *agsam* stalks in mangrove mud for at least 24 hours to make them acquire a deep dark color.
- 2 Dry them for a day or two but not in direct sunlight to keep their elasticity.
- 3 Distribute them to weavers for processing into finished products.