

Hooked on Embroidery

Prime Legacy Inc.

A family business that began with embroidery is now able to supply bags to the United States and Japan at huge volumes to retain its grip on its captive markets.

WITH THE RIGHT MINDSET
Jocelyn Antonio's entrepreneurial attitude and passion for product designing have successfully transformed their simple beaded bag business into a global venture.



A company in Daraga, Albay, sells only one type of abaca handicraft—bags. Unlike any other abaca bag, it is uniquely embroidered.

That was how Prime Legacy Inc., a second-generation native bag exporter, earned its market niche in Japan and the United States. Its exports include embroidered renditions of an iconic Japanese cat and the famous American mouse, both licensed by their owners.

Prime Legacy caters solely to the middle segment of the market. "We can't compete with high-volume exporters where the orders are big but the margin is low. Neither in the high-end market where margins are big but the orders are limited," says Prime Legacy owner and general manager Jocelyn Antonio.

"80 percent of our market is Japan. We had one order worth US\$ 50,000," Jocelyn says. "Sometimes the company would even decline large-volume orders within a limited time frame. We don't want the quality to suffer."

UNIQUENESS MATTERS

"I think we're the only one who does the intricate designs. Anybody can make a knot, but not all can make a uniform knot." Jocelyn admits it is a challenge.

Moreover, the company uses only premium abaca fiber. Not the thick ones, but the thin twines that require special skills. Bicol, according to Jocelyn, is still the best source of

abaca. Those from other regions, she says, tend to be brittle.

The bags are totally Bicolano. From the abaca farms in Goa, Camarines Sur and Tiwi, Albay, processors strip the plant into fibers. The communities in Mallipot, Albay then spin the fibers into yarn, and dye where needed. These are then woven into fabric, sewn into form, and installed with handles. Finally, the bags are delivered to the company factory in Daraga for embroidery. It has taken the company 17 years, though, to complete and perfect this production cycle.

SHOPHOUSE BY THE TRAIN STATION

The company started as a mere cut-and-sew operation by Jocelyn's parents in 1959.

"It was so small," Jocelyn recalls about the shophouse near the train station, "where they'd sell the bags to passengers and passersby."

Jocelyn's mother did the designs, and her father did the marketing. "They didn't have a display room. They'd finish one bag and then sell it."

In 2001, Jocelyn's parents, then in their 80s, retired, and turned the business into a family corporation.

THE CHALLENGES

Unfortunately, the expert embroiders were aging and their children were losing interest in the craft in favor of jobs in the cities, or in other industries generating higher returns than abaca.

Moreover, stringing abaca fibers together in long strands on the streets, exposed to the elements, makes them hard to come by during rainy days.

SURMOUNTING HURDLES

The straight-forward solutions were simply better pay and improved working facilities. But during the corporation's early years, the family had just enough money to pay the employees.

After three years, Jocelyn considered closing shop. "We didn't have any orders for exports."

Like a godsend, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) invited Prime Legacy to regional and national trade fairs to promote Albay's handicrafts.

"After a week, the orders started coming in," Jocelyn says of her company's participation in DTI's Manila FAME which brought Japanese and American clients to Prime Legacy.

Likewise, DTI helped Prime Legacy develop its process flow, system controls, and product costing through export coaching and trainings.

Today, Jocelyn and her family live on the third floor in the now sprawling company compound.

Asked for an unforgettable moment in the company's journey, Jocelyn says, "Our client in Japan gave us this magazine." With eyes beaming, she adds:

"We're in it."



ARTISTRY AND QUALITY
With great artistry and strict adherence to quality, these highly skilled workers go about the process of putting together embroidered handicrafts.



ON A GLOBAL SCALE
Prime Legacy produces quality fine-weave abaca bags with unique hand-beaded designs that have been stocking up shelves of big companies in Japan and the United States.



DID YOU KNOW?
Abaca fibers were already being woven into fabrics and footwear even before Spanish colonization in the 1500s.

HOW DTI HELPED

Prime Legacy was able to find buyers through business matching activities and trade fairs such as the Manila FAME exhibit.