



Ulé Kirá

The Fashion Cycle Meets the Product Life Cycle

Ulé Kirá brand handbags link plastic reuse with the world of women’s fashion through the artistry of a group of women in Cartago.

Ulé Kirá bags have a sleek look and feel reminiscent of modern art, seemingly at odds with the humble origins of the principal raw material used in making them. They are handmade by participants in the project Linking Hands (“Enlazando Manos”) from the brightly colored plastic bags originally destined as packaging for convenience foods such as potato and corn chips.

Ana Quirós first came up with the idea for Linking Hands about two years ago. She was inspired by the CILCA conference on product life cycles, held in Costa Rica in 2005, to use this particular form of consumer waste in a productive way. Quirós emphasizes the importance of the product life-cycle concept in the development of this project as an innovative way



Roxana Canales Anchía: Married 20 years with two girls and a boy. Housewife and doesn't work apart from weaving Ulé Kirá bags. She enjoys being in the house and doesn't get out much. Once a year between January and February she goes with her family to Sapotillal beach to camp.

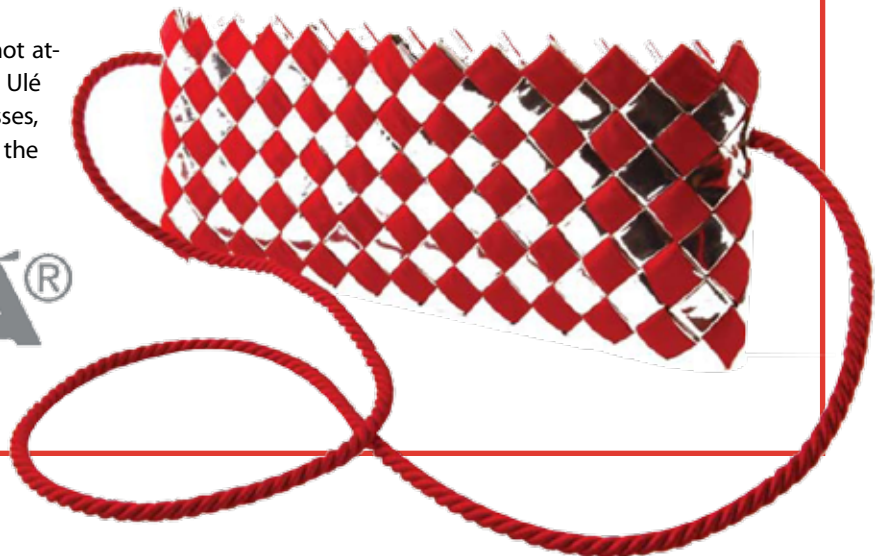
Karol Méndez Canales: 15 years old, in the 7th grade. In addition to making Ulé Kirá bags, she enjoys dance music.

Jazmín Méndez Canales: 16 years old, does not attend school. In addition to weaving Ulé Kirá bags she enjoys cooking classes, French fries, chicken, food in general, the beach and music.



Dania Mendez: Married with 5 children: 4 girls and a boy. In addition to weaving Ule Kira bags she helps her husband with work around the house. They have a shack in Tablón de Guarco, which they have built together. They just celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary in July. Dania has 7 grandchildren: 4 boys and 3 girls with another grandchild on the way.

ÚLE KIRÁ®



to use brightly-colored plastic, otherwise classified as waste. She points out that this polypropylene waste does not easily deteriorate which makes it both a problematic waste product and an oddly appropriate raw material for women's bags.

Home Workshop

The individual members of Linking

Hands work at their own pace and in their own homes in Cot and Ochomogo in Cartago. The group is currently composed of about 20 individuals, overwhelmingly female. After the initial training in October of last year, the women began pro-

ducing bags for sale starting early 2007. Ana Quirós estimates that each woman initially made one or two bags a month but estimates that they are now producing about 4 or 5 per month. "They started out pretty timidly," says Quirós, "following

their training. Little by little, they have been getting more creative, combining colors and making new designs. Some are more creative than others.”

They create these unique works of functional art for a small but growing market, currently comprised of a few collectors and environmental advocates plus the patrons of “La Pulpería de Arte” in Escazú. Retail prices range from \$26 to \$185.

Post-Industrial Waste

Ulé Kirá bags are not currently made of plastic from bags that were actually filled with food. Rather, they are made from plastic waste generated on the factory floor. In Quirós’ words, the plastic they currently use is “post-industrial waste, not post-consumer waste.” Quirós clarifies that they have successfully made articles with “post-consumer” waste, but that the challenges are greater. She states that, “Linking Hands plans on working with post-consumer waste in subsequent phases of development. For that, we will need support such as that provided by the Swiss Embassy in the initial pilot project.” Quirós notes that, “for fashion articles, consumers prefer very consistent finishes, which you can best achieve with post-industrial waste.”

Most of the waste to date has been provided by Alimentos Jacks, which was an early supporter of the project, but Quirós says that the project has received some waste from other sources and is hopeful that this supply of raw material will grow.



Join the Project

There is a very long list of organizations that have helped in the launch of Linking Hands, and the list of individuals that have helped in one way or the other is even longer. Quirós describes the project as a joint effort by her company, Eco-

Global, Centro de Producción Más Limpia, Gente Reciclando and Alcalá. Some of the principal sponsoring organizations have included the Swiss Embassy and Alimentos Jacks de Costa Rica. The project is still very much in its initial stages and is still in need of support.

Quirós is particularly interested in recruiting additional factories as suppliers of waste polypropelene to the weavers of Ulé Kirá. Other areas in which interested individuals or groups may help include legal support, business planning and management, export capacity building, product design and innovation, web site management, internet use, capacity building, and English skills development. Cash donations may be made through EcoGlobal.

It has been said that imitation is the best form of flattery, for others have noticed. “They’re already copying us,” says Ana Quirós. “So consumers need to make sure that they are purchasing a real Ulé Kirá and not a cheap copy.” Fortunately, some things can’t be copied. “It was a real achievement getting the registered trade mark,” notes Quirós. ■

For more information call Ana Quirós at EcoGlobal: 248-1847.
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Ulé Kirá: The name Ulé Kirá means “Stronger Together” in Chiriquí, one of the local native languages.

Details

CILCA: International Conference on Life Cycle Assessment.