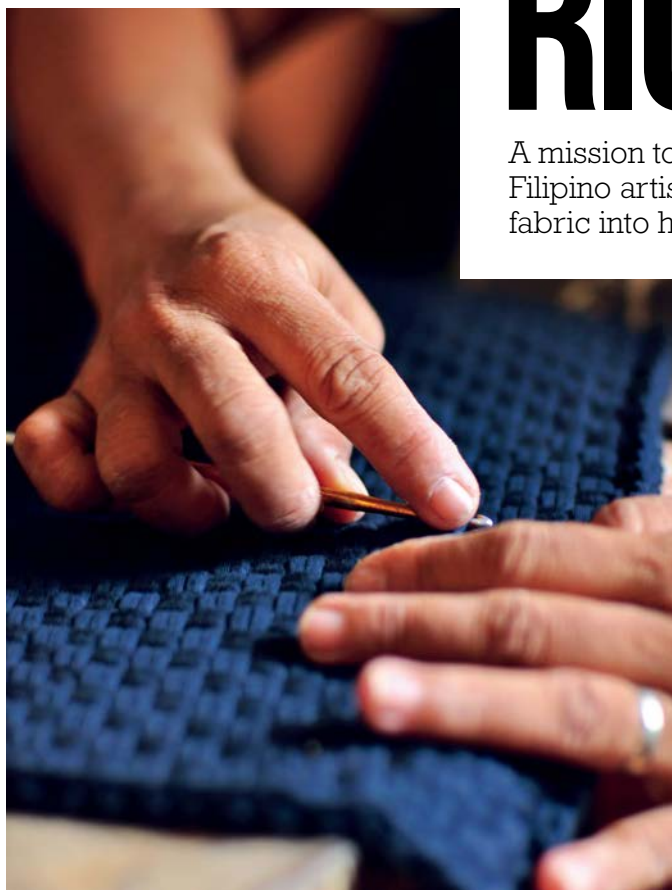




# RAGS TO RICHES

A mission to improve the livelihoods of underprivileged Filipino artisans is transforming lives and turning scrap fabric into high-fashion, one bag at a time.

WORDS: CHITRA SANTHINATHAN PHOTOGRAPHY: AFFENDI ABD/FND



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** An artisan demonstrates the first stage of the weaving process – setting – which acts as the base for each piece; weaves have to be tight for a quality end product; rugs woven by the artisans are ingeniously transformed into fashionable wallets, purses and clutches by the designers who work with Rags2Riches; the artisans sometimes use modified utensils such as this fork as weaving tools.





One of HULMA's artisans cuts strips from a bolt of cloth to weave the rug panels. These days, the artisans no longer have to collect scraps of cloth from dumpsites to weave rugs. Instead, Rags2Riches buys fabric overruns from garment factories for the artisans to work with.



The scene changes rapidly from modern to rural on my drive from Manila's CBD to Caloocan City in the north of the Philippine capital. It's a less than two-hour journey through traffic and I arrive in Caloocan City on a balmy Tuesday afternoon. Though the district is still part of Metro Manila, the pace of life is far removed from that of the big city and shanty towns take the place of skyscrapers here.

Once out of my four-wheel drive vehicle, I cross front porches and backyards, treading carefully over muddy ground to make my way to a community centre in one of the area's *barangays*. Unaccustomed to seeing a stranger in their midst, children peer from behind half-open doors and dogs bark as I gingerly pick my way through a neighbourhood of makeshift tin-roofed homes. I'm here to visit a community of weavers who are working together with Rags2Riches (R2R), a social business enterprise committed to improving the lives of less advantaged Filipino artisans.

## WHAT'S IN A WEAVE?

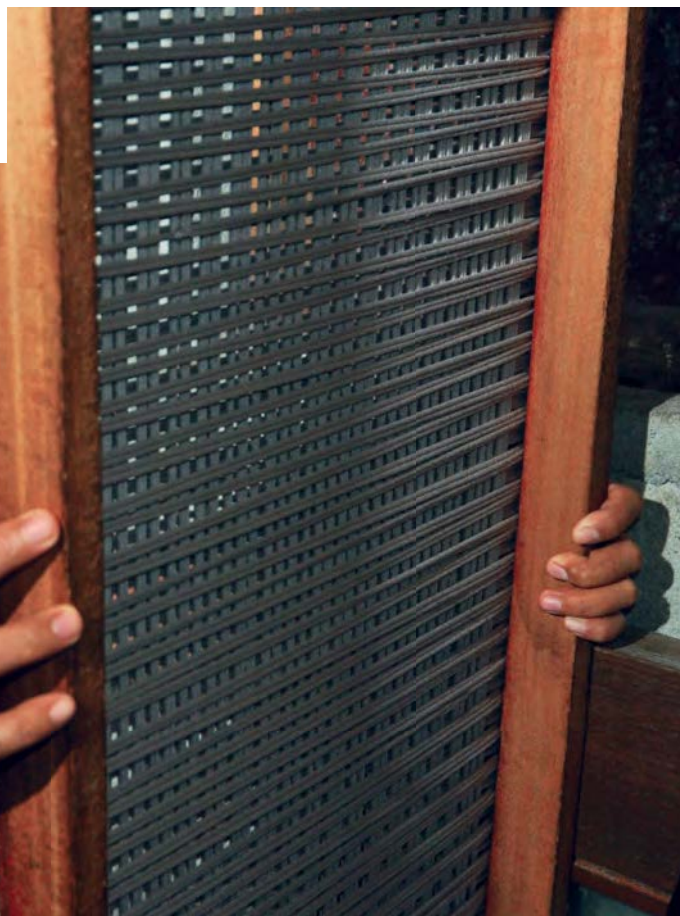
As soon as I enter the centre, which is really a rough-cement walled room attached to someone's home, I'm greeted by a dozen smiling faces and the warmest of Filipino welcomes. The trepidation I was feeling earlier disappears and I begin to see the unfamiliar and stark surroundings in a different light. This is the Homeweavers Upward Looking Micro-Enterprise Association (HULMA), a group of locals who have partnered with R2R to produce the woven panels that make up the company's signature bags.

I meet with Enrique Tango, a local resident and HULMA's community co-ordinator. An odd-job worker who now supplements his family's income with earnings from weaving panels of cloth for R2R, Tango tells me how he has seen the community grow since their involvement with the social enterprise in 2009. "Some of us were already weaving rugs for sale at the local market but

by partnering with R2R, we've improved our skills through training. The money earned has helped us put our kids through school and even university, which is a tremendous leap forward for our community," he says.

I look around the room and see a collective nod of heads, the women and two men (including Tango) work day and night, weaving as many panels as they can to supplement their meagre incomes and ensure their children will not have to face a similar struggle. What surprises me most about this community is how cheerful they appear considering their circumstances. The room, despite its spartan surroundings, is rife with friendly banter, and I'm amazed that even in mid-conversation, these women (and men) do not seem to miss a single weave on the panels they are working on.

The artisans make it seem easy but in truth, it is not as simple as it looks. R2R maintains strict quality control for their products and finished work that does not meet their stringent requirements will be rejected, which translates to a loss of income for a weaver. It is hard work, and the finer the weave, the more time and focus is necessary to satisfactorily complete the job. Being in the company of friends certainly helps break the monotony, and when I ask the maternal figure of the group, Erna Abella, how hard the work is, she replies with a grin, "It's not work at all, it's just as if we're playing!" Curious to see what the final products of these 'playing sessions' were, I happily accept an invitation to visit the R2R showroom in San Juan City, a Manila suburb.



Yonalyn Romero checks to see if she's got her setting right before continuing with her weaving. The setting forms the basis of every rug panel, and if incorrectly done, would result in a poor finished product.





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** A worker puts the finishing touches to a bag in R2R's Manila workshop; the rug panel that made this clutch would have taken an artisan several hours to complete; Susa Marie Estabillo used to scavenge dumpsites for a living before she found a way out of poverty by weaving rugs; R2R has teamed up with AirAsia for a line of exclusively designed bags, which are now available for sale onboard its flights.





## FROM RAGS TO RICHES

In a converted two-storey bungalow along a quiet side-street in San Juan City, I am acquainted with more artisans, the men and women who put the finishing touches on each R2R product, transforming panels of weaves into the fashionable clutches, purses and totes that are fast gaining popularity with Filipino newsmakers and personalities.

I'm introduced to Susa Marie Estabillo, a genial woman in her late 40s who's excited to fill me in on how R2R has improved her livelihood.

Estabillo hails from Payatas, and is part of the pioneer community of weavers recruited by R2R for their enterprise. The mother of five tells me how she used to scavenge for a living, picking up bits and pieces of recyclables from one of Manila's

biggest dumpsites – a site close to Payatas – where much of Manila's urban poor reside. "We used our bare hands or sticks to push aside garbage and forage for things worth salvaging. Those were long days; an average day would mean working eight to 10 hours, roaming the landfill to see what we could find," she recounts. Estabillo scavenged for 14 years, and it was during this time that she began to weave rugs from scraps of cloth dumped in the landfill.

Her lucky break came in 2007 when R2R offered to provide the artisans in her community clean scraps of cloth from garment factory floors, in exchange for woven panels that the organisation would then turn into fashion and home accessories. The offer was a godsend to Estabillo as it provided an alternative means of income. In a short time, she doubled her earnings from an

average of PHP270 (about USD6) a day, and her husband too no longer needed to scavenge for a living, an accomplishment she is immensely proud of. "We have proper jobs now and I know my children will never need to set foot in a dumpsite. There was a time when we did not know where our next meal was coming from, but things have change for the better and I'm glad that we managed to find a way out of that poverty," she said.

During my visit, I hear many success stories similar to Estabillo's. While these artisans are by no means cash rich now, their lives have certainly been enriched since teaming up with R2R. It is a way out of the vicious cycle of poverty. "We never used to think of the future or tomorrow. The money we earned in a day was used to feed our families for that day only. That was our way of life. Not only has R2R provided us jobs, they have also given us financial guidance and encouraged us to open bank accounts and save a portion of our earnings. It is a way out of poverty, a way out for our children," sums up Estabillo.

## FASHION WITH A CONSCIENCE

One of the reasons R2R has been so successful (their bags and home accessories are now being retailed abroad – the UK and soon in the US) is due in part to the sheer determination and foresight of its founders. President and founding partner, Reese Fernandez-Ruiz was only a 21-year-old university student when she visited Payatas for an outreach programme six years ago. The struggles of the residents resonated with Fernandez-Ruiz, who as a child of a missionary mother, had often visited and lived amongst underprivileged communities while growing up. "I had friends who were from these communities, people who had amazing talents but sadly didn't have the opportunities to nurture their gifts. When I saw the artisans of Payatas, I knew that a one-off donation was not going to help."

Together with several like-minded people – among them a priest, teacher and politician – R2R was born with the goal of providing the artisans within these marginalised urban communities the opportunity



Rug panels are fashioned into bags and home accessories by talented artisans working at the Rags2Riches workshop in San Juan City.







## AirAsia Foundation

► As the recipient of a social enterprise award from the AirAsia Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the AirAsia group, Rags2Riches was chosen to pilot the foundation's Artisans Across Asia programme. Under the initiative, 100 artisans from three communities are selected to participate in workshops that will enable them to link up to the Rags2Riches artisans' network and earn regular incomes as weavers. The artisans are also supported through life skills training on financial management, nutrition and healthcare. For more information, go to [facebook.com/airasiafoundation](https://facebook.com/airasiafoundation)

## BAG THAT BAG

► R2R bags designed exclusively for AirAsia are now available onboard AirAsia, AirAsiaX and at AirAsia Megastore [www.airasiamegastore.com](http://www.airasiamegastore.com) Purchase a bag and make a difference.

The walls at HULMA's community weaving centre in Caloocan City are decorated with frames or looms used for weaving the rug panels.





Passionate about improving the lives of artisans from marginalised Filipino communities, Rags2Riches president and founding partner Reese Fernandez-Ruiz found a way to turn their handiwork into high-fashion bags and home accessories.





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Enrique Tango uses his eye for detail to ensure every rug that leaves the centre is perfect; ethnic prints like the *tinalak* are also incorporated into R2R products; an artisan works on bags destined for AirAsia flights.




to make a living from their handiwork. "We saw artisans who were making and selling rugs from scraps of cloth salvaged from dumpsites for only USD0.20 a day. These were talented people who were not earning enough simply due to the lack of opportunities" says Fernandez-Ruiz. What began as a means to market the rugs made by the talented artisans quickly grew into a fashionable enterprise with the help of local designers.

Despite being fresh-faced and barely out of university, Fernandez-Ruiz, with help from the other founding members, approached well-known Filipino designer Rajo Laurel to collaborate with them on a range of products made from up-cycled fabric. Playing around with a sample rug, Laurel fashioned a wine bottle holder, a bag, a wallet and even a yoga mat. The designer signed on as a collaborator, a move that helped R2R establish itself as a brand worth taking notice of. It was only a matter of time before more designers including Hollywood favourite

Oliver Tolentino lent their expertise and fashion savvy to create one-of-a-kind designs. Ranging from USD20 for a coin purse up to USD300 for a *pouf*, R2R has a wide variety of products to choose from. Proud of its Filipino heritage, R2R has also begun incorporating indigenous prints such as the *tinalak* woven by the ethnic T'boli women of Southern Mindanao into their products, particularly handbags, clutches and totes.

## FASHION FOR THE FUTURE

With their products fast gaining popularity with well-heeled and socially conscious Filipinos, R2R is now able to reach out to more communities in the Metro Manila area. At present, the organisation is working with 12 such communities and hopes to extend its work even further, weaving hope for a better future for talented Filipinos. 

Visit <http://rags2riches.ph/> to check out the full range of Rags2Riches products.