

“I’VE HAD NOTHING BUT SUCCESS AND 100 PERCENT INPUT FROM THESE WOMEN, BOTH DURING TRAINING AND WHILE INSTALLING THE EVENTS.”



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AN EVENTFUL LIFE

WORDS ASHLEIGH EBERT **PHOTOGRAPHY** RUSSELL MILLARD

Sarah Gun goes beyond the wow factor to give homeless women a step up in the world.

Do you ever notice the interior décor at award dinners, conferences and luncheons? You know what we mean – the dainty table settings, colourful seat covers, creative PowerPoint presentations and stunning flower arrangements that beautify any function. There's a whole industry set up around making sure every item is just right, and at GOGO Events – a social enterprise focusing on events management and design – there's a life-changing story behind how they got there.

"We educate and train homeless and disadvantaged people to produce décor items and event materials, and then employ these trainees to install our events," owner Sarah Gun says. She's been in charge of the company for 15 years but decided to re-invent it almost three years ago. "I took some time out and tried to

re-envisage how I could continue working within that forum, but make a difference and feel good about what I was doing," she says.

Sarah saw the lack of opportunities for homeless and disadvantaged people to receive training and decided that that was where she could make a difference. She teamed up with two established social enterprises that support people to get out of homelessness or a disadvantaged state, to work with women aged from 20 up to 65. Put simply, GOGO helps these women develop the basic skills required to be job-ready.

"I had this crazy idea that if I convinced my clients that we could engage some of these less fortunate people to work on the design collateral and materials for their events, then we could designate a small amount of their budget into really doing some good," Sarah

says. "I was really lucky that a few of my clients – Toyota, Food South Australia and the Australian Hotels Association – agreed. I said to them, 'We'll have to hold hands on this because there are some risks and we don't actually know what these are until we start'."

Food South Australia was the first to do this and since then, the GOGO team has continued to deliver. Integral to their success is their events sustainability policy, a document Sarah designed to articulate the company's commitment to environmental and socially sustainable practices in event design and management systems.

"I've had nothing but success and 100 percent input from these women, both during training and while installing the events, and our event designs continue to deliver above and beyond our clients' expectations."



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In terms of the training, Sarah has worked with TAFE SA to enable women to learn basic computer skills, which they’ve used to design invitations and menus. She recalls one event where one of the women had skills from her previous employment – as a web designer – before her life unravelled. “We linked her with a mentor and she went on to do all the graphic design for a large event. A lot of these women are highly educated and capable, but for some who don’t have those skills, it is a great opportunity for them to learn and develop.”

At the Adelaide College of the Arts, 10 women screen-printed 650 t-shirts, which were used as chair covers at a major event. This gave them two weeks of experience, working together as a team through physically and mentally challenging work. GOGO has also worked with a floristry lecturer over a four-week period, creating flowers for a Great Gatsby-themed event.

While Sarah is giving these women a second chance in piecing back their lives, she doesn’t refer to herself as a lifesaver. She says she’s merely changing a mindset and taking these women from a state of depression and despair to give them opportunities. She points out that it’s not just about gaining skills, but self-confidence and belief.

“GOGO’s ultimate goal is for these women to develop enough self-belief to gain a sustainable job, and become independent and contributing members of society,” Sarah says. “I want them to have that confidence to say, ‘Yeah I can go to that job interview’. That’s really the key.” And the women are living proof of GOGO’s success – having gone from women from despair to, six months later, full-time employment, study placements or simply unearthing skills they didn’t know they had.

Sarah recently bumped into a young woman who had been suffering from serious

mental health issues the last time they met, and who is now studying literacy and numeracy at TAFE SA.

“She said to me, ‘Sarah, I’m really good at maths. I never knew I had those skills.’”

And a beautiful email from an employee explaining how GOGO acted as a stream of light to her then-dark place was an epitome to Sarah’s goals. “That’s enough to keep me going. It would be nice to change the world on a massive scale but sadly I’m not Bill Gates, so it’s just these little things.”

While the limiting factor is that GOGO Events is niche, Sarah hopes to also work with men and young people. But for the time being, she’s happy interacting with clients to achieve their goals while providing disadvantaged women with much-needed opportunities.

“It’s made my job three times as demanding but it’s worth it.” ♦

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