

By Eugene Yiga

# Good for the planet, good for the people

As the founder of I Scream & Red, Zaid Philander is on a mission to change the world one stitch at a time.



I Scream & Red creates bags from recycled seatbelts, reused car and furniture upholstery as well as rejected fabric sample books. The company binds all its products with cotton and other materials that are natural or organic, which ensures that it is green-endorsed. I Scream & Red also trains and empowers people from previously and currently disadvantaged backgrounds.

## WE SPOKE TO ITS FOUNDER, ZAID PHILANDER, TO FIND OUT MORE:

### What did you do prior to starting your own business?

I was initially part of a Low Carbon Futures campaign, where we drew up statements to hand over to all the ministers around the globe at the environmental summit in Kobe, Japan in 2008. That sparked in me the desire to start something smaller of my own and create planet-friendly goods at home for friends and family.

### Where did the idea come from?

At one point I was a costume designer for a dance company. I would sew costumes backstage for the dancers, some of whom were disabled. Instead of them waiting half naked for me to rush through fixing garments, I started teaching them how to sew their own clothes. I then started introducing this element into my business.

### What motivated you to turn it into a business?

I'm passionate about design and fashion and the way it should serve a purpose in society other than being a way to show

off elitism. Above all, I wanted to create awareness to bring about change in other people's lives. **I want to see and cultivate a society that is eco-conscious, aware of disabilities, and united by what we wear.**

### When did you officially start operating?

In late August 2008 I started making my first bag from recycled seat belts and curtains, as that was the only material available to me at the time. For the first four years, I always treated this as a second job. Three years ago I became more active and began working on the venture full-time.

### How did you get funding to get started?

I never received official funding. Everything I bought for my business was self-funded through second jobs and building profit from the units we sell. The business grew gradually, in an organic manner.

### What's been the biggest difficulty you've had to overcome?

As you can imagine, I had a lot of resistance from my elders who believed that the only careers one should pursue to better our lives should be that of a lawyer or a doctor. This was demotivating for me as a child who wanted to pursue a career in the creative industry, but I managed to see further than that through books and art.

Other than that, being the weirdo kid that made his own little fabric creations was difficult because it made me an easy target to be ridiculed. It also made it difficult as I was a 1990s kid so the only people

▲ Stout Noir backpacks and belted toppers



▲ Messenger sling bag made with recycled seat belt and stalk.



▲ Kids' range

**“We grant people the platform to create their own opportunities.”**

# Q&A:

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who were sewing around me were female factory workers or grannies. **The challenge was to believe that what I made was great.** And let's be honest, when you're creating clothing at such a young age, some of the items won't be that pretty!

### What's been unexpected?

Having to deal with travelling in and out of the townships with a sewing machine in one hand and material in the other often made me a target, but I stuck with it and I am often recognised by others for what I do. I also think the time we were attacked by a gang and our machines were stolen in 2010 was the most damaging experience to the initiative. But my self-motivation and knowing the reward of getting to empower someone else is what kept me going.

### What's the biggest lesson you've learnt?

Making a plan and having the will to continue is the solution to almost any problem. I think a major challenge for me was that I was too short as a kid to be able to sew. But I overcame that by using a contraption made from a crutch and a hosepipe that had me sewing using my elbow. I believe this drive is the simplicity of wanting to make it happen for myself.

### How tough is competition in your sector, and what differentiates you from others?

We are trying to create a planet-friendly movement within the fashion industry that would include any customer going out and wanting to buy a bag. A customer, instead of just hunting for something that looks cool, will hopefully look for a brand like ours that does not just sell “cool”, but sells a story that can change the way we see disabilities, the environment, and the fashion industry.

### How many people do you currently employ?

We are currently a team of six people. However, we do not believe in employing our makers. In fact, we do not provide people with jobs. Instead, they can either produce as many bags as they want for us and earn based on their output, or they can use the skills we teach them to start their own businesses.

We grant people the platform to create their own opportunities. I Scream & Red trains and empowers people from previously and currently disadvantaged backgrounds with the skills to create products and to sustain employment in order to significantly improve their lives.

### What is the best business advice you've ever received?

The best achievements are not what one would consider a milestone. The awards, features and blurbs are great and a wonderful pat on the shoulder, but the truth is that the best achievement we get is what we receive every day. This is the idea of being able to empower someone who has been taught by society to believe that they have a limitation, allowing them to see it as a gift that can never be replaced by anything greater.

### What is your role within the business and what does this involve on a daily basis?

I am the founder of the initiative, so I mainly engage with customers and then also lead a lot of classes in teaching people how to sew. My typical workday is mainly administration, as I am slowly handing the creative work to other makers. In a typical day I could be doing cuttings, running off to meetings with new clients, playing behind a PC, working on marketing, and often doing training with new disabled makers in different townships



Zaid Philander  
Founder of  
I Scream & Red

across Cape Town.

I Scream & Red thrives not on the number of people we would like to work with, but believes in the organic growth of touching the lives of those around us and focusing on the impact we can have on people at no cost to the planet. **What I love most about my work is the chance to empower people and see them change their lives every day.**

### What is your three-year goal for your company?

I would like to make this concept go global. I hope we will reach a point where minorities are working in the fashion industry and being equipped with the means to start businesses of their own, as opposed to them working for conglomerates. I also hope that people see what we do and are inspired to do good themselves in whichever way they can. It's a chance for them to want to share a good story and do it for the betterment of humankind. ■ [editorial@finweek.co.za](mailto:editorial@finweek.co.za)



▲ Customised backpacks made from upcycled flags and four-ton truck seat belts. The bottom of the bags were made from event banners.