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FASHION / DESIGN / FILM / FOOD / TECH / ART / SOCIAL CHANGE / TRAVEL

# REBEL

*with a cause*

SHE STARTED her own shoe label with one big mission – to save her ETHIOPIAN village from poverty. Now Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu is one of AFRICA'S most talked about entrepreneurs. But her shoes, which will bring in US\$20 MILLION by 2016, aren't a 'pity product'.

WORDS: AMY MOLLOY

**H**er footwear label has been dubbed the 'African Nike' and she's vowed to make her company as ubiquitous as Apple. Except Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu isn't sitting at the head of a boardroom in America. The 33-year-old hails from a small village in Ethiopia and her shoe label, soleRebels, is the first and only global retail chain to have been launched from a developing country.

And not only is it successful – with sales into 30 countries and bringing revenue of more than US\$1 million into the East African nation – but every pair of shoes is fair trade, locally produced and handcrafted.

The determined entrepreneur says that rather than holding her back, her impoverished roots have inspired and spurred her on.

Bethlehem was born in a small village in the capital city of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, in 1980, just a few years before extreme drought triggered the worst famine in the country for a century, which resulted in more than 400,000 deaths; the same famine that saw Sir Bob Geldof and his friends take to the stage with Live Aid to raise money and awareness

for the people of Ethiopia.

The daughter of a cook and an electrician, Bethlehem was encouraged by her parents to pursue higher education so that she wouldn't face such hardship. While studying accounting and finance at college, she started work in the marketing section of a clothing store, where the idea of soleRebels was born.

"I realised that Ethiopia had plenty of brands produced by charities but not a single global brand of its own," says Bethlehem. "I had a strong desire to focus my business skills on my community. I didn't want to create a 'pity product'. I want people to love our shoes because they look and feel good."

As a child she remembers being taught to hand-spin cotton by family members and watching traditional weavers called 'shemannies' hand-loom threads into scarves, shawls and blankets, as part of an artisan craft passed down through the generations.

"There were so many talented people in my community but no job opportunities for them," says Bethlehem. "It struck me as both an immense tragedy and also an immense opportunity, especially as there is an abundance of natural resources in Ethiopia, from leather to organic cotton and hemp."

In early 2005, fresh out of college, Bethlehem launched soleRebels from a tiny workshop on her grandmother's

plot of land in the village of Zenabwork. The company's original set-up was modest, as Bethlehem had no investors – just US\$10,000 she had gathered from her husband and immediate family members. Along with four friends, she did everything from design and manufacturing to marketing. And she soon realised she was onto something special.

"We had great success right out of the gate," says Bethlehem. "The product was fresh and had a unique selling point, so we were lucky to attract the attention of iconic retailers like Amazon, Urban Outfitters and Whole Foods, who agreed to stock it."

Over seven years later, despite adding 16 stand-alone stores in Ethiopia and Taiwan to her portfolio, every single pair of shoes is still painstakingly crafted by hand. "Many footwear brands buy mass-produced material," says Bethlehem. "We handcraft our AbyssinianPure™ leather ourselves and spin every single metre of our own fabric."

She sees every pair of shoes – which start at US\$60 – as a work of art, mixing traditional skills with innovative thinking. In 2007, soleRebels became the first footwear brand to be listed as World Fair Trade Organisation certified. This shows that a company's entire practices, from labour and wages to the environment, are fair trade compliant.

"I think the idea of a 'green business' is a bit of a fad," says Bethlehem. >



IMAGE COURTESY OF BETHLEHEM TILAHUN ALEMU

“I prefer to use the terms ‘historically eco-sensible’ and ‘green by heritage’. We embrace old-world production methods, not because some marketing guy tells us to, but because they’re an integral part of Ethiopia’s cultural fabric. In this country, we’ve been recycling for years out of necessity – we just haven’t been calling it recycling.”

The label’s most popular shoes, barabasso and selate (which Ethiopian rebel fighters once famously wore and proved the inspiration for the soleRebels name), feature soles made from recycled tyres that are hand-cut into shape. “In Ethiopia, tyre soles have been worn for decades,” says Bethlehem.

“We’re not only respecting a loving tradition, but also reducing landfill.”

Today, soleRebels operates out of a factory in Addis Ababa and has plans to open 50 more stores in the next 18 months, everywhere from Israel and Japan to Italy, Australia and the US.

Some might say the brand already went global when its online store launched in July 2011, offering free international shipping and a “happySOLES guarantee” on all orders, which means every pair is replaced if the customer isn’t happy.

“I’m really proud that soleRebels has built our supply chain from scratch using local materials, contracts and suppliers,” says Bethlehem.

“There have been challenges of course, such as funding. But I always say that if you are not experiencing obstacles then you are not really in a dynamic and meaningful business.”

To ensure the label has longevity, Bethlehem ensures that new styles are constantly added to the range.

“We experiment with different weaves, finishing and stitches all the time,” she explains. “I want to ensure our focus is fresh and always exciting to our customers. We are able to turn new ideas into real products within three to five



days.” As the brand has grown, so has Bethlehem’s profile.

In August 2011, she was named by *Forbes* magazine in its list of the “20 youngest power women in Africa”.

She was also included in CNN’s “12 female entrepreneurs who changed the way we do business” list alongside Coco Chanel, Elizabeth Arden and Body Shop founder Anita Roddick.

However, it’s the boost that she’s given to her country’s job market that Bethlehem is especially proud of. The impending store expansions are forecast to create more than 600 jobs by the end of 2015. The company pays on average four times the legal Ethiopian minimum wage and all employees receive medical coverage and disability provisions.

“I wanted to create a company where artisan talent is nurtured,” says Bethlehem. “A place that takes a worker who came in as a shoe stitcher, sees his creativity and turns him into a shoe designer, who’s earning as much as a doctor.”

The company’s ethos is summed up by its logo, which features an image of the Koba plant, native to Ethiopia.

“We chose it as our symbol because of its resilient but amazing qualities,” says Bethlehem. “Every part of the Koba plant has a use, from its fibres, which are woven into fabric, to its roots, which can be eaten in times of food shortage. It requires little water and is hardy but effective... just like us!” ■



## bethlehem’s six-point plan for everlasting success

- ✕ Love your customers. Passionately. Always.
- ✕ Create truly awesome products that your customers will love and deliver these products with equally awesome customer-focused service, so they will love you in return.
- ✕ Market honestly – no one likes being scammed.
- ✕ Stay agile and never allow complacency. Be ready to examine all your assumptions and, if need be, to react immediately if those assumptions come up short.
- ✕ Be responsive, especially on social media. Many companies are so busy posting Facebook messages and tweeting, they never take time to listen and respond when customers contact them.
- ✕ Embrace failure. Nobody created true awesomeness by being timid, and thinking big means you’ll probably fail at some point. It’s what you learn and apply from that failure that will enable you to achieve greatness.

IMAGE COURTESY OF BETHLEHEM TILAHUN ALEMU

