

A helping hand (bag)

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Quách describes her work using the words “the spirit of the swallow.” And like the bird’s journey, her collection is inspired by her migration between the beauty of her native land and the free spirit of her adopted land. Photos courtesy of Linh Quách.



SHARING HER BOUNTY: *A portion of her purse proceeds are donated to buy milk, clothing, medical supplies and essentials for orphaned children, who designer Linh Quách visits on her trips back to her homeland.*

She hasn’t made it big yet, but Linh Quách saw something that let her know she’s on her way.

The purse designer was strolling the mall one day when she chanced upon a woman clutching one of her creations.

“I didn’t know who she was, but she was carrying my bag,” recalled Quách, who lives in Mansfield, Texas. “That’s what’s so neat about it.”

Quách stepped up, introduced herself, and asked the stranger where she got her accessory. She learned a friend had bought one first, then the woman decided to get her own.

Quách, 29, recently quit her job as a global accounts manager for American Airlines to pursue her dream of designing handbags that are crafted in Việt Nam. The Yến Linh Collection, using her full name — Yến Linh Quách — has been around for just 18 months, but it’s going strong and its founder has plans to raise her profile in the fashion world.

The seeds of the company were planted in Quách’s trips to her homeland, when she would sketch outfits for tailors to make.

“That’s where I learned about all the craftsmanship and learned about all the beautiful fabrics and silks,” she said. She wanted to bring her designs to the U.S., but — knowing the fashion industry is a tough one to break into — decided to start small, and with a must-have item.

So she found artisans in Hà Nội, Đà Nẵng and Sài Gòn. Sometimes she designed her handbags with their input. Sometimes they designed the handbags with hers. Now, Quách stamps her singular vision on most of what she sells.

Her three lines — Silks, Intricates and Ethnics — are flush with brilliant color and detailed embroidery, ranging from the simple to the flashy.

Her business provides jobs to her family in Việt Nam, who handle most of the operational duties, organizing the dozen artisans who produced a thousand purses last year.

“I thought about what I could do to help and give back to my own native land,” Quách said. “You think about how fortunate you are and what kind of opportunities you have in the U.S. to do what you want to do.”

She began dabbling in the venture in July 2003, selling to friends and through her Website, www.yenlinh.com. Then in early 2004, she decided to get serious, going to her first trade show where boutique owners look for cool stuff to sell and sales representatives look for merchandisers to represent.

“I think I was more scared about that than anything that I’ve ever done,” Quách recalled.

Reaction was mixed. People loved the handbags, but they were hesitant to trust an untested designer.



“When you’re new, it’s hard,” Quách said. “They don’t know who you are, if you’ll be able to meet your requirements. That first one was just a learning experience.”

Still, some were willing to take a chance, among them Kathy Leake and Stephanie Chambers, owners of Back House Beads in Dallas and designers themselves. They specialize in custom jewelry, and they were looking for some accessories to complement their own.



“We saw her handbags and thought they were really pretty,” Chambers said. “something like this and they’re amazed,” she said. “The Vietnamese are not all about a war, it’s about people who can make beautiful artwork. They have this skill that hasn’t been tapped into.”

Because Việt Nam has given so much to her, Quách gives back, as well. She once helped a friend work through the red tape to adopt a Vietnamese orphan, and that exposed her to the needs of Vietnamese orphanages.



“Somebody helped me to be what I am today, and being able to help her bring a child here and give them a chance at a new life is wonderful,” Quách said.

Now she spends up to 20 percent of her earnings to buy milk, clothing, medical supplies, and even an air conditioner for a Vietnamese orphanage. Eventually, Quách plans to start her own charity.

For Linh Quách, there are good days and bad days in the designer handbag business. There are days when her suppliers haven’t sent the right shipment, when she’s gone to another trade show but didn’t get that many orders.

“It can be frustrating because you’ve put your heart and soul into this, and you want it to succeed,” Quách said.

But then there are days when she finds the individuals who believe in her and her product, who marvel at its artistry. And those are the days that keep Quách going while she waits to make it big.