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‘Beekeeping started out as a hobby but now I’ve created a booming business out of beeswax’

Lulu Edy-Roderick, 38, is the assistant to the curator at the Durban Botanic Gardens and lives in Giba Gorge with her husband Keith and her parents-in-law. She’s a beekeeper who makes and sells beeswax-based skin-health products and reusable beeswax wraps.

I’ve always been fascinated by bees – how they colonise, make honey, and the artistry of beekeeping itself. In early 2011 I bought an unassembled beehive that my husband Keith and I assembled. We placed it on one of the shelves of our outdoor laundry on our property, with the intention to reposition it at a later date. We were thrilled when bees slowly started occupying and colonising the boxes but, at that stage, I decided not to do anything more than to observe and admire the new colony. My bee knowledge and beekeeping skills took shape later in 2011 after attending a beekeeping workshop, that was hosted by conservationist, artist and passionate beekeeper Jenny Cullinan at the Durban Botanic Gardens, where I work. By the end of the weekend workshop the Durban Beekeepers Club had been formed, and keen new beekeepers would meet to train in the art of beekeeping. We would visit different hive locations, suit up in protective clothing, open the hives and learn to work with bees.

My first time engaging with bees was electrifying, and I instantly knew that this was not just a passion but a calling. After many hours of opening hives and removing bees, I began to feel confident enough to work with our own hives at home. We take care to choose the days to work with bees: never on a windy or extremely hot day, and they can even sense if I’m ill or in a bad mood. We embrace mindful beekeeping practices and approach the bees with respect and reverence.

MY BIG IDEA

As our hives increased in number, I toyed with the idea of harvesting the honey to sell, but when I spoke to experts they said that I’d need around 5 000 hives to have enough honey to keep up with demand, but I wasn’t ready for that kind of commitment.

Instead, I tapped into my green fingers, using the plants from our garden and the

beeswax from our hives to make skin-health products in our kitchen – mixing up body and face balms and lip nectars and salves. There was trial and error and I did extensive research into the benefits of different plants and their uses, until I created the perfect formulations. I shared them with friends and family, and when they worked wonders for them I decided to formalise my business in 2016 – this is when Lulubee was born. I now trade at local markets around KZN and have a number of stockists I supply. While looking into ways to add to my range of skin-health products, I stumbled across a video on how to make reusable beeswax wraps. I hadn’t heard of them but it turns out that they’re not new – they’re an ancient invention that the Aztecs and Egyptians used to store their food in.

I experimented with melting beeswax and tree resin with natural oils and infusing it into cotton. It took me a couple of months to perfect the prototype, but when it was ready I launched it at the Beekeepers Pollination Symposium in KZN in September 2017. The event was attended mostly by bee farmers and environmentalists – they loved that the wraps were environmentally friendly and reusable; they’re the perfect zero-waste alternative to plastic wrap. We sold out at the symposium; I went home and told Keith that we were onto something big, and the product hasn’t let us down since.

GOING TO MARKET

The beeswax wraps have done better than expected: at local markets people now recognise the product – and me! I also sell the wraps via our online store, as well as at trade shows and expos across KZN, and my products are delivered nationwide. My vision is to have more time to focus on the business, as well as to educate people on the importance of bees and plants, and how to minimise household waste by using smart, natural storage solutions. I’m planning on moving out of my current workshop space at home and moving into a bigger space. I would like this to become the Lulubee headquarters, where it will allow us to add valuable dynamics to the business.

*** Go to lulubee.co.za to view Lulu’s products and to find out more.**