



Meet
Anna Ramokoka
Morake Décor

Morake Décor specialises in top-quality re-upholstery services for a wide range of products and furniture, for private households and the hospitality industry.

Meet owner

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Breaking barriers

Anna grew up on a farm in Rustenburg in the North West, later moving to a rural settlement. She married young and raised two children – a son who was born hearing impaired, and a daughter. Today her son is 36 but sadly her daughter passed away at the age of just 23.

Like many others who hail from rural areas, Anna came to the city in search of work, arriving in Johannesburg in 1995. She was hired as a seamstress by Warren and Sons, and during her time with the company, was able to grow her sewing skills.

“The way they taught us was really beautiful and encouraging,” she explains. “We learnt to make décor items from scratch, such as curtains and cushions, and to do it all ourselves, from working with a pattern to cutting material.”

When one door closes...

Anna enjoyed working for Warren and Sons until 2008 when they unfortunately closed down the business. The company gave Anna two sewing machines, however, and the opportunity to live and work on the property. “I decided I would continue with what I know and start my own business,” says Anna. “The first thing I did was buy a third sewing machine. It was a stressful time, but I had a feeling I would make it because Warren and Sons had taught us to work as if we were running our own businesses. They would

give us our orders and delivery deadlines and the rest was up to us. We also worked on commission.”

Anna got her business off the ground and two years later, when the demand for upholstery was growing, she realised she needed to upskill herself. She signed up for a two-day course to learn the basics and bought her first staple gun. But the next challenge was finding more customers.

Anna left her workshop to sell her items on the side of the road. “I remember I had this chair and had to take it on the taxi with me. The passengers were complaining, but I just stood there and waited. Luckily, the driver was kind; he asked the passengers to help me get on and to make space, as it was getting very late. So that was my first attempt at marketing and one I will never forget!”

Not long afterwards, Anna landed her first big client, who also wanted to help Anna. She advised her to buy a compressor and a different kind of staple gun.

“The client offered to purchase these items for me and said I could pay her back later when I got more work,” Anna explains.

It was around this time that Anna’s hearing-impaired son, Lawrence, became interested in what Anna was doing. He became fascinated with the new compressor. “He also tried to use the staple gun, so I decided to teach him.

At first it wasn't easy but today, Lawrence is doing an amazing job! I can't even do what he can. It's as if he went on a course – his work is so neat, so beautiful. He really has a talent for it.”

A new chapter

Anna and Lawrence became a team; he loved doing the upholstery, happily working until late at night if necessary. Another seamstress came on board to help Anna during busy periods and the business was registered in 2011. If work volumes became too much for the small team, Anna outsourced the work because “we can't say, no, sorry we are too busy. We can't do that. The most important thing is to keep our customers happy, and they must get their orders on time.”

One of Anna's greatest achievements was to buy a car in 2014 and to pay it off in seven years. “No more travelling in taxis with furniture items!” she laughs, explaining that her business made this possible. She encouraged Lawrence to get his driver's licence, “and now we are both driving this little car; we can see clients, go to meetings and collect something small. It has made our lives so much easier.”

She admits, however, that trying to market herself was never her strength and it remained her greatest challenge. “I would feel so stressed about it, especially during times when I didn't have work. I'd be thinking about what I could do and how, but I wouldn't have any ideas. In honesty, I just wanted to sit at my sewing machine and do what made me happy.” Despite

this, Anna succeeded in securing several corporate clients and received repeat business.

Meeting Tony Balabanoff from City Lodge while Anna was still with Warren and Sons would prove a turning point years later. “Back then he was looking for some furniture and I showed him around. A few years after that, his wife, Helen, who worked at the HeronBridge College in Fourways in those days, contacted me to have couches recovered there.” After successfully completing the job, Anna was commissioned by several City Lodge hotels, as Tony has shared her number with them.

“This was huge for me, even though it started out with small jobs. My son was so excited! We made curtains and blinds for the Courtyard Rosebank, and we also did work for Fourways, OR Tambo, Randburg, Rivonia and Centurion. Then in 2022, City Lodge introduced me to Sigma International.”

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An empowered entrepreneur

“We found Anna's story heartwarming and remarkable – she turned a huge disappointment into an opportunity, built up a business on her own and trained her hearing-impaired son to help him access the economy. We knew we could assist Anna with taking her business to the next level,” says Shamantha Moodley, GM Operations, from Sigma International.

Morake Décor was assessed as an emerging business and under the supplier development instrument, Anna was accepted into the SATSA-Sigma International business incubator programme to run from October 2022 to

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September 2023. City Lodge came on board as the sponsor.

After determining that Morake Décor was compliant, the next step was to identify areas of improvement, such as marketing and financial literacy. Addressing load-shedding was also critical as it was impacting the productivity of the business.

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Anna was assigned a Sigma business mentor to coach her in financial literacy and marketing basics and to help her connect her with additional City Lodge hotels and SATSA members. She was also provided with data to engage with her mentor online. Next was designing a website to give Morake Décor an online presence and a professional image.

“I used to hear people talking about websites and now I have my own,” Anna says smiling. “I am also getting assistance with managing my business and my money and to do my own books. My mentor guides me and meets with me online every week. This is something I never thought I could do and while I'm still learning, I'm definitely making progress.”

A changemaker in the making

When asked about the advice she would give someone wanting to embark on a similar

journey, Anna says without hesitation: “If you want to start a business, make sure it's something you really love doing; don't be in it for the money. I don't ever think how much a job will pay me; I just love doing it.”

And her dreams for her business? She would like to grow it to five people and have a greater focus on furniture design. Anna also dreams of helping others and leaving a legacy.

“I'd like to upskill my employees and empower them with the means to provide for their futures. I don't want them to work for me forever. Especially young people.”

“Also, I'd love to help hearing-impaired people. I could teach them like I taught Lawrence. I know from experience they're struggling to find jobs, but with training, they could start their own businesses or become skilled in this profession. I would really like to give them the ability to become part of the workforce.”

So, it's full-circle ambitions for Anna, whose strength, resilience, hard work and persistence have helped her rise above adversity. Meanwhile, Lawrence is proof that entering this industry is not only possible, it can also be lifechanging.

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