



Simeon Stoyanov has hopes of earning enough money from footwear production to live on his own and travel to other parts of Spain in his spare time.

ALL CREDITS: PIKOLINOS

Spanish footwear group Pikolinos, famous for projects that have empowered women in Maasai communities in Kenya and Tanzania, has launched a new social responsibility-inspired collection of sandals and accessories. This time, though, its focus is much closer to home.

Community action close to home

Footwear group Pikolinos has launched a new collection that emphasises its commitment to corporate social responsibility.

In 2014, the Elche-based company launched a collection of sandals and bags with strong links to Africa. Part of an initiative called the Maasai Project, it involved shipping cut pieces of leather from Spain to Kenya and Tanzania and employing more than 1,000 Maasai women to decorate the material with beads using traditional artisan skills. Pikolinos shipped the decorated pieces back to Spain to make up the finished products. Eight sandal styles and one bag made up the collection.

Its new social responsibility-inspired collection is the fruit of a project Pikolinos was able to undertake without going so far from home. Called Pikolinos Solidarity, this latest venture comprises two styles of each of the brand's Alcudia and Madeira sandals and one style of its Wha handbag. What sets them apart is that these products are the work of artisans from Defora, a specialist footwear and leathersgoods project founded in Elche, Pikolinos's home town, by a local shoemaker, María de los Ángeles Brotons.

The people who work at Defora are men and women with learning difficulties. Defora began teaching them to make shoes and accessories in January 2015 but Ms Brotons says the idea first came to light about four years ago. "It came from a need that we had in my own family," she explains, "because we have children with learning difficulties who are now adults. We moved heaven and earth trying to find something for them, wondering all the time what would become of them in the future. We looked and looked, but there were really very few options out there that would allow them to have a full life, look after themselves and face up to their disabilities and be part of society, just like other people."

Like many people in and around Elche, Ángeles Brotons has worked in the shoe production industry and knows how to make shoes. She says it's all she knows. So she had the idea of teaching her own sons and a group of adults they spent time with at a day centre how to make shoes too. "The first year and a bit has gone really well," the founder says. "Once they realise they are capable of doing this, you can see that their self-esteem receives a big boost. And, of course, the best way for

The new Pikolinos Solidarity collection.





Decorated sandal parts, put together by workers at Defora.

them to have a full life is for them to earn a salary."

The Defora centre also had a garden and aims to help the people on the project to grow and prepare their own fruit and vegetables. They learn other life-skills, too, such as washing and ironing.

Production manager, Juan Manuel Senen, explains that the founders of Defora knew all about Pikolinos's social projects and made an approach to ask if their idea might also win some backing. The answer was positive and Pikolinos has supported the work of the Defora group from day one. Following the project's success in helping the young adults involved learn to carry out the work well, the footwear group is now turning this into a commercial operation with the launch of its Solidarity collection. "Pikolinos has been one of the pillars of this project," Mr Senen says. "The company was enthusiastic about Defora from the start and we are delighted to have its support."

One of the Defora workers, Simeon Stoyanov, says a variety of tasks is involved. In keeping with the Maasai project, Pikolinos supplies cut parts of its products for the Defora group to work on, for example, by making perforations in strips of leather and threading tassels through them to make a decorative sandal component. "With time and with patience, you can learn to do all these things," Mr Stoyanov says. "Some things have been more difficult to learn, but you can learn to do all of them if you have patience and enthusiasm." He says he dreams of being able to earn enough money to live in a home of his own and be more independent. He also wants to travel and visit different parts of Spain.

Juan Manuel Senen says the products in the Pikolinos Solidarity collection are stylish and well made and would have been a success anyway. But he says the fact they were made by people with learning difficulties adds value to the collection. "They're not just products that consumers will like," he explains. "In buying them, the consumer will also be helping the people at Defora become more integrated into society." For its part, Pikolinos said at the time of the launch that it regards

its support of Defora's work with this special collection as "an example of sustainable fashion in its purest form".

With regard to the future of Defora, Ángeles Brotons says she views it positively. "Pikolinos has backed us and has backed these young adults. It's a special team we have here making these products and I am confident that, with what we on the one hand and Pikolinos on the other are giving, we can continue to build on what they have achieved so far. I am full of hope for what Defora can become." 🍀



Young adults with learning difficulties at the Defora centre in Elche have worked with Pikolinos to produce a new Solidarity collection.