

TEXT
MERYL MCCAY
PHOTOS
SWAGS FOR HOMELESS

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40, 878 Australians will sleep on the streets this year (based on ABS statistics for 2011).

Sitting in church one day, Tony Clark suddenly had an idea! Something needed to be done to reduce the needless suffering, death and trauma of the homeless sleeping in the streets. When shelters are full, or where none are available, the homeless have nowhere to go; Tony felt that his idea could be the missing piece of the puzzle and address this critical issue, saving lives while at the same time giving dignity to homeless people. Designed by Tony and his wife Lisa, the Backpack Bed (now patented) is an innovative product – in fact, it’s really five products in one: an ergonomic backpack, a windowed tent, a bed, an outdoor open shelter, and it has full body

mosquito protection (vital in our Australian climate). Tony and Lisa’s design philosophy was focused around treating people the way you yourself would want to be treated – would he, Lisa, or any member of his family sleep in one of the Backpack Beds? There were challenges along the way: cheap materials were totally inappropriate – they wouldn’t survive severe use, so a new fabric needed to be developed and a special mattress had to be designed as well. Tony and Lisa felt that safety and comfort needed to be priorities – you might be surprised to learn that the Backpack Bed meets 47 international standards, including fire retardation, chemical safety and colour fastness. Implementing



Backpack Bed Original Hero

these features is difficult and expensive, but to Tony and Lisa, it’s worth it to ensure life and safety. These amazing beds are incredibly tough, yet ultra-light (they weigh less than a newborn baby!) – important considerations given the often severe weather conditions faced by the homeless, carrying all their worldly possessions with them. Tony and Lisa >>>





know their product is built to last – there's one that's been in constant use for four years now, and is still going strong. After designing the product in 2007, several philanthropic grants enabled the first Backpack Beds to be produced. The first container load arrived at Tony and Lisa's front door in November 2009 – every bedroom was full of them! Within two years, the Backpack Bed had won three international design awards and was quickly becoming a success story. Today the product has won eight design awards and been acquired by three international museums in Paris, Essen and Sydney. While the beds were initially designed specifically for the homeless, their durability and quality has sparked public demand as well; the harsh conditions for which they were built are often worse than many mountain campsites! As public demand increased, Tony and Lisa created *Swags for Homeless*, a national charity that operates as a social enterprise. As Backpack Beds are sold to the public

for personal use, 100% of the profits is channelled into projects for the homeless – an important source of revenue as despite their international success, the organisation receives no government funding. Word spread fast within the homeless community and *Swags for Homeless* now partners with over 300 welfare agencies across five countries to distribute the Backpack Beds to those in need. The prestigious awards have allowed them to help countries they otherwise would never have been able to assist – after

all, what good is an amazing idea that only helps the homeless in Australia. They wanted to share the success of saving lives with the rest of the world and had no idea that their charity would spread around the world so rapidly – but with faith and perseverance, the revolution to save street-sleeping homeless has begun, while simultaneously changing single-person camping forever. The Backpack Bed has also transformed outreach to the homeless. Those new to the streets can immediately see that even when there is no available shelter, someone still



cares and understands. Many of the long-term homeless feel let down and forgotten – they may have had a visit from an outreach worker, only to have been left with nothing. On the streets, without shelter, you can die. With immediate crisis help available, through the provision of a Backpack Bed, lives are being saved. And now, the reputations of many charities are being repaired as thousands of street-sleeping homeless, in Melbourne and beyond, have received one of these life-saving beds. The success of the Backpack Bed has reached beyond Australian shores and now includes use in international disaster zones where access to portable shelter is critical. Families in these crisis situations can be given a tent, but the single person in such circumstances often misses out – giving them an emergency tent designed for a family is often seen as an inefficient use of resources. Now, they can receive a Backpack Bed. And it's not just the local population that can be served:

international aid workers arriving in disaster zones often come only with what they can carry – sometimes a Backpack Bed is the best solution for their protection too. Feeding the homeless is the focus of many aid organisations, but just as vital – if not more so – is keeping them alive at night. Restoring their dignity is also a key step in helping them quickly get back on their feet. A study has shown that the Backpack Bed improves dignity, health, comfort and warmth for homeless people. Tony and Lisa estimate that by the end of 2014 almost 20,000 beds will have been made, saving the homeless around the

world. What does the future hold for *Swags for Homeless*? Well, Tony and Lisa are looking forward to branching out into the US retail market: "Imagine entire cities of homeless being given Backpack Beds as a result of our social enterprise." I'd say they're well on their way to achieving such an ambitious goal. In fact, in 2011 the Australian Human Rights Commission honoured them with the Best Community Organisation award! Why should you care about this project? Well, as Tony says, "homelessness can happen to anyone" – what if it happened to someone you know? **19**

