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WHAT JEAN MADDEN IS CREATING COULD END HOMELESSNESS

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Making a difference: Jean Madden has launched a business to provide basic shelter for the homeless, curb homelessness and create hundreds of jobs. Photo: Mark Bowling.

LIVING on the streets could be a thing of the past if Brisbane entrepreneur Jean Madden's new cabin project takes off.

Ms Madden has launched the "swags with walls" business to shelter the homeless, with a vision to provide life-skills training and potential to create hundreds of jobs.

The founder of the not-for-profit Street Swags has set up a factory in the Brisbane suburb of Darra, where her team has already produced prototypes of one-room, two-room and three-room cabin models.

The team is gearing up for full commercial production.

"My mindset is that no government, anywhere in the world, has solved poverty," Ms Madden said.

"It's up to community to solve poverty.

"Here's a wonderful product that can help that."

Over the past 10 years Street Swags has distributed 50,000 swags, providing basic bedding for homeless people sleeping rough.

Ms Madden plans to sell 50,000 cabins over the next 20 years.

Ms Madden said the cabins would suit the homeless, unemployed and low-income earners, like pensioners, as well as anyone looking to install a grannie flat or a weekender.

A one-room cabin would cost \$10,000, purchased as a "shell", while a three-room model would cost about \$33,000.

"We've worked out that someone on full Centrelink payments can rent one of our swags with walls ... and have it paid off in five years, actually own their own home," Ms Madden said.

"For \$120 per week you can have the three-room model – we call it the Clarendon – which could be paid down over five years so that at the end you own it.

"That rent is less than what most people are paying if they are at the low-end wage owners or unemployed."

Ms Madden said the money would come directly out of people's Centrelink payments.

"So for the first time ever in Australia, it is possible to own your own home even if you have no income," she said.

WATCH JEAN MADDEN'S TOUR OF A ONE-BEDROOM CABIN:



Mother of two, Jean Madden has a string of accomplishments.

In 2010 she was named Queensland's Young Australian of the Year, she has won business and international design awards, and she is a strong advocate for women, particularly in the corporate world.

She is confident her first foray into the building industry will produce rapid growth and opportunities for unskilled workers as well as higher-skilled trades people.

"Building is something the government intends pushing as far as creating jobs, particularly as the mining sector slows," she said.

"We are solving a lot of problems for the government here; it is not costing them a cent."

The cabins are made from Queensland hardwood, and fixtures such as windows and frames are produced in Brisbane. The cabins have a Level 1 bushfire rating and are termite resistant.

"The amount of timber I'm planning on using over the next 20 years will completely reinvigorate the Queensland hardwood timber industry," Ms Madden said.

Queensland hardwood timber industry, Ms Madden said.

"Over the next two years we will create 500 jobs for Queensland, just in the timber industry alone.

"Other employment will come out of the training project programs that we are developing using the cabins in the agriculture and building industries."

Ms Madden said the "vision" of Swags with Walls, came while working with Aboriginal people in Queensland's north-west and in the Northern Territory.

She was working with remote communities on a healing program retreat to provide pathways for young indigenous people who had drifted off their traditional lands and were living on town fringes, often homeless or in crowded conditions, and where domestic violence, and using drugs and alcohol were rampant.

"One elder, Dorothy Major, was down here from her Warlpeyangkrere lands, saw a cabin on a friend's property and said 'How soon can you build us some?'," Ms Madden said.

"So we adapted some of our healing program retreats, with the Aboriginal kids making their own cabins for their own families.

"By the second time we did these retreats we knew we were onto something.

"In their houses they wanted communal kitchens, a sit-down area, as they are being built for extended family who come to stay, and they hope to do up their lands with these cabins for tourism and other ventures.

"Dorothy sees these cabins as an opportunity to own their own houses and develop their lands the way they want to, in a sustainable way for them, so they can go back and live on their lands because there is nothing for them to live in there."

One-third of Queensland's homeless are indigenous, and cannot afford mainstream housing, even if they own their own land.

"There is a massive affordability gap that the government has been talking about for years," she said. "I figured, we'll just make the houses cheaper.

"It's not rocket science, people."



Dream home: Founder of the organisation, Street Swags, Jean Madden (pictured below) has turned her attention to building cabins to help homeless people and low-income earners to obtain a home of their own.

The cabins are transportable by tilt-tray truck, and that provides another business opportunity for

Swags with Walls – to provide affordable housing on land that is under-used or un-used.

“We are currently in negotiations with landholders for a pilot village, similar to a caravan park, where a ‘site fee’ is paid, either as a lease or a purchase,” Ms Madden said.

“We are also looking at partnerships with landholders such as churches, charities, developers and government to provide land at a very low cost.”

Income from the sale of cabins would be used to fund Street Swags’ work in the distribution of swags and on a community healing program to help homeless people get back on their feet.

“We will be pumping money into our community healing program which in a lot of cases will look like cabin villages which will be residential training facilities,” Ms Madden said.

“I believe half the homeless people out there would do alright if they just had somewhere they could afford to live.

“The other half need this intensive support, the sort of support we are offering in our community healing program.

“So by helping the 50 per cent find a place to live we will fill the needs of the other 50 per cent.

“And that’s my plan: to end poverty in Australia over the next 20 years.”

By Mark Bowling