

## Pipe dream: Waterloo man defeats the dark

A heart-warming story of recyclables to radiance.

*In a settlement outside Durban, a once jobless man is turning plastic trash into fantastic treasure, writes Roving Reporter, Laura du Toit.*

Christmas is a time of giving, but the spirit of the season and its colourful lights might burn a good deal dimmer – no thanks to Eskom.

But the entrepreneurial efforts of a part-time electrician turned craftsman have brought some welcome cheer.

Ridwaan Chui – a 41-year-old descendant of a Chinese grandfather and a Mozambican mother – has taken to stencilling and cutting intricate designs into discarded PVC pipes to fashion energy-saving lamps. And it's all environmentally friendly.

Chui's work was recently brought to the public's attention by Eastern Cape surfer and former Durban journalist, Dave Macgregor.

Macgregor runs a treehouse-styled surf camp in Port Alfred. Chui has never met the man, but after visiting Macgregor's Facebook page, he reckoned his lamps would fit in well with the camp's rustic, eco-friendly lodgings.

"Soon, pictures of his craft started pinging in my WhatsApp," wrote Macgregor. "Fascinated, I scrolled through each and imagined the wonderful shadows they cast across darkened rooms. But what is even more amazing is how he came about his awesome idea."

Heartbroken from a divorce and unemployed to boot, Chui had been walking from his modest rented room in Waterloo, near Verulam outside Durban, in search of a job. He came across a pile of PVC plastic waste water pipes and was reminded of his late father's ivory decorative piece from his childhood home.

A lightbulb moment flashed. Staring at the abandoned pipes, Chui decided to ditch his job search and return home to craft something. With a junior hacksaw blade and a knife, Chui carved away at a PVC pipe until he held aloft against the ceiling light his first stencilled creation.

"My dad taught me everything I know. He said you have to pay yourself, and only now I understand," Chui says. His first lamp led to a few orders and increasingly complex designs. He now has a mini drill and many attachments which he uses to create his lamps.

Working with your hands is an invaluable skill, says Chui.

"To say you're not employed, that's an excuse," he adds vehemently.

It also helped him work through the heartache after his divorce.

"What actually saved me from doing silly things after my breakup were these lamps," says Chui.

His outdoor workshop in the front yard of the home he rents, now draws the eyes of locals, many of whom donate PVC they deem worthless.

But turning these bits and pieces into works of art needs a more productive workspace.

"My landlord complains about the noise of the mini-drill," laughs Chui. "He says I must find a real job."

This week, rain also stopped production. “So I really need to buy a small generator and gazebo. Then I can work anywhere I am allowed to,” says Chui.

As an electrician by trade, Chui is flummoxed that South Africa does not harvest more energy from the sun.

Loadshedding has inspired his innovations. His first lamps were made with standard light fittings. Now, he designs candle-lit lamps and others that can switch over to a battery-operated system when power outages strike. He hopes, in time, to include solar panels. Most of Chui’s creations are inspired by African symbolism – elaborate elephants and intricate acacia trees are favourites. And for the festive season, Chui has stencilled Christmas tree lamps to light up South African households.

“My hope is that with Christmas around the corner, people dig into their pockets and spread the cheer by supporting artists like Ridwaan,” says Macgregor.

“There are many people like Ridwaan out there getting rid of plastic and other waste by turning them into something uniquely South African. At R350 each excluding postage, it's a deal. Not made in China, my china; made in Durban *ekse!*” – *Additional reporting, Fred Kockott, Roving Reporters*

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