

## **Slađana Tuksar / Požarevac**

Slađana Tuksar has been struggling with preconceptions about Roma ever since her birth, and today she is aware that being an independent woman is an even more challenging feat, regardless of the ethnic background.

Slađana Tuksar (45) is living in Požarevac, and weaving her dreams with strict determination in that town. With a gentle smile on her face and mild timidity in her eyes, she greeted us at the door of her small empire, a shop embellished with hers and her son Stefan's (24) hopes, ambitions and above all, love. After all, "Sve za ljubav", (*All for Love*) is the name of the shop where alongside unusual gifts and decorative props for weddings, she designs and sells true miracles.



### **Help came at the hardest of times**

– I'm thrilled you came to see me. I am mindful of the fact that after several years of trial and error, I have finally stepped into a completely new life where I am paving my own road. It took me some time to admit to myself and rightfully say that I am an independent entrepreneur who works in production, organisation and decoration for all sorts of events. When it came to work, I was not fearful of the pandemic, as I have never lived a comfortable life. Struggle is my innate state – Slađana explains while we browse through her magical shop.

Her steps along the bumpy road of entrepreneurship are firm, full of self-confidence and faith that the time to showcase her skill has finally dawned. It was not easy, she says, while recognising that it would have been quite impossible without the help from her friends.

– I feel immense gratitude to the people and organisations that gave me the opportunity to venture into a new chapter of my life. First and

foremost, the most wonderful Vladimir and folks from the Roma Association of Braničevo District – *URBO*. They were my only family when I first moved to this town from Veliko Gradište. Owing to the support from the German Development Cooperation project “Inclusion of Roma and Other Marginalised Groups in Serbia”, beautiful things started happening to me. In cooperation with the town of Požarevac and the Roma Association, they have introduced activities that included “start-up” projects for empowering women, Roma, and other vulnerable groups.

By being a part of the project two years ago, in numerous training courses and workshops, Slađana mastered the skills she hadn't the slightest idea about previously. She learned how to write projects, how to present the items she produces, how to run a business, and become skilled in communication and sales, and completely computer literate ...

### **I wanted to learn and find rescue in knowledge**

– I've had an immense desire to learn, and that desire is still strong. I can hardly describe that exhilarating feeling of mastering something new. Many have had everything so available throughout their lives, whereas I've embraced those novelties at this age with such tremendous joy. Today, I can barely imagine my day without using a computer, even though at the time, grasping something that comes so routinely to me now was very difficult. There were about ten of us, programme beneficiaries, and we've all started from the same low level of knowledge and business experience. We've encouraged each other along the way and rejoiced in each and every success. Just imagine how happy I was when I created my first ever e-mail address – Slađa, who now uses the computer daily, explains light-heartedly.



They still keep in touch and act as major support for each other. When the going gets tough, they can always reach out to their teachers for help.

– People cannot understand that certain, for some, quite trivial things, were such insurmountable obstacles for us. I remember, when contracting a job, being asked to send my portfolio. I was bewildered as to what that might be, but was able to reach out to my former teacher who had explained everything. That was priceless.

### **I will become the well-reputed decorator**

The project has procured the CNC machine that Slađana uses to make stunning gift packaging, gift boxes, Christmas decorations, logos... and another machine for making balloon wreaths. With her son Stefan, who in her words is her only family, she keeps fashioning something new and ever more beautiful. Together, they are trying to create new gifts for celebrations, holidays and birthdays that will please both companies and individuals.



– It might sound boastful, but the two of us will work to make this logo of ours “Sve za ljubav” a worldwide brand. I am completely enamoured by design and beauty and want to become the decorator the world is raving about. Just as chefs who became stars, I can become a well-reputed decorator. There aren't any of those yet – she jokes but

with clear determination on her face.

She explains with pride how nervous she was when she did her first floral arrangements for the shop and fashion show of our famous designer Verica Rakočević. She remembers her as a woman of immense strength who is a great inspiration to her.

### **To me everything beautiful was unavailable and off limits**

Slađa has been sheltering her love for all things beautiful ever since her tender years, even though, to her everything beautiful was unavailable and off limits. Life to her was unkind. She lost her mother as a young girl, and while growing up with her grandparents in Veliko Gradište her father had visited her only once.

– I recall gazing at a beautiful toy, dress or a car, and my grandmother covering my eyes and saying: “Don’t look at that, that’s not for you”. Later on, when the time came to choose a high school, enrolling into the design school was never an option. Therefore, I became an agricultural technician, but could not find a job with that either. I did everything I could, worked in the phyllo dough store, worked as a sales person... Everything that I could only to earn less than a minimum wage. I got married at 20 and quickly realised what a poor choice that was. Still, I stayed in that marriage until I was 36 years old. Restrained, belittled ... It was very difficult to grow up and have a married life, but I am still not ready to talk about all the abuse... - she says teary eyed, but determined not to let those tears run down her cheeks.

– I don’t like to go back to it all. Apart from my son, the only nice memory from that period was working at the flower shop. It was then and there that I’ve revealed to myself everything that I can do, because that was the first time I was surrounded with the loveliness of flowers. My first desires and ambitions were born at that time. The most important decision in my life, however, was to put an end to it all and move with my son to Požarevac, painfully aware that a woman with a child is to expect nothing positive, but regardless, I was determined to fight. Before I came to the Roma Association, all doors were closed to me. I needed rescuing, and they’ve accepted me open heartedly, understood me, showed me love found in happy families and gave me the opportunity to start anew. They became my support and my saviours, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

### **I will be the support for struggling women**

Sladja has been struggling with Roma biases ever since she was little, and today she knows, from experience, how difficult it is to be a woman, regardless of the ethnic background, without a man backing you up.

– Event planning implies communication with owners of restaurants, businesses, musicians, and photographers, and they tend to be male. I am very proud of myself for being able to build a good business rapport with them filled with mutual respect. I’ve fought like a lioness for that. Stumbling along the road only gave me additional strength to keep going. All those experiences are the wind beneath my wings pushing me forward to become a woman who will act as support to other women struggling with similar problems.

Text: Branka Gajić / Photograph: Mia Medaković