

# JIVANAS:



## Footwear that give Life

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Photos by Pranish Shrestha and Jivanas

*At Jivanas, poverty-stricken people and those rescued from trafficking works with much eagerness and enthusiasm. They produce handmade footwear using all-natural materials, thereby contributes to the sustainability of the planet.*

**C**hester Zygmunt is a Philadelphian by birth who grew up in New York, US. But for the past two years, he is living in Nepal with his wife, Michelle Zygmunt, and three kids (Allie-15, Kaleb-11, and Conner-8) and has founded the footwear manufacturing company, Jivanas, to help improve the lives of Nepalis, especially those from the poorest communities. Today, few poor Nepalis, who were living the worst of lives, are among the happiest ones.

Chester's motivation to living in Nepal and founding Jivanas, however, has a story behind.

In 2016, Chester had gone to India with his family to help an orphanage located in a city nearby Mumbai. One day, on their way back to Mumbai, they visited another orphanage where they met a girl. In a candid conversation with her, they discovered she

was a Nepali and was rescued from the red light district of Mumbai.

"She was just six months older than my 12-year-old daughter. I was shocked to discover how she was tempted by false promises of a good job and sold to a brothel in Mumbai," recalls Chester.

Touched by her story, Chester researched about Nepal and learnt how human traffickers execute various modus operandi to lure Nepali girls and women and sell them to brothels in India. He also came to know how the rate of poverty in Nepal was not decreasing due to the narrowing job market in the country. This discovery persuaded Chester to start a business in Nepal that could create jobs for financially-struggling Nepalis and prevent poor Nepalis from going abroad and possibly land on indecent jobs. Chester's wife also appreciated his idea, and they came to Nepal in 2017 to establish Jivanas, a footwear manufacturing company.





"With love, sweat, and tears, Jivanas was created—a brand that exists with purpose to make a difference. Alone we can't save Nepal or the earth. But together we can all be part of a larger story, one that promotes people and protects the planet."

—Jivanas



In the first year, the couple did the groundwork, including setting-up the factory for their start-up. And in the second year, they bought the machinery.

Chester, as the President and Chief Executive Officer of Jivanas, shares, "In the first two years, we also worked in designing and making prototypes of the products to make sure that our suppliers are well aligned."

Starting up a business in Nepal, however, was not easy for Chester. Abiding by the regulations required for incorporation of a company and establishing channels for importing and exporting was challenging for a foreigner like himself. He too had to continue dealing in unfairness with local suppliers who usually don't entertain producing VAT (Value-Added Tax) bills. Chester even struggled to understand the language, religion and culture of





the country. But despite the obstacles, Chester and his wife continued in their journey, and as soon as they set-up everything, they started hiring people.

Jivanas' motive has always been to providing jobs to poverty-stricken people; thus, reference check on employment history and skills assessment were not the stages in the recruitment process. In fact, all the employees hired by Jivanas were inexperienced in footwear-making industry.

Chester recalls, "We hired few people with the recommendations from our friends, while others approached us after knowing about Jivanas through world-of-mouth promotion. And none of them was experienced."

As soon as the recruitment was over, Jivanas trained the newly-hired employees for three to four months. After that, they started producing footwear right away.

Jivanas does not use much of technology and machinery for producing their products; instead, almost everything is manually done. Except for cutting the materials, shaping the sizes of the footwear and stitching them, the trained artisans at Jivanas use their hands to make a final product. The then fresh artisans did the same and took a one-and-half hour to make a singing unit of a flip-flop. No matter how much time they took, they soon became good artisans within months.

After producing the footwear, naming them was another step for Jivanas. For this, they chose the different places of Nepal such as Tokha, Jiri, and others because these places are favourite to Chester and his family. Besides, they also named the flip-flops after their employees. Some were named Hira and Ishori, while others, Juna and Sahana, and there are many others.

Offering jobs to needy people was not the only motive of Jivanas; ensuring the quality life of their employees, indeed, was equally important for the young company. To ensure this, Jivanas paid good salary scales to their employees and provided fringe benefits and allowances required for insurance, medicines, and education for their children.

Minimum Wages Fixing Committee of Nepal has fixed the minimum wage of a labourer to be Rs 13,450 per month, and Jivanas claims to have paid more than that. Michelle, who looks after finance at Jivanas, says, "Our lowest salary is above minimum wage, or 30% than fair trade wages."

In addition, Jivanas provided their employees with annual leaves for 20 days, sick leaves on a need basis, and weekend holidays on Saturday and Sunday. Interestingly, Jivanas also offered the employees with juice and beer to hangout and relax. Today, their employees wear nice clothes, eat hygienic foods, enjoy weekends, and their children go to school.

Everyone at Jivanas is happy today, and they do their works with much eagerness and energy. They manufacture footwear for men and women which are available in different variants of colours like turquoise, honeydew, crimson, dark chocolate, mocha, onyx, saddle brown, etc. Besides this, they also manufacture tote bag and covers for bottle openers and keychain. These products are available not only at their local factory outlet in Le Sherpa, Lazimpat but also in countries beyond Nepal.

Chester quantifies, "We have produced about one thousand units to date, and we have a target of selling three thousand units this year and double the sales in the next year." He adds, "Jivanas' flip-flops are considered as luxury products. Now, we are working to expand our market base in Europe and Australia as well."







Estimating the magnitude of trafficking in persons is difficult because Nepal has not developed an integrated counter-trafficking database system. However, Nepal Police reported that the number of trafficking cases has increased from 185 in the fiscal year (FY) 2013/14 to 305 in FY 2017/18. Similarly, Armed Police Force India reported the number has increased from 72 in 2012 to 607 in 2017. Jivanas is venturing in Nepal to bring those trafficked back to home and provide them jobs for their better tomorrow.

Jivanas' footwear are expensive. They range from Rs 14,250 to Rs 17,250. In US, these products are 30 per cent dearer. But no matter how expensive these products are, praying for its good sales is a virtue because the company is giving the best of their strength to improve the lives of Nepalis, especially who are trafficked.

Jivanas has established a close tie-up with Kolkata to Kathmandu (K2K), a fair trade non-profit based in Kolkata, working in rescuing trafficked girls. Jivanas allocates a certain percentage from the sales profit and funds K2K for their efforts in bringing Nepali girls back to home. For K2K's rescue effort on every Nepali girl, Jivanas pays USD 600 (approx Rs 67,000) that is spent on medication, counselling and logistical requirements. But Jivanas' support to them does not end here; Jivanas employs the rescued ones when they return.

Jivanas was founded with many motives in Chester's mind, and along with ensuring better lives of Nepalis, the company carries one more agenda.

The global fashion industry has become the second largest source of pollution after the oil industry, and footwear is of no exception. Fashion brands continue

to find ways to make cheaper materials at lower prices, leaving the brunt of the cost on the environment. This is another major concern of Jivanas, which is why the company is not compromising on producing environment-friendly products.

Chester says, "People around the world are focusing on eating organic food and are using electronic cars to avoid using petroleum products, but nobody really cares about pollution induced by fashion revolution. Today, fashion is the area where a lot of improvement is needed. Jivanas is my appeal to grasp the focus of the fashion industry."

Jivanas only uses all-natural materials. The company imports 97 per cent of raw materials from abroad: vegetable leather from Italy, tools from the US, rubber from Sri Lanka, and glue from Indian distributor of an Italian company. The Italian vegetable leather is an ancient material made with tree bark, leaves, and fruit, while the adhesives, dyes, and conditioners are made from organic, plant-based materials. Similarly, Jivanas uses bees' wax, coconut oil and castor oil to make sealer.

Chester, who loves his employees, says, "Glue used in most of the footwear

manufacturing companies is very harmful because when heated, it evaporates and the workers inhale the toxic substances produced from it. But in Jivanas, we use water-based glue, and even employees do not get expose to toxic substances."

The company's website ([www.jivanas.com](http://www.jivanas.com)) also claims, "Our leather is soft, breathable, and incredibly durable. As it ages, the colour and *patina* become richer, and with proper care will last for many years." It further elaborates, "Our process is more intricate and time-consuming, but it allows us to offer a completely biodegradable product."

Jivanas is the perfect name for Chester's company. It is a hybrid word: Jivana is derived from *Jeevan*, meaning 'life' in Nepali, while 's' marks the plurality of life like 'lives' in English grammar. Jivanas is not only manufacturing flip-flops of good quality, but the footwear manufacturing company is giving a decent life to the victims of trafficking and poverty-stricken Nepalis. Moreover, the company is contributing to the sustainability of the planet where we all live in. Above all, Jivanas is working for a cause: improving the lives of Nepali people and the world.