

# Sole Mates

**City of Gapan Footwear Multi-purpose Cooperative**

*A year after graduating from college, a man decided to focus on footwear making as a career, whose challenges could be too much for anyone in his youth. With the government coming to the rescue, his business has risen to make all his efforts pay off.*



**MORE THAN JUST WORK**  
Treating employees like family results to open communication, greater leadership, healthy sense of community, and increased productivity.



**G**apan has earned its reputation as the "Footwear Capital of the North" from producing and distributing quality sandals and slippers across the region.

Rolando could not have benefited from such partnership had he not settled on footwear-making in 1987 after graduating from college in 1986 and landing on other jobs.

It stemmed from a cottage industry that began as early as the 1930s, when slippers were crafted by bare hands using only needle and abaca thread to attach the fiber-wrapped wooden sole to the flap made of carabao (water buffalo) hide.

Then on his own, Rolando did all the cutting, drawing, and assembling the materials for his Bagong Likha Footwear. His designs were derived from the different places he had been.

Now on its 87<sup>th</sup> year, the industry is highlighted by the *Talinas Festival* and an annual gross sales of around Php 500 million.

But just when everything was going well in 2000, finished products poured in from China at a bargain, where the shoemakers in Gapan were sourcing their raw materials. Rolando almost gave up, and thought of applying for a police job instead, but he was advised against doing so by his family.

Thanks to the skilled footwear makers like Rolando Pascual and the Shared Service Facilities (SSF) project in this fourth-class city at the southeastern part of Nueva Ecija. Through the SSF established by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) for use by cooperatives in the area, Rolando has been able to manufacture his own brand—the Bagong Likha Footwear. The brand has iconized the partnership that makes Rolando and the SSF appear like "sole mates" in footwear making.

Then DTI came to the rescue, establishing the SSF to help enable the Gapan footwear makers to compete. DTI made the SSF fully equipped with all the required tools and machinery—swing beam arm press, cutting knives, stitching and zigzag sewing machines, hydraulic press, air compressor, insole and upper folding machines, binding machines, band saw, and stamping machines.



**THE SHOEMAKER**

(Opposite page) "I've been to a lot of places looking for what will give me income and comfort. Someone from an insurance company encouraged me to get into making and selling slippers since I was familiar with the trade. I was inspired to try it. I had more control with my time and income," Rolando Pascual tells about his eureka moment in establishing Bagong Likha Footwear



**THE PROCESS**  
From conceptualizing the unique designs to preparing the raw materials for production, Rolando's workers then put his creations to life.

DTI also helped them in product development through training and seminars on footwear design, including the technology in making their products comfortable to wear.

Eventually, they organized themselves into a cooperative in Barangay Mangino in Gapan, with all the support of DTI.

Through regular participation in various trade fairs, Bagong Likha gained captive markets in Aurora, Guadalupe, Baguio, Badaran, and Makati, among others, and produces four dozens of footwear daily.

Bagong Likha has also diversified its product lines and expanded their operations. Its products have been exhibited at the Toronto Fashion Week in Canada from which it has gained supply contracts as a toll manufacturer for a number of international footwear brands.

The growing business has enabled Rolando to buy a piece of land and to send his children to college.

Rolando attributes his success to DTI's assistance. He is paying it forward by treating his employees as family members.

"I always remind my children that our employees were the ones who helped me send them to school. So, my children call our employees *ate* (elder sister) or *kuya* (elder brother) as a show of respect and gratitude," Rolando explains in Filipino.

Rolando became a hall of famer in the DTI's One Town, One Product (OTOP) program, and the SSF in Gapan landed third among the best in 2016, thus attaining each other's "sole" purpose.

## HOW DTI HELPED

The City of Gapan Footwear Multi-purpose Cooperative acquired the needed machinery, equipment, tools, systems, skills, and knowledge through DTI's Shared Service Facilities (SSF) project.

The cooperative is also under DTI's One Town, One Product (OTOP) program which provided them business counseling, appropriate technologies, skills and entrepreneurial training, marketing, and product design development.

They also achieved a sustained brand presence in their captive markets by regularly participating in DTI-sponsored trade fairs.

## SUCCESS TIPS

- 1 Decide on what you want to pursue.
- 2 Be patient with clients and never burn bridges.
- 3 Take criticisms as tips on product development.
- 4 Access every available government assistance. It's free.
- 5 Treat your workers as partners.



**MAKING THE SANDALS**  
Workers make the sandals, all by hand. The materials are sewn and glued together for a perfect and lasting fit. These footwear have a technology for comfort that prevents strained feet and calluses.