

# Church epiphany sparks unusual success

Claire Heaney

COMPUTER expert Tony Clark can't explain the epiphany he had during a church service which led him to scale back a lucrative business and help the homeless.

"I was sitting in church and the idea popped into my head. I had no background with homeless people, came from a middle-class family and had a happy childhood," he said.

"I just realised something needed to be done about homeless people."

With the support of wife Lisa he developed the lightweight and portable Backpack Bed.

"We thought if we were homeless we would need something to put our gear in, so we came up with the backpack. It had to be light and have a bed with mosquito protection," he said.

The couple made paper models of how they thought the backpack bed could work.

"It took almost two years for the first 20 foot container, with 800 backpacks, to arrive in Australia. It was so big that it sat on the naturestrip," he said.

Mr Clark, of Knoxfield, developed and patented a lightweight product called Literex. Efforts to produce the beds in Australia failed but he was insistent it had to be ethically made.

With the help of grants from organisations such as the George Adams Foundation the first shipment was possible.

The Clarks have



**New direction:** Tony Clark and his wife, Lisa, walked away from an IT business to make swags for the homeless.

## BACK TO BASICS

- IT systems means the business punches above its weight.
- Word of mouth has been integral to the business success.
- Online presence has seen it found via internet searches.
- Winning awards has brought more business.
- Be responsive to changing needs.
- Credibility is essential.
- Netlink: [swags.org.au](http://swags.org.au)

established a not-for-profit organisation called Swags for Homeless.

Mr Clark said the swags were recognition that there was not enough emergency shelter for the homeless.

"It is no good giving a homeless person a blanket, they need something that will protect them from hypothermia," he said.

"We keep people alive

while they are waiting for shelter. We have had people call us and tell us that they made it through thanks to having a bed to sleep in."

Mr Clark said while some people, largely because of mental illness, will stay homeless, others will be able to resume a "normal" life.

"By 2010 we had demand from the public to buy the lightweight backpack beds

and not just the homeless," he said.

"We made a very limited number, kind of like cupcakes, and we started selling them and they all disappeared without us doing any marketing."

Six years on, the business is affiliated with 300 welfare agencies across five countries. The majority are Australian but a trip to the

US in April to accept an Edison innovation award has opened possibilities.

As a not-for-profit, Mr Clark said he had only started drawing an income this year.

"I have never worked so hard in my life but I was determined to make it work," he said.

"We are growing exponentially."