

Hooray for handbags

Online shop to auction off donated bags in pipeline

A UNIQUE Brighton charity that has tapped into a whole new audience of women is going global.

Handbags for Hospices, which auctions dream handbags donated by celebrities including Paloma Faith, Zoe Ball, Davina McCall, Millie Mackintosh, Gemma Arterton, Lottie Moss and Jo Wood at local pop-up shops and handbag parties, plans to launch an online shop this summer that will open up an international market.

At the same time, its founders Abigail Bowen and Lucy Wilkes have just confirmed the Leather Satchel Company is to design a satchel handbag especially for the charity.

Since Handbags for Hospices launched in 2012, it has raised around £16,000 for eight hospices in Sussex, including The Martlets and Chestnut Tree House, and Abi and Lucy are about to realise their dream of rolling out the phenomenon worldwide.

"We're starting to work on the online shop by the end of this month," said Abi, a graphic designer.

"We have been thinking about it for a while, but decided to go for it after we sold one of Kim Wilde's handbags to someone in the Netherlands through eBay and we realised there was a whole new market out there."

Lucy, who also runs a training company and a printing shop and has two children aged nine and 12, said: "Everyone we have asked to help has done so immediately and without delay. I email people every day and no one has said no."

"But while the handbags and celebrities are the glamorous and exciting part of the charity, we never lose sight of the fact that the whole aim is



Handbags for Hospices founders Lucy Wilkes (left) and Abigail Bowen. Right, Zoe Ball, with husband Norman Cook, and Paloma Faith

to raise money for hospices."

The idea began back in 2007 when Abi's father received care at The Martlets Hospice, which cares for around 1,000 people a year from the Brighton and Hove area who have a terminal illness.

"He was only there for 12 hours but he was looked after with such warmth and care in that short space of time," explained Abi, 41, who has two children aged 10 and seven.

"When you have experienced something like that, everyone wants to give something back and I am no different

to anyone else.

"A few years later, I asked The Martlets how I could use my professional skills to help them and they told me that one of the best ways to fundraise is to get women together, whether it's for a fun run or a midnight walk or something like that.

"At the time, I had been going to a few accessories parties, which had gone down a treat with women because with accessories you don't have to worry about taking your clothes off to try things on or about whether you're fat or thin.



PICTURE: MIKE BURNELL

"So I said to my friends: let's get together, and bring your handbags!"

The first auction took place in 2012 at the Temptation Cafe in Gardner Street, Brighton, when 60 women brought 120 bags. "It blew me away," said Abi.

High on "post-event euphoria" after raising £2,000, Abi agreed to stage a second event at the Pub Du Vin in Brighton and her friend Lucy came on board after she panicked.

"The sum of the two of us together is greater than the sum of us individually," said Abi. "We're both mothers and we both work, and it just works."

The first celebrities to donate handbags were TV presenters Zoe Ball, who lives in Hove, and Davina McCall, who lives in East Sussex.

"The first time I stood in front of Davina, I just went doolally with excitement," said Abi. "Things escalated once it was put on Twitter, and then the celebrity handbags just kept coming in."

High-end brands such as Mulberry, Ferragamo, Miu Miu and Gucci have kept the momentum going, and this month Brighton jeweller House of Hoyo in Ship Street has been hosting the UK's first handbag-only charity pop-up shop for Handbags for Hospices, where donors can drop off bags.

But next month Abi and Lucy move into a new phase of development, with their plans to launch the first Handbags for Hospices online shop.

"We love doing it," said Abi. "Knowing we're helping is incredible and everyone's generosity has restored my faith in humanity."

Visit handbagsforhospices.com or search for them on Twitter and Facebook.