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Duo defy the odds

Kalesi Mele

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Sekaia Vatucicila, left, and Minesh Kumar are in charge of producing greeting cards for Lautoka-based NGO FRIENDS. Picture: KALESI MELE

THE speech and hearing impaired are often marginalised individuals, but Sekaia Vatucicila and Minesh Kumar have never allowed their disabilities to limit their ambitions.

The duo are responsible for the production of the Foundation of Rural Integrated Enterprises and Development's (FRIEND) creative greeting cards that are sold to selected business outlets throughout the country.

At 45, Mr Vatucicila has mastered the art of creating paper out of banana stalk, kava residue (kosa) and even ginger plant.

The material is first beaten to a pulp then the watery soup is laid out on a screen which is used to drain all water. Material left on the screen is then pressed before being dried to form paper.

Mr Vatucicila said he used to be a canecutter.

"I love my job," he said.

"I don't regret making the change because I earn a steady income."

The Mataso native said he had four children and the money he received was enough to put them through school.

"I like it here. I earn enough and I love the environment I work in."

Mr Kumar, 27, expressed similar sentiments.

The former Lautoka Special School student said designing cards brought out his creative abilities.

In a day he designs about 10 cards which are later packed for distribution to retailers.

Retailers sell the cards at more than double the wholesale price.

"I've worked here for six years and I have never considered anything other than this," said Mr Kumar.

"I travel from Lovu every day for work. My father is a driver and whatever I earn can contribute to putting food on the table."

Friend Fiji associate director Dr Jone Hawea said most of what Mr Kumar created was his own initiative.

"We don't dictate what we want in the cards, he does that himself," he said.

"All that he does he learnt by trial and error."

The duo are part of the NGO's business arm.

Dr Hawea said while NGOs were largely dependent on donors, they hoped through initiatives such as creating cards and new restaurant, would help them become self-sufficient.



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