



Colombian designer Adriana Restrepo (center) —a victim of the armed conflict— works at a computer waste recycling in downtown Medellin, Antioquia department, Colombia. —AFP photos



Adriana Restrepo works with used tires at a waste storage.

Colombian eco-designer

FINDS BEAUTY IN TRASH

Adriana Restrepo has a lot of experience searching for silver linings. The Colombian fashion designer and environmentalist was a pregnant 18-year-old when drug traffickers in Medellin, her violence-stained hometown, killed her partner, leaving her to raise their son on her own.

Maybe that has something to do with her talent for finding beauty in other people's trash, which she avidly collects to turn into hip, colorful home decor and accessories. Restrepo lights up as she criss-crosses Medellin, Colombia's second city, visiting used tire depots and warehouses full of cannibalized computers.

"It's my shopping mall," she said, beaming as she brandished defunct hard disks she planned to turn into pop-art coasters or clocks. Restrepo, who is now 33, is known as the "All-Terrain Blonde" among the impoverished trash-pickers of Medellin, who sort through the city's garbage looking for what-

ever can be reused or recycled.

She is their regular customer in the subway stations where they spread their meager wares on the floor, hoping to sell an old CD, broken toy or empty box. "I've always been very aware of nature. With my brand, I try to send a message of caring for the environment by giving things a second life. But they have to be beautiful. Because who likes ugly?" she told AFP.

Designs from the dump

In the living room of the small apartment she shares with her 15-year-old son, David, Restrepo shows off her workbench—a reconverted kitchen table—and her shelves stacked with rescued treasures. This is where she transforms wine corks into USB flash drives, old inner tubes into trendy bags, discarded plastic toys into flower pots.

She proudly shows off her two sewing machines, one of which she received from the Victims' Unit, a government body tasked with

helping Colombians affected by an armed conflict that has simmered for more than half a century.

Over the years, the conflict has drawn in the army, leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and drug traffickers. It has killed more than 220,000 people and uprooted six million. The violence has been fueled by the drug trade in Colombia, the world's largest cocaine producer. Medellin, home to the now-defunct cartel led by late kingpin Pablo Escobar, has been hit especially hard.

"The Trianas, a gang linked to the narcos and the guerrillas, killed my boyfriend, David Alexander," Restrepo said. "I never found out why. I was three months pregnant." She has had just one goal ever since, she said: to get through the ordeal. Her mother took care of her infant son while she finished her studies— all while working from home. Today, Restrepo markets her creations all over the world through her Facebook page, Adriana Restrepo

Eco Diseno. She also teaches young people looking to break into the fashion industry.

Transform that trash

One of her students is 23-year-old Catalina Casas, who was uprooted by the Colombian conflict when paramilitaries killed her uncle. Like Restrepo's younger self, she is a single mother desperate to make it in design. "I love sewing! I would never have imagined you could make a bag out of a tire," she said.

On a recent day, Restrepo visited the sprawling slum of Comuna 13, a shantytown perched precariously in the hills on the outskirts of Medellin, to give a Christmas workshop. Armed with just paintbrushes, glue and Santa Claus napkins, she taught a dozen residents to turn a scratched CD into a festive wine coaster. It all fits into her larger mission, she said. "We have to show that things can be reused, instead of thrown away," she said. —AFP



Adriana Restrepo holds a wall clock made out of a recycled computer hard drive at her workshop.



Adriana Restrepo works with people of the Commune 13 neighborhood.



Adriana Restrepo cleans handbags made out of recycled tires.